



# Commissioned Officers Association

of the U.S. Public Health Service

June 9, 2019

The Hon. Jamie Raskin  
US House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Rep. Raskin:

We need your help. By “we,” we mean the officers who serve in uniform in the US Public Health Service, over 1300 of whom are assigned in your Congressional district.

Such numbers mean that you have the distinction of representing more USPHS officers than any other member of the House. Your district includes the headquarters of the USPHS, as well as headquarters for the Indian Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) uniformed corps of officers.

We mention both the USPHS and NOAA because that’s why we need your help. Perhaps you have heard, but the Smithsonian—one of our country’s most venerable institutions—is planning to build on the Mall a National Native American Veterans Memorial, with groundbreaking scheduled for this coming September. We think this is a wonderful idea, except that the approved design for the memorial omits any mention of either the USPHS or NOAA.

Officers of both the USPHS and NOAA are veterans under federal law, recognized as such by the Veterans Affairs Department. Because the 1994 law which authorizes the Native American Veterans memorial mentions the Armed Forces, the Smithsonian has concluded that it is not allowed to include all Native American veterans in the memorial, only those who earned their status through service in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. We have carefully read the legislative history of this law, and it is clear to us that the primary sponsor, then-Rep. Craig Thomas of Wyoming, wanted a memorial that would honor all Native American veterans.

Alex Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services, wrote to Smithsonian Secretary Skorton on this matter and told him that use of the term “veterans of the armed forces” in the law “does not preclude the inclusion of the USPHS logo on the memorial.” We agree. We have raised this issue with the Smithsonian on numerous occasions, and they blow us off by stating that, “the Commissioned Corps [of the USPHS] is a non-military uniformed service and Corps officers are not trained in arms.”

This Smithsonian construct totally ignores the fact that all uniformed medical personnel

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are non-combatants under the Geneva Convention, whether they are part of the USPHS, the Army, Air Force, or Navy. USPHS officers have served on the battlefields of every war we have fought since 1898. They especially distinguished themselves during WW II.

USPHS officers were mostly assigned to the Coast Guard during World War II, and some of them lost their lives when their ships were sunk by enemy action. Other USPHS officers were in the Philippines when the war started, providing health care to the troops there. Some of them died in captivity. They were recognized with Purple Hearts and other medals. They served on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff and Adm. Chester Nimitz's staff and in the China-Burma-India Theater with Army Gen. Joseph Stilwell. USPHS officers served in Korea and Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

We are asking you to reach out to the Smithsonian because you represent so many USPHS officers, as well as NOAA officers, and you serve on the committee that has oversight responsibility over the Smithsonian. We enclose Secretary Azar's letter to the Smithsonian as well as an OpEd we wrote for The Hill. We worked with Emma Norvell of your staff before she left, and we have subsequently given materials to Lauren Doney. We would very much appreciate your assistance in getting the Smithsonian to treat USPHS and NOAA veterans with the respect they deserve.

Please feel free to contact me at [jcurrie@coausphs.org](mailto:jcurrie@coausphs.org) or 301 731-9080, ext. 7011.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Currie". The signature is stylized with a large, looped initial "J" and a cursive "Currie".

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