Date

Name

Title

Indian Health Service

Address

Dear [insert name],

As leaders / advocates of the [insert tribe name], we write requesting that the Indian Health Service facilities serving the [insert tribe name] be designated as voter registration sites under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA).[[1]](#endnote-1) Designation of the [insert IHS facilities name] as a voter registration site represents a significant opportunity to improve voter registration rates in Indian Country while meeting IHS’s mission of building healthy communities and providing quality healthcare. Designation can help ensure the critical voices of our community, so often silenced, are well-represented in our democracy. In addition, the robust body of research linking civic engagement and individual and community health suggests improving voting registration opportunities also improves health outcomes for patients. [[2]](#endnote-2)

In March of 2021, President Biden issued Executive Order 14019 Promoting Access to Voting.[[3]](#endnote-3) The EO specifically lifts up the need to increase voting access in Native American communities[[4]](#endnote-4) and offers a significant opportunity to increase voter registration rates specifically, for the [insert tribe name] and across Indian Country. Under this EO, President Biden strongly encourages federal agencies to seek and accept designation as voter registration sites under the NVRA.[[5]](#endnote-5) While such designation is not a pre-requisite for IHS and 638-compacting facilities to offer voter registration, being designated would help both entities provide high quality voter registration services—like those provided for decades at DMVs, Medicaid offices, and other state agencies—to the Native people they serve.

Native Americans face multiple barriers to voter registration that are not faced by other Americans. Native Americans are less likely than other Americans to be registered to vote at DMVs or state social service agencies that currently provide voter registration under the NVRA, since they may rely instead upon tribal IDs and federal programs that fulfill the federal government’s treaty obligations. Additionally, these offices are state-run and less utilized by Native Americans who live primarily within reservation lands. Further, other voter registration sites are often located over 50 miles from reservation communities.

Moreover, the long history of formal disenfranchisement, the legacy of colonization, and present-day racism and hostility continue to prevent many Native Americans from exercising their fundamental right to register and vote.[[6]](#endnote-6) Poor roads, poverty, and lack of vehicle access, which are rooted in the treatment of Native communities, compound the difficulty of reaching voter registration sites. In addition, the lack of consistent addressing on Native homes makes the act of accurately filling out a registration form more difficult. As a result, over a third (34%) of the Native American population is not registered to vote, notably higher than the 26.5% of non-Hispanic whites who are eligible but unregistered.[[7]](#endnote-7) These barriers to participation across Indian Country hold true in the [insert tribe name] Nation as well.

NVRA designation would reduce registration barriers by providing voter registration services at federal agencies and offices most utilized by the [insert tribe name] --- including [insert facility name]. [Facility name] serves approximately X people each year, too many of whom are not registered to vote and would likely take advantage of the opportunity to register alongside their routine visits to the facility.

Like Medicaid offices, IHS offices can offer registration services without compromising patient confidentiality, and without significant burdens to current staff. Because state agencies have been offering voter registration for decades, we know that doing so is both inexpensive and effective. Data from Michigan’s Department of Health and Human Services show that the average cost of offering voter registration is a mere $7,000 per site per year.[[8]](#endnote-8) Further, data show that, when state public assistance agencies provide voter registration services that comply with the NVRA, millions more eligible voters are added to the rolls.[[9]](#endnote-9) With minimal and effective training, IHS providers can offer a meaningful voter registration opportunities to its patients, including assisting them with filling out registration forms, which can be especially difficult for Native voters that do not have addresses on their homes.

Though seeking NVRA designation is relatively new for IHS facilities, it is already well-supported by the Native American community. In June, the Native Congress of American Indians passed a resolution urging IHS providers to become NVRA designated sites and encouraging Tribal Nations that compact IHS responsibilities to do likewise.[[10]](#endnote-10) Additionally, other institutions serving Indian Country have also pursued and secured NVRA designation recently, include the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute in New Mexico and Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas, in cooperation with the Department of the Interior.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Ensuring Native American communities can fully participate in our elections is vital to building a multiracial, inclusive democracy and improving health in Indian Country. Research suggests health and participation in civic engagement activities, like voting, creates a reinforcement loop that leads to better outcomes in both areas.[[12]](#endnote-12) Among government health agencies, Medicaid providers have long offered registration services and recently – in response to President Biden’s EO – Veterans Affairs facilities have begun the process of seeking NVRA designation. By integrating voter registration services into their regular interactions with patients, IHS facilities serving the [insert tribe name] can leverage their significant reach and critical role in Indian country to move us closer to a democracy in which all communities are valued and thrive.

Sincerely,

Name, title

1. National Voter Registration Act, 52 U.S.C. §§ 20501–20511. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nelson C, Sloan J, Chandra A. *Examining Civic Engagement Links to Health: Findings from the Literature and Implications for a Culture of Health*. RAND Corporation, 2019. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3163.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Exec. Order No. 14019, Fed. Reg. Page 13623-13627 March 7,2021. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/03/10/2021-05087/promoting-access-to-voting>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Id., Sec 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Id.,* Sec 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jacqueline De León, James Tucker, and Dan McCool, *Obstacles at Every Turn: Barriers to Political Participation Faced by Native American Voters*, 2020, <https://www.narf.org/obstacles-at-every-turn/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. National Conference of State Legislatures, *Voting for All Americans: Native Americans,* July 20, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voting-for-all-americans-american-indians.aspx>. *See also* National Conference of American Indians Infographic, <https://www.ncai.org/initiatives/campaigns/NCAI_NativeVoteInfographic.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Michigan DHHS administers SNAP, Medicaid/CHIP programs. Data obtained via public records requests and represents an average across sites for 2019 and 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Laura Williamson, Brenda Wright, and Pamela Cataldo, *Toward a More Representative Electorate: The Progress and Potential of Voter Registration through Public Assistance Agencies*, 2018, <https://www.demos.org/research/toward-more-representative-electorate>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. National Congress of American Indians*, Resolution #ANC -22-038,* 2022. <https://ncai.assetbank-server.com/assetbank-ncai/assetfile/1970.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Department of the Interior, *Interior Department Takes Steps to Increase Voter Registration in Indigenous Communities,* March 24, 2022. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-takes-steps-increase-voter-registration-indigenous-communities>. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Supra* note #2 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)