

Statement of Mark Cruz
Nominee for Director of the Indian Health Service
Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
June 24, 2026

Waq'lis'i, Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. My name is Mark Cruz. I am deeply honored—as are my family, the Klamath Tribes, and my fellow Oregonians—that President Trump has nominated me to serve as the 12th Director of the Indian Health Service.

My life has been profoundly shaped by people who took a chance on me. As a former foster child from a rural and tribal community, I will be forever grateful to the families who opened their homes, gave me rides to games, or made sure I had a meal. I am equally grateful to the parents of my friends who did the same. In that same spirit, I would like to make a few acknowledgments.

I want to thank my brother Cougar Ray for being here today and recognize my sister Shawnee Faye, who could not join us. No one has stood beside me longer than these two. I cannot imagine facing the adversity we overcame without two stronger or more loyal siblings. I also honor my brothers Kody and Victor, who now walk the happy hunting grounds. They remain in my heart and continue to inspire the work I do.

I also thank the many friends who are family to me—especially the Klamath Tribes delegation, my best friends Kyle Mauch and Blake Misajet, and the mentors in this room. Finally, I thank the tribal members, tribal governments, tribal health programs, and organizations that submitted letters of support. Their endorsement reflects my commitment to show up, listen, engage, and dialogue with anyone, anywhere, as long as we are working together to improve health outcomes for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples.

I appear before you today humbled and grateful, ready to share my story and my vision for the Indian Health Service.

I am a proud citizen of the Klamath Tribes, a first-generation college student, and a former foster child. Like too many American Indian families, I come from a broken home. I am the son of a deported drug dealer and a lifelong addict. Even so, I appreciate my parents, Mark and Leta, both of whom have passed on. I especially want to thank my late maternal grandmother, Barbara “Bunny” Unive. After overcoming colon cancer at the Santa Fe Indian

Hospital and leaving a comfortable life in Dixon, New Mexico, she returned to Klamath to raise me and my siblings. Her love and sacrifice made everything that followed possible.

In some places it takes a village to raise a child. In Indian Country, it often takes an auntie or a grandmother.

I grew up in Klamath Falls, Oregon—where the sunny skies overlook quaking aspen and ponderosa pine, and the Sprague and Williamson rivers flow into Upper Klamath Lake and the Link River. It is a tough, tight-knit rural community that looks after its own, values hard work, honesty, and accountability, and treats one's word as a promise. Those values guide me still.

For more than a year, I have served as Senior Advisor in the Immediate Office of the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. I thank the Secretary for creating this position in response to tribal leaders' request and for entrusting me with it.

In that role, I work closely with Department colleagues, tribes and advisory groups to address a variety of issues that came before the Department, including by not limited to CMS, SAMHSA, FDA, OASH, HRSA, NIH, CDC, ACF, ACL, ASPR, and ASPE. That work includes travel to many of your states, including Alaska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and North Dakota (amongst others), where I coordinate and collaborate with other federal agencies to address issues brought forward by tribal communities and promote healthcare affordability and improve nutrition in Indian Country. If confirmed, I commit to continued rigorous engagement and follow up.

I have deep respect for this Committee and the important work it does every day. As a congressional intern, I sat in this room listening to the words of your predecessors. The Committee's bipartisan tradition has improved lives across Indian Country through better schools, hospitals, clinics, water systems, and more. If confirmed, I will be a good-faith partner in continuing that tradition.

Life in Indian Country can be extraordinarily difficult. As a former high school teacher on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, I saw firsthand the devastating effects of suicide, substance use, missing and murdered Indigenous people, gangs, economic hardship, and chronic disease.

More than fifty years ago, Secretary Kennedy's father, Robert F. Kennedy Sr., described similar conditions when he said:

“I have seen Indians living on their bare and meager reservations, with no jobs, with an unemployment rate of 80 percent, and with so little hope for the

future, so little hope for the future that for young people, for young men and women in their teens, the greatest cause of death amongst them is suicide.”

Unfortunately, these challenges persist. Yet I have also witnessed extraordinary dedication from healthcare providers, teachers, and law enforcement officers—Native and non-Native—who walk into our communities every day and work tirelessly to empower the next generation.

Last summer I visited the Rosebud IHS hospital. While I saw the real challenges with workforce, facilities and management, my spirit was lifted when I heard someone call out, “Mr. Cruz!” It was one of my former students from Saint Francis Indian School, now working at the front desk—twelve years later. In that moment, I was powerfully reminded why I am called to this work.

We recently marked 50 years of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. This law will guide my decision-making. I have seen the power of tribes managing their own programs when given the authority and resources to do so. If confirmed, I will work closely with all federally recognized tribes to continue improving health outcomes.

The Indian Health Service recently celebrated its 70th anniversary. Real and measurable progress has been made. Today, tribes have a seat at the table, political power, and resources. They must be meaningfully consulted on policies that affect them. If confirmed, I will lead inclusively in that space.

I firmly believe that tribal consultation is a process, not an event. Tribal leaders and Congress can count on me to engage early, listen carefully, and be transparent. I am realistic about the challenges but optimistic about what we can achieve together. With strong federal, tribal, and urban Indian health partners, outcomes will continue to improve. We see this in the return to traditional first foods, Secretary Kennedy’s work to address chronic disease, the Special Diabetes Program for Indians, and ongoing efforts against Alzheimer’s, liver disease, cancer, kidney disease, and other conditions that disproportionately affect our people.

My vision for the Indian Health Service aligns with the President’s Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Request. If confirmed, I will work to advance resources that demonstrably improve care, including:

- Advance appropriations
- Full funding for contract support costs
- Full funding for 105(l) agreements

- Completing the 1993 priority construction backlog
- Reducing the roughly 30% staff vacancy rate
- Improving Purchased/Referred Care
- Modernizing electronic health record systems

With the continued support of the Administration and this Department, we will make measurable progress. We are 100 years out from the 1924 Snyder Act and the 1928 Meriam Report, which first quantified the severe health disparities facing American Indian and Alaska Native communities. We have come a long way, but not far enough.

If confirmed as director, what I bring—and what many previous Directors have also brought—is direct, lived experience in the communities and systems I would oversee. My family, my friends and my tribal community will live with the consequences of the work I do, for decades to come.

I welcome that challenge and I would be honored by the opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration of my nomination.

Sepk'eec'a (Thank you).