



OPENING STATEMENT
The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member of the House Natural Resources Committee
Before the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the U.S.
Oversight Hearing on
“A Year in Review: The State of COVID-19 in American Indian, Alaska Native,
And Native Hawaiian Communities—Lessons Learned for Future Action”

Thank you, Madam Chair and thank you to the witnesses for being with us virtually.

As everyone here can attest, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on not only our nation but on our American Indian and Alaska Native communities who have experienced the brunt of the pandemic’s effects.

American Indian and Alaska Native populations have and continue to experience disproportionate levels of underlying health conditions like diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary (puhl·muh·neh·ree) disease.



Many of these conditions are listed by the CDC as major contributors that lead to a higher risk for contracting COVID-19.

This is added to the reality that many tribal communities lack proper water delivery systems, sanitation facilities, and other disparities, you have a perfect storm.

As a result, several tribal communities continue to experience higher cumulative percent positive COVID levels than the rest of the country.

Cases in the Navajo region continue to be twice the national average.

This is unacceptable in 21st century America.

I am thankful that we were able to develop a vaccine in seven months, provided a vaccine development usually takes anywhere from 5-10 years.

The Operation Warp Speed initiative, announced under the previous administration, was a monumental success and will save thousands of lives.

As of March 22, 2021, 850,228 vaccine doses have been administered in the twelve I-H-S regions.

While this is good news and more people are vaccinated every day, more must be done to ensure more American Indians and Alaska Natives receive these vaccines as soon as possible.

Congress has also provided more than \$9 billion to the I-H-S specifically to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic which is in addition to the \$6.2 billion FY 2021 appropriation.

Added together with funding provided to other agencies, more than \$35 billion has been appropriated through the CARES Act and the America Rescue Plan Act in response to COVID-19 in Indian country.

While additional funding for Indian health and economic relief is certainly supported in this time of need, we will need to work together to find other common sense solutions as this level of funding will not be sustainable long term.

I hope to work across the aisle to ensure that these funds are spent efficiently and effectively—And find other pragmatic solutions to address need in tribal communities.

Needs are different for each of the 574 federally recognized tribes and there must be transparency and accountability.

I look forward to today's conversation and thank our witnesses again for their participation.

Thank you, Madam Chair, I yield back.