

# News Release



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

August 31, 2011

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## **Top U.S. health officials learn about Alaska's Native health system**

### ***Southcentral Foundation hosts secretary of health and human services for discussion and tour***

**(ANCHORAGE, ALASKA)** – Senior officials and advisors from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) visited Southcentral Foundation (SCF) yesterday to discuss SCF's Nuka System of Care, progress at Alaska Native Medical Center, and the local consequences of the national debate on health care and the deficit. This visit delivered on the commitment President Barack Obama made two years ago when he promised his administration would listen to Alaska Native and American Indian people when formulating health and human services priorities, policies and budgets.

With HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Director of the Indian Health Service Dr. Yvette Roubideaux and U.S. Senators Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich present for the visit, SCF's leadership had the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation, listening and problem solving around the challenges in health care delivery. According to SCF leadership, Sebelius brought an impressive level of preparation, detailed knowledge and genuine interest to the discussion.

Discussion centered around SCF's customer-driven Nuka System of Care, which has resulted in dramatic improvement in population health measures while decreasing overall cost and staff turnover. In response to Sebelius's questions about the extent to which this journey can be translated to other settings, SCF President/CEO Katherine Gottlieb emphasized listening to the wants and wishes of those receiving services, redesigning services around long-term trusting relationships, and empowering customer-owners to own health issues at personal and systems levels.

Besides the innovative Nuka system, the discussion also included raising awareness that health care for Alaska Native and American Indian people has been "prepaid" in exchange for land and resources. It is a contractual, legal obligation. Gottlieb shared that, historically, the federal government has not fully met the obligation. According to a U.S. Civil Rights Commission study, per capita funding on Native health care is only one-third of the national average, and barely one-half the amount of per capita spending on federal prison health care. Gottlieb noted that in the last two years IHS funding has increased more than in the past and Sebelius said the Obama administration is working to further address this disparity.

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In addition to the IHS budget shortfalls, Congress has repeatedly underfunded the contract support costs SCF needs each year to self-govern and deliver health care services to 58,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people. Last year, SCF's contract support cost payment shortfall was calculated at \$5.5 million. Additionally, SCF is building a 90,000-square-foot outpatient facility in Wasilla as part of a Joint Venture with IHS, which requires Congress to fund a sizeable portion of the staffing costs – a possible challenge with all of the deficit reduction activities.

The visit concluded with a walking tour of the innovative Anchorage Native Primary Care Center where customer comfort, de-medicalized clinical spaces, optimized integrated care team environments, and optimal use of light, color, and texture were highlighted. Sebelius noted that much of what she was seeing and hearing were potential models for the nation, an idea also strongly supported verbally by Senators Begich and Murkowski during the discussion.

In the end it was apparent that SCF leadership, IHS leadership, both Begich and Murkowski, and Sebelius shared a common passion for improving health care access, quality, and outcomes within responsible cost constraints, and emphasizing the centrality of those receiving the services.

“Secretary Sebelius brings an obvious high level of expertise and respectful listening to her Alaska visit,” said Gottlieb. “The conversation was right on target and we are confident that we have a strong partner in furthering our journey to health and well-being.”

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#### **About Southcentral Foundation**

Established in 1982, Southcentral Foundation's (SCF) mission is to work together with the Native Community to achieve wellness through health and related services. The nonprofit health care affiliate of Cook Inlet Region Inc. (CIRI), SCF has grown in its 27 years, from a single dental clinic to an internationally recognized, award-winning health care organization that employs more than 1,400 people and manages more than 60 health care programs and services.