

## INTERIM HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES TESTIMONY

October 12, 2012

Michael E. Bird, MSW, MPH

Member of Pueblo of Kewa/Santo Domingo

Public Health Consultant, Fmr. Pres. of American Public Health Association (APHA)

- My part of this presentation will focus on the following points:
  - o Native populations in New Mexico and their socio-economic status and oral health;
  - o Alaska Natives Response to the need for dental care; and
  - o Tribal Self-Determination and Sovereignty and the implications that the action has in this set of circumstances.
- **New Mexico:** In New Mexico, American Indians have the highest poverty rates, highest dropout rates, and our ethnic health disparities rates are the worst in comparison to the other populations in the state. The same can be stated for oral health at it relates to tooth decay and gum disease. Children, elders and all ages bear the burden of a lack of access to care including pain and suffering with crippling long term implications.
- **Alaska Natives Response:** You will be told by some today that we are not Alaska, but I would argue that we are more like Alaska than a whole lot of other places and we can benefit from good Alaska Native Knowledge. In Alaska, the Alaska Natives saw a problem and decided to fix it. They responded to the need which was access and oral health care for their own people.
- **Dental Health Aide Therapist Program:** The Alaska Native Health Consortium and the IHS Community Health Aide Program Certification Board developed the Dental Health Aide Therapist Program expanding on the Community Health Aide Program.
  - o They sent students to New Zealand for training and they returned to their own villages to practice in 2006.
  - o They have developed partnerships with the University of Washington School of Physicians Assistant Program.
  - o This resulted in 25,000 people in 25 rural Alaska communities who have access to dental care for the first time.
  - o Alaska Dental Health Aide Therapists are certified by the IHS Community Health Aide Program Certification Board under the Authority of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. Dental Health Aide Therapists were not subject to state licensing.
- **American Dental Association:** The ADA and Alaska Dental Society took the Natives to court but the case was dropped for a number of reasons including: Alaska Natives were exercising their own authority under the policy of Self-Determination not to mention the fact that the argument of limited oral health care means nothing compared to no care.
- **Indian Health Care Improvement Act:** Due to the inclusion of some new language in new Indian Health Care Improvement Act and the Affordable Care Act Tribes no longer can exercise the right to use Dental Therapists and must now subjugate themselves to states.
- **Result:** This erodes long standing policy of Self-Determination and not to mention Indian Sovereignty in not allowing tribes to determine what is best for their own people in their own way. Doesn't seem like a fair thing to do given all the rhetoric about freedom and choice now does it.

