

My name is Victoria Kitcheyan. I am a member of the Winnebago Tribe and an elected member of the Winnebago Tribal Council. I am also the Chairperson of the National Indian Health Board. Thank you for inviting me here today.

## BRIEF BACKGROUND

As you will recall from my past testimony, the Winnebago Hospital still holds the distinction of being the only federally operated hospital in the United States to have lost its CMS certification. This occurred as a result of years of mismanagement and serious patient care deficiencies including lack of staff training, equipment and overall hospital operations. I know these issues have been reported to you starting as early as 2010 and were brought to the forefront again in 2015. These ongoing issues have resulted in the painful loss of lives and unnecessary suffering of so many of our people.

When this ordeal began for the Winnebago Tribe in 2015, we were adamant that because the Indian Health Service created this problem, the Indian Health Service needed to fix it. As the weeks turned into months and then into years, the Tribe finally came to the hard conclusion that it could wait no longer for the IHS to solve the problem. The Tribe initiated an intensive planning process and, on July 1, 2018, the Winnebago Tribe entered into a Self-Governance Compact with the Indian Health Service pursuant to the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act and assumed full management of the facility, now known as the Twelve Clans Unity Hospital.

## HOSPITAL TRANSITION

Since July of 2018, the Tribe has worked diligently to assess, stabilize and improve the hospital operations. Priority areas have included the establishment of the organizational structure, board training, staff recruitment and training, overall quality improvement and, of course, working

toward CMS certification. The issues at the hospital did not develop overnight, and we understand that it is going to take considerable time and effort to change the organizational culture and make all of the improvements necessary to not only achieve CMS certification, but to become the top quality health care organization that we know is possible. It has been a period of significant change for the organization and for the community, and it has not been without challenges. However, we are confident that we can be successful and we can already see remarkable improvements in many areas.

During this period of transition, the support that you have provided has been critical. Without the added oversight and support from this Committee, our congressional delegation and congressional staff, the tribal assumption of the hospital and the ability to sustain ongoing operations would simply not be possible. We appreciate this commitment and we will continue to need your support as we move forward with getting this facility on the right track.

#### ONGOING NEEDS

Today, for example, we are attempting to recruit personnel for a facility that has lost its CMS Certification, a facility that has been documented to have inadequately trained staff, and a facility which still has an unstable source of funding. Our hope is to build a solid reputation and strong organizational culture so the hospital is a place where employees can be proud to work and patients can be confident in receiving their health care. We think that we will be most successful with permanent full time staff with a vested interest our organization and community. Again, this is going to take time.

While we continue to work on these ongoing recruitment efforts, we find it necessary to continue to use locum tenens staff to provide the personnel necessary to staff the hospital. We are

continuing to rely heavily on locum tenens contracts for medical providers and nurses as well as for the radiology and laboratory departments, which are considerably more costly than paying permanent staff.

We have also identified the need for ongoing training and technical consultation with regard to meeting hospital rules and regulations for all of our departments and staff. Although the facility has been in existence for a long time, it is essentially a new hospital now that the Tribe has assumed management. This requires intensive review and revision of all policies, procedures, operational plans and processes in order to adapt to a non-federal system of operation, ensure all CMS Conditions of Participation are met and to implement best practices in the health care industry.

Another new challenge was presented recently during the government shutdown. We would have had great difficulty keeping all of our services open during the recent shutdown if we did not receive third party shortfall funds from the special accreditation emergency fund that you appropriated in FY 2018. This recent event greatly emphasized the need for continued replacement of lost third party revenues in at least the same amounts provided for in FY 18. This lack of third party revenues exists due to the lack of CMS certification, and the replacement of the funds helps provide financial stability for the organization while we work to restore the hospital's certification.

The Winnebago Tribe also supports the recent efforts to provide for forward funding for the Indian Health Service, as well as the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The IHS, and the tribally contracted and compacted health care facilities that receive funding through the IHS, are unique in that they provide direct patient care services throughout the country. This patient care includes basic things like ambulance services, medications for chronic health conditions, mental health counseling for suicidal patients, dialysis for diabetics, and a wide array of other services that our people depend on. These services and the associated funding are part of the federal government's

treaty and trust responsibilities. Our patients should not suffer and go without adequate healthcare simply because the federal government does not yet have an approved budget. We appreciate the Committee's support for forward funding and sincerely hope this can become a reality.

Thank you again for your commitment and continued support for the improvement of Indian health care.