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BAUCUS CALLS FOR FUNDING, IMPROVEMENTS ON INDIAN HEALTH AND CHILD WELFARE

Finance Chairman hears from tribal leaders on needs in Indian country

Washington, DC – Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) today called for increased funding for Indian health services and direct access for tribal members to foster care and adoption funds. At a Committee hearing entitled “Keeping America’s Promise: Health Care and Child Welfare Services for Native Americans,” Baucus heard from tribal leaders about the need for the Federal government to better keep its commitments to the health and social well-being of Native Americans. Baucus says the Finance Committee will move forward to reauthorize portions of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, or IHCA, this year. Part of today’s hearing focused on the problems caused by underfunding of the health programs authorized by that law.

“The current funding level for the Indian Health Service system is only 52 to 60 percent of the need. There are just too many stories of too many people who don’t get proper care because of that limitation,” said Baucus. **“We’ve got to find a way to get that solved as quickly as we can. It bothers me no end. It’s totally unconscionable, in my judgment.”**

Baucus asked for input from tribal leaders on changes that should be made in IHCA reauthorization. Witnesses suggested changes ranging from the amount of funding requested for Indian health services to the structure of the law. Crow Nation Chairman Carl Venne noted that due to underfunding of Indian health services, many physicians are leaving the Indian Health Service (IHS) because of the financial hurdles to practicing good health care. Valerie Davidson of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium urged a requirement for inflation-related increases to the IHS budget, and for equal access for tribal members to Medicare, Medicaid, and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program. Linda Holt of the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board called for a revision of rules in the law to treat tribes equally, and for the Federal government to pay for Indian health care through the IHS.

Witness Connie Bear King of the National Indian Child Welfare Association discussed the great need for foster care for many Native American children, and asked for resources to help tribes take care of kids. Baucus agreed that more funds could be supplied directly to tribes for this purpose. More than a third of foster children in Montana are Native American.

“Most of the Native American children in foster care are under the jurisdiction of tribal courts, but Native American tribes that administer their own child welfare systems are not eligible for the right Federal funds to run their programs,” Baucus said. **“We also need to think creatively about ways to help children to find safe, permanent homes with relatives.”**

Baucus expects the Finance Committee to consider IHCA legislation related to Medicare, Medicaid, and CHIP this spring.