United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 17, 2015

The Honorable Sylvia Burwell
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell:

We write to respectfully urge you to direct the appropriate officials in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), to develop and implement a comprehensive Department-wide policy for addressing complex trauma, including historical trauma, in Native American communities.

As you may be aware, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs has held hearings on youth suicide, substance abuse, and crime victim services in Indian country. The hearings represent the Committee's latest efforts to share stories, disseminate best practices, and meaningfully address the persisting issues in many Native communities. Unfortunately, the hearings also demonstrate that too little progress has been made in reducing trauma and its effects.

A coordinated interagency approach that incorporates the growing and credible evidence from the science of epigenetics and groundbreaking research from Kaiser Permanente Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Adverse Childhood Experience study, which finds that complex childhood trauma is often the underlying cause of such problems as substance abuse and youth suicide, would be beneficial to tackling these challenges. Recent scientific studies have also demonstrated that complex trauma causes neurological changes in the brain that can only be addressed through trauma-informed interventions.

In a July 11, 2013 memorandum regarding guidance to State Medicaid and Child Welfare Directors, the directors of SAMHSA, ACF and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighted the importance of addressing complex trauma. The letter stated, "Across the life span, complex trauma is linked to a wide range of problems, including addiction, chronic physical conditions, depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviors and other psychiatric disorders." We applaud HHS for recognizing the critical importance of addressing this issue in relation to child welfare and believe it is time to expand those same insights to the other programs serving Native Americans as well as coordinate the actions of these programs to break down administrative silos and comprehensively incorporate what is known about complex trauma.

As part of the federal trust responsibility, agencies should coordinate with both federal and tribal partners to provide comprehensive, integrated strategies that promote trauma-informed programs in the health care, child welfare, education, law enforcement, and other systems supporting tribes and Native communities. To uphold Executive Order 13175 and the principles of tribal self-determination, which this government supports, HHS agencies should also meaningfully consult with Indian tribes and Native communities to ensure integrated, trauma-informed approaches meet their local needs as well as support known best practices.

We recommend that the Office of Indian Alcohol and Substance Abuse within SAMHSA coordinate this effort, as its officials have demonstrated an understanding of the trust responsibility to Indian tribes and the devastating impacts of trauma. Through their work in tribal communities, SAMHSA officials understand the need to consult with and provide Indian tribes and Native communities the training and technical assistance required to implement comprehensive, trauma-informed programs aimed at preventing and addressing trauma.

We hope that this integrated and coordinated federal approach for providing funding and resources to tribes and Native communities will reduce complex trauma, which appears to be the root of many issues persistent in Indian Country. As such, we recommend that this group coordinate and include representatives from the Indian Health Service (IHS), the Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Defending Childhood Initiative, which is working currently with several tribes on helping address complex trauma, as well as ACF, which oversees special initiatives on trauma and violence through its Family Violence Prevention and Services Office and new Office on Trafficking in Persons.

We appreciate the work you have done for tribes and Native communities. Your attendance earlier this year at the inaugural Native Youth Gathering illustrated your commitment to Native youth and tribes. But, more must be done to address this persistent problem, so we thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senate

Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senate

Al Franken
United States Senate

Jon Tester
United States Senate

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senate

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senate

Tom Udall
United States Senate

Angus S. King Jr.
United States Senate

Brian Schatz
United States Senate

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senate