

# Increasing SCHIP Access for American Indian Children

By Michelle Meadows

Closing the Gap, State Children's Health Insurance Program • January 2000

**T**rying to convince some American Indian/ Alaska Native (AI/AN) families that the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) is beneficial is like trying to tell people in the desert they need flood insurance, says Phil Smith, M.D., maternal and child health coordinator with the Indian Health Service (IHS) "It's hard to see the need for it right then," he says. But six months later a heavy storm hurls through and washes the house away.

The challenge lies in the fact that members of federally-recognized tribes already receive many health services through IHS facilities, including preventive care such as immunizations and well-baby checkups. But many don't know that SCHIP brings some additional benefits. "For example, if there were an emergency and a child needed services in a non-IHS facility, SCHIP could help pay for that," Dr. Smith says.

IHS participates in all federal insurance programs and spent more than \$100,000 on SCHIP outreach in Fiscal Year 1999. Outreach activities have included two national meetings on SCHIP for tribes and the development and distribution of culturally-appropriate promotional materials.

IHS determined that one of the largest barriers to SCHIP was the co-payment required of families. In November 1999, IHS announced a major milestone—all SCHIP cost-sharing for AI/AN children would be waived, eliminating any co-pay, Dr. Smith says. IHS has also worked with HCFA to help American Indian and Alaska Native families determine the eligibility of their children for SCHIP.

Smith says a major goal is to better coordinate agency efforts, so that IHS strengthens linkages with HCFA staff and SCHIP administrators, along with social workers in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services created an Inter-agency Task Force on SCHIP Outreach in the Summer of 1998. Through this task force, several states such as Michigan and Washington have formed committees dedicated to insuring more American Indian children.

IHS plans include using the 2000 Census to identify areas with large numbers of American Indians so that SCHIP outreach can be more directed, organizing a leadership team to champion outreach activities within IHS and the tribes, and assigning tribal workers to serve on federal and state SCHIP workgroups and committees. ❖

