



COALITION OF LARGE TRIBES

Blackfeet Nation • Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe • Crow Nation • Eastern Shoshone Tribe
Fort Belknap Indian Community • Mandan, Hidatsa & Arikara Nation • Navajo Nation • Northern Arapaho Tribe
Oglala Sioux Tribe • Rosebud Sioux Tribe • Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe
Shoshone Bannock Tribes • Spokane Tribe • Ute Indian Tribe • Walker River Paiute Tribe

COLT calls on IHS to honor Treaty and Trust Commitments following IHS’ failure to deliver healing resources to the Blackfeet Tribe responding to IHS’ knowing and purposeful transfer of a former doctor and convicted pedophile who abused Blackfeet children

June 9, 2023

Browning, MT - The Coalition of Large Tribes, an intertribal organization representing the interests of the more than 50 tribes with reservations of 100,000 acres or more, supports the stance of the Blackfeet Tribe in refusing to meet with IHS Director Tso in response to IHS’ repeated failures to address an unconscionable wrong.

The Blackfeet Tribe had made numerous attempts to meet with IHS Director Tso in Washington D.C. over the past 18 months and were finally granted a meeting in February of this year. The purpose of the meeting was to follow up on a commitment made by former IHS Director Rear Adm. Michael Weahkee to mitigate the harm caused by former IHS Dr. Weber, who was convicted of sexually assaulting Blackfeet children.

Former IHS Director Weahkee had committed to the Blackfeet Tribal Business Committee, in a government-to-government discussion in chambers, to partially redress the wrongs of IHS by funding and building a youth center on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation after visiting the Blackfeet Reservation in March of 2019. His commitment was to provide much-needed trauma healing resources for current and future Blackfeet youth.

Now, after more than four years have passed, IHS has not done a single thing for the Blackfeet Tribe to mitigate the harm caused by the former doctor and convicted pedophile. Rather, IHS has declined to honor the commitment made by former Director Weahkee and, sadly, urged the Blackfeet Tribe to do what it has already been trying to do by applying for competitive grants to obtain additional health resources and a tribal wellness center. Director Tso has disclaimed any responsibility to the Blackfeet Tribe to provide trauma healing resources for the victims, their families, and the tribal community.

Director Tso informed the Blackfeet Tribe that although she supported the Blackfeet Tribe’s effort to secure funding of a youth wellness center; the IHS budget FY2024 had been submitted without any request for a Blackfeet youth facility. The omission of this important promised funding request is the precise reason that the Blackfeet Tribe sought (without success) on numerous occasions to meet with IHS Director Tso. It is, unfortunately, another failed promise of the United States to the Blackfeet people.



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The Coalition of Large Tribes strongly urges Congress to address the lack of “competent physician-led health care to the Tribe’s members” for the Blackfeet Nation and all large land base tribes based upon longstanding Treaty and trust obligations. *See Rosebud Sioux Tribe v. United States*, 450 F.Supp.3d 986 (D.S.D. 2020). COLT also asserts its members’ collective Treaty rights to hold IHS accountable for the “policy of this Nation, in fulfillment of its special trust responsibilities and legal obligations to Indians to ensure the highest possible health status for Indians . . . and to provide all resources necessary to effect that policy.”

During a special Coalition of Large Tribes recent meeting, a Resolution was passed to address IHS’ failure to expend the resources they have on hand to provide “competent physician-led health care to the Tribe’s members.” In this instance, IHS has approximately \$90 million in unobligated funds, and instead of addressing unmet needs of large land base tribes, IHS continues to hold the same funds that are so desperately needed by tribal members.

Like Rosebud and so many other large land base reservations, overall IHS conditions at Blackfeet have continuously worsened over time. A steady vacancy of healthcare positions hovered at 47% in the month of May. In April 2023, there has been a vacancy rate of 48% and the vacancy rate has been 52% since October 2022 at the Blackfeet IHS Hospital. These vacancy rates translate to nearly 140 vacant full-time positions.

And, ironically, the Blackfeet IHS hospital has been without a Human Resources Director, whose responsibility is to fill vacancies at the Blackfeet IHS Hospital. The vacancies have resulted in the local IHS budget being depleted to transport patients to Kalispell or Great Falls, Montana (many miles away from the Blackfeet homeland). The program for handling referrals out of Blackfeet (PCR - Purchase Referred Care) is down 66% - only 2 positions of the six are filled.

Just a few weeks ago, on May 14, 2023, in a hearing U.S. Senator Jon Tester (Montana) pressed IHS Director Tso on staff shortages:

“It’s a crisis. What we need to know from you though is—we prioritize it—but what the hell does that mean? What are we doing to get people on board? And once again, not unlike law enforcement, if we need to be a help on this committee, tell us what we need to do so that you can bring more people onto Indian Health...I don’t need to give you the statistics on life span of Native Americans. It has to do with more than just health care, but health care is pretty fundamental. So this is important.”

Blackfeet Tribal Business Committee Member and COLT Chairman Marvin Weatherwax stated: “Until Indian Health Service can actually bring something to the table to improve healthcare on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Director Tso’s visit is a poverty tour.”



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Director Tso plans to visit Fort Belknap Indian Community, Chippewa Cree Tribe and the Little Shell Tribe during the week of June 12-16, 2023. We truly hope her upcoming visit marks a fresh start and that all COLT tribes can meet regularly and productively to follow-up on and implement the commitments IHS has made to our people, beginning with the Blackfeet youth who were abused at the hands of the former doctor when IHS put our children in harm's way.

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