

The Montana Office of American Indian Health

In 2015, via Executive Order, Governor Steve Bullock established the Office of American Indian Health to address disparities in health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer rates, respiratory illness, lifespan, and other outcomes that exist between the American Indian and non-Indian population in Montana. The Office will be housed within the Director's Office of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS).

In October 2015, DPHHS held a Tribal Consultation to receive feedback from tribal government representatives on how to develop the office and what functions it should have. Tribal representatives recognized that many factors contribute to the health disparities, including housing, transportation, education, employment opportunities, and the criminal justice system. This indicates that the topic is too broad for one agency to address, and a one-person office that becomes absorbed in the state bureaucracy is inadequate to achieve the kind of progress that is necessary to close the existing health gaps. What is necessary is an office capable of leading the effort to pursue the following:

1. A greater focus on disease prevention;
2. Agency-wide support for an Indian health agenda;
3. Coordination with Tribal health stakeholders to improve health of American Indians in Montana;
4. Coordination with State and Tribal health advocates to use available data for policy analysis and development.
5. A "health in all policies" approach that considers factors like transportation and housing; and
6. Strengthening the capacity of tribal communities, as well as the urban Indian population in Montana,

Using feedback from the Tribes, DPHHS has drafted a position description for the Director of the Office of American Indian Health and will begin recruiting for the position once the position description is finalized. The Office itself will serve four primary functions:

1. Internal Coordination – to ensure that DPHHS programs across its divisions develop, implement, and monitor strategies that reduce health disparities and include a cultural component in their work to address factors contributing to health disparities. The department will appoint an internal Indian Health committee of senior staff representing the department's various Divisions. The Director of the Office of American Indian Health (Director) will oversee and direct this committee's work to develop and pursue an Indian health agenda within DPHHS. The internal coordination will commence immediately upon the hiring of the Director. The Director will work with DPHHS leadership to develop a staffing plan for the Office of American Indian Health. Each DPHHS Division will allocate specific staff time and resources to support the functions of the Office of American Indian Health

2. External Coordination – to ensure that the Office of American Indian Health involves Tribal stakeholders to address health disparities. The Director will coordinate and facilitate the input and priorities identified by the Tribal health stakeholders. This work will also begin immediately upon the hiring of the Director.
3. State Government Coordination – to ensure that other agencies adopt policies that address health disparities that arise from transportation, employment, corrections, and other services that affect Indian health and well-being. The Governor will appoint representatives from other state agencies and the Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs to serve on a committee that will work with the Director to address health equity issues throughout state government. This work will begin within one year of hiring the Director.
4. Technical Assistance – to identify existing state resources and new potential funding sources that are available to assist tribes in strengthening their capacity to improve the health of their members.
5. Research and Data – to coordinate and facilitate collaboration between DPHHS, tribal health programs, Indian Health Service, and other stakeholders that generate relevant health data in order to ensure appropriate use of tribal health data to guide department policy and reduce health disparities.

DPHHS will provide the Office of American Indian Health with administrative support and internal staff expertise in public health and epidemiology, planning and research, grant writing, and/or other skills necessary for the success of the Office. Senior staff will work with the Director to develop a long-term staffing plan for the Office of American Indian Health after its Director is hired.