

# Indian Health Service Continues to Provide for Millions Medicare and Medicaid Work Hard to Keep Up

By Brigette Settles Scott, MA  
Closing the Gap, Working Toward Our Goal • August 2003

According to recent U.S. Census data, more than 60 percent of the American Indian population is geographically located in poor urban or rural communities off the reservation. Many American Indians do not have access to, and in many cases, are not eligible to participate in an Indian Health Service (IHS) sponsored health care program because they reside outside of the IHS service area.

IHS, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, is responsible for providing Federal health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The provision of health services to members of federally recognized tribes grew out of the special government-to-government relationship between the Federal government and Indian tribes.

The IHS is the principal Federal health care provider and health advocate for Indian people, and its goal is to raise their health status to the highest possible level. The IHS currently provides health services to approximately 1.5 million American Indians and Alaska Natives who belong to more than 557 federally recognized tribes in 35 states.

“In these communities, the unemployment rate is high. This situation gives American Indians who are not covered by the IHS few health care choices or alternatives,” said Greg Richardson, executive director, North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs.

“American Indians who are not covered by IHS programs must fend for themselves, and as a result, are often not being seen by a doctor or not being diagnosed and treated for diseases,” said Richardson.

Like most indigent, unemployed, or disabled Americans, some American Indians have access to treatment or health services through various government programs like Medicare and Medicaid. However, thousands of American Indians do not qualify for government-sponsored health care programs because they either work part-time, or work in temporary or seasonal jobs.

So, where do American Indians who are not covered by IHS go for health care? “In short, these American Indians must rely on private employers who provide health insurance, or if they are unemployed or economically disadvantaged, they must rely on publicly funded programs for their health services,” explained Richardson.

“Another issue that needs to be addressed is that IHS services are not portable and American Indians, even those who are federally recognized, enrolled members of a tribe and are eligible for IHS services, cannot access the services once they leave the reservation. The problem is that all Indians do not live near the IHS facilities or on the reservation. Therefore, I see this policy as a major health disparity, which must be addressed if the health of American Indians is to be improved,” concluded Richardson.

*For more information on American Indian health care services, go to <http://www.ihs.gov>.* ❖



---

*Indian Health Service Continues to Provide for Millions* is based on the Summit workshop  
“Where Do Native Americans Who Are Not Covered by IHS go for Healthcare?”

