

**Testimony of Wind River Family & Community Healthcare Systems
Submitted by Rick Brannan, Chief Executive Officer
to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
for the Record of the July 10, 2024 Hearing on
S.4365 Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act**

Our Service Area is Ground Zero for Dog Bites in Wyoming

I appreciate this opportunity to share with this Committee the perspective of a 638 tribal health care facility about the very real public health emergency of dog bites for Native families. Wind River Family and Community Health Care Systems (WRC) was established in 2016 to serve the Wind River Indian Reservation that is home to Wyoming's two tribes– the Northern Arapaho Tribe (NAT) and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe– and ground zero for 50% of all dog bites in the state of Wyoming. We respectfully submit this testimony to share with Congress the perspective of tribal medical personnel about the urgent need to expand the authority of the Indian Health Service to include veterinary health care.

Dog Bites Increased More Than 90% on the Wind River Reservation Between 2017 and 2020

In 2020, we compiled a report for Dog Bites on the Wind River Indian Reservation using data collected from multiple agencies, including WRC, Sage West Hospital Emergency Room, Indian Health Services in Fort Washakie, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Wind River Agency. The data revealed that in just three years the incidence of dog bites increased 91%. At the time, we could not determine if the increase was linked to an increase in dog attacks, an increase in accessibility to services, an increase in reporting by the agencies or a combination of all.

Last year, we reexamined the issue using data collected from our organization alone. *In the last three years, our organization has seen a total of 183 patients for dog bites. There were a total of 232 injuries reported and a combined total of three hundred sixty-five 365 dog-bite related visits to the clinics.* The nature of this injury is unique in that it affects the entire population, regardless of age or gender– the youngest patient seen in our clinics being one year of age and the oldest patient being 81.

The rate of dog bites our patients suffer is significantly disproportionate to surrounding communities and the state of Wyoming overall. *If state reports included the number of dog bites in the area, the Wind River Indian Reservation would account for over 50% of the total injuries reported in Wyoming during 2023.*

The number of feral dogs roaming the community has grown throughout the past several years correlating with increases in dog bite injuries throughout the same time period.

Free Roaming Dogs Take a Toll on Physical and Mental Wellness

The local community has become increasingly wary of feral dogs. In a recent wellness survey conducted by our team, respondents highlighted presence and aggressive or feral dogs as a top reason for not partaking in outdoor wellness activities due to fear for personal safety. And with good reason.

Dog bites pose the risk of fractures, scarring, nerve and muscle damage, and infection such as rabies and tetanus. Patients who suffer from dog bite injuries are often bitten by stray or unaccounted for dogs that may not have vaccinations. This vaccination uncertainty contributes to more care needed by patients due to rabies shots being a recommended addition to their injury treatment.

Our patients who suffer from dog bite injuries suffer physical trauma, mental/emotional distress, in addition to feeling unsafe within their community.

Dog Bites are Costly to Both Tribal Families and Tribal Health Care Facilities

Dog bite injuries on the Wind River Reservation are not only prevalent but costly. We estimate their total treatment cost to be more than \$28,000 for an average child and \$46,000 for an average adult. Such costs can deter local families from seeking proper care and force local health care facilities like ours to redirect our limited health care resources. Clinically speaking, dog bites are trauma injuries that require immediate medical attention. The 183 dog bite patients we have treated in the past three years cost our facility more than \$5 million.

We cannot support taking IHS resources away from existing programs to fund a new veterinary health program. But neither we nor our patients can afford for the federal government to continue ignoring this problem either. WRC supports the expansion of IHS authority to include veterinary health care in order to protect our patients from traumatic injury and our tribal health care system from financial harm.

IHS Authority Limits Our Capacity to Serve Our Community

As a 638 tribal health care facility, WRC cannot contract with the IHS to provide services to limit the dog population or incidence of zoonotic diseases on the Wind River Reservation because IHS currently lacks the authority to approve such contracts. We are grateful for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs holding a hearing on this urgent public health issue. We welcome Committee Members to

visit us here on the Wind River Reservation and see for themselves the challenges our patients face navigating a community full of free roaming dogs due to the lack of tribal veterinary care. We thank the Committee for striving to create sustainable, long-term solutions and stand ready to be part of the solution.