

Talking Points of Kevin J. Allis

- Thank you, President Sharp. I am Kevin Allis, CEO of the National Congress of American Indians and a citizen of the Forest County Potawatomi Community.
- NCAI is the oldest and largest national organization composed of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations. Since 1944, NCAI has been fighting to protect tribal sovereignty and improve the lives of tribal citizens across Indian Country.
- When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all in this together. And, we are hearing news coverage about the impacts in communities across the U.S. – except in Indian Country.
- Tribal nations and tribal citizens cannot be left behind in this fight to respond and recover from COVID-19—whether we are talking about the national conversation or in the federal government’s response.
- Tribal communities face the same threats from the pandemic as other communities, except that in our communities the threats are even greater.
 - Healthcare: The Indian Health System is grossly underfunded and Native people experience significantly higher rates of the underlying medical conditions that increase the risk of severe illness and death caused by COVID-19 (as compared to the general U.S. population).
 - Housing: Indian Country also has a severe lack of housing and because of that we experience significantly higher rates of housing overcrowding, which increases the risk of coronavirus transmission.
 - Food Deserts: Additionally, many tribal communities, particularly those in rural areas, are considered food and goods “deserts,” which will make it extremely difficult for residents of those communities to easily and regularly obtain the food and goods they need to engage in proper social distancing for the duration of the pandemic.
- The bottom line is that we cannot be an afterthought in this – especially in response and recovery packages that Congress and the White House are negotiating.
- Tribal nations need direct access to federal resources and funding for:
 - Healthcare: the Indian Health system—services and facilities.
 - Tribal Government Services: our tribal governments provide public safety, emergency response, social services, and many other services to our tribal citizens.
 - Tribal Economies: our tribally-owned enterprises generate a significant portion of our tribal government revenues because our tax bases are limited.
 - They are also often the cornerstones of our tribal economies.
 - Tribal Community Impacts: Our families are experiencing furloughs, school closures, overcrowded housing, and the lack of access to nutritious food.
- NCAI is working closely with tribal nations, our partner organizations, and many devoted advocates to secure relief for our communities. Our role is to be a convener, and we are currently organizing advocacy efforts and acting as a clearing house for tribal priorities.
- It is my hope that today we can elevate these issues so that our communities and our people are a part of the national conversation and a part of the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Questions and Answers

1. What are the things Congress can do to provide the resources Indian Country needs?
 - a. It is important to remember that tribal nations are governments and so the list of priorities is broad, as our tribal governments respond to this pandemic. Just a few examples would be:
 - i. Tribal healthcare systems need an immediate significant investment in funding for our health care facilities and the services they provide.
 - ii. Tribal economies need direct relief for fiscal stabilization, and we will need measures to ensure access to credit, such as zero and no interest loans, as well as a significant federal investment in a loan guarantee fund.
 - iii. Tribal governments need a significant federal investment to ensure tribal nations can provide the emergency response, law enforcement, and social services, among many other services, needed to meet the unique response circumstances in their communities.
2. How BIE schools are being impacted by Corona-related school closures? [Defer to NIEA]
 - a. As of two days ago, we heard that all BIE system schools, except one, were closed. This obviously presents a problem for our kids and their parents: In many tribal communities internet based instruction wouldn't even be an option because of the lack of highspeed internet; finding childcare for working parents is a challenge; and the potential lack of school lunches could put a strain on family finances, although BIE indicated it is providing school lunches with logistics of that service varying by proximity and other factors.
3. Wants to check and see if you'd gotten a sense of how IHS is handling any possible coronavirus cases at their facilities, which is obviously a big concern given the issues IHS has faced. [Defer to NIHB]
 - a. IHS was grossly underfunded before the Pandemic, and tribal facilities are often understaffed. So, the response to this was going to be a challenge no matter what. We need more resources for personal protective equipment, testing supplies, sanitations supplies, and the facilities needed to address pandemic and care for other patients at the same time, among many other things. Staffing is also an issue. Our facilities were already understaffed, and the impacts of more commission corps deployments and the possibility of healthcare personnel getting sick are very real concerns.
 - b. The first package of funding included additional funding that was going to be disbursed through the CDC; however, to my knowledge it has not. So, although we have received some additional resources, they still aren't reaching our health systems. IHS has been holding calls with tribal leaders on a weekly basis to stay in contact.
4. Impacts to tribes and tribes' planning surrounding the new coronavirus. [President Sharp on the ground examples would be great]

- a. This situation is unprecedented in our time. Tribal nations are working hard to overcome the challenges associated with keeping our communities safe. This situation impacts every aspect of tribal governance and life in tribal communities. So, addressing the pandemic is requiring a comprehensive and fast-moving approach. [Anecdote from any conversations you've had with tribal leaders about their individual responses].
5. In general, what unique challenges do Native American communities face during a pandemic like this? Are they more at-risk than other demographics?
 - a. Healthcare: The Indian Health System is grossly underfunded and Native people experience significantly higher rates of the underlying medical conditions that increase the risk of severe illness and death caused by COVID-19 (as compared to the general U.S. population).
 - b. Housing: Indian Country also has a severe lack of housing and because of that we experience significantly higher rates of housing overcrowding, which increases the risk of coronavirus transmission.
 - c. Food Deserts: Additionally, many tribal communities, particularly those in rural areas, are considered food and goods "deserts," which will make it extremely difficult for residents of those communities to easily and regularly obtain the food and goods they need to engage in proper social distancing for the duration of the pandemic.
6. More specifically, how has or will coronavirus-related layoffs, unemployment and housing issues affect members of the community?
 - a. Layoffs and furloughs are going to make it a lot harder for tribal citizens to get by during the response phase of the pandemic because without a paycheck, how are you supposed to buy food, pay your housing payments, or take care of other expenses. At the same time, this is going to put a lot of strain on tribal governments, as applications for food and other assistance increase.
 - b. Tribal governments and their citizens need federal relief and that is why it is incumbent on the federal government to provide significant additional funding for tribal nations and enact policy that protects families across Indian Country.
7. How will federal funds (like the \$64 million Congress has allocated to Indian Health Services) help protect Native Americans? Does the funding go far enough? [Defer to NIHB]
 - a. The additional resources are definitely welcome and will help the Indian Health Service and tribal facilities to confront this pandemic. However, the funding level is nowhere near enough, especially when you see just how costly this pandemic is on the national and international stages. Some of our healthcare federal funding asks include \$1.1 billion for Indian health services funding and \$200 million for IHS facilities funding.