



# Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service

May 15, 2019

The Hon. Robert Wilkie  
Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

It was good to see you at Monday's meeting of the Veterans Day National Committee. It is clear that you care about our country's veterans. The organization that I direct is the only group that directly represents veterans who earned their status through service in the US Public Health Service. These men and women are often forgotten or left out when it comes to recognition as veterans, though several thousand of them have served our country, and they comprise 12 percent of the USPHS today. We will be at Arlington National Cemetery on May 27, represented by both the Assistant Secretary for Health (ADM Brett Giroir) and the US Surgeon General (VADM Adams).

I have written you before about the problem we have with the Smithsonian and the proposed National Native American Veterans Memorial, and I am appealing for your help. The Smithsonian plans to build this memorial and omit any mention of either the US Public Health Service or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Their official response to us is that the 1994 law which authorized this memorial "only references the Armed Forces of the United States." That is true, but it is clear from reading the legislative history of that law that its sponsors wanted to honor ALL Native American veterans. We often encounter legislation that unintentionally leaves out both the USPHS and NOAA, and we believe this is what happened in 1994. There is nothing in the law that even hints that its intent is not to be inclusive of all Native American veterans, and we think the Smithsonian has plenty of latitude to include our folks and Native American veterans who served in NOAA.

I am enclosing a copy of the letter that HHS Secretary Alex Azar recently sent to the Smithsonian. We don't know how they responded to Secretary Azar, but we believe he is absolutely correct in what he told them. We are asking that you also reach out to the Smithsonian and ask them to be inclusive. Erecting a monument to Native American veterans which does not include all Native American veterans is simply wrong.

Sincerely,

Col. James T. Currie, USA (ret.)  
Executive Director



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

APR 09 2019

David J. Skorton, M.D.  
Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution  
600 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Secretary Skorton:

I recently learned the Smithsonian will be constructing a National Native American Veterans Memorial at the National Museum of the American Indian. Native Americans serve in the uniformed services at significantly higher rates than other ethnic groups. As Secretary of Health and Human Services, I oversee the women and men of the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps (Corps), one of the seven uniformed services.

The USPHS has a long history of service to our country. During times of militarization of the Corps, officers served alongside military forces in WWI and WWII under 42 U.S.C. § 213. Currently, over twenty-five percent of the Corps have prior military service with the Department of Defense (DOD). Additionally, Corps officers proudly serve in the Indian Health Service, providing critical care to underserved populations.

The USPHS is especially meaningful to me because one of the very first people my grandfather met upon arriving at Ellis Island in 1920 was a uniformed member of the USPHS who performed his physical examination. Recently, I presided over the 2017 Hurricane Response Joint Services Award Ceremony, where the DOD awarded more than 1,400 Corps officers with the Joint Services Humanitarian Services Medal. This distinguished honor recognizes superior humanitarian efforts by both the DOD and the Corps in the wake of hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. Upon learning that the proposed design for the National Native American Veterans Memorial will omit the logo of the USPHS, I felt compelled to write you.

I understand that the 1994 law authorizing the National Native American Veterans Memorial used the term "veterans of the armed forces" but this does not preclude the inclusion of the USPHS logo on the memorial. Please reconsider adding the USPHS logo to the design. I believe including the USPHS logo is warranted and appropriate.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alex M. Azar II", is written over a horizontal line.

Alex M. Azar II