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Begich Highlights Tribal Health Agreements at VA Hearing ***Alaska's model program for helping rural veterans showcased***

U.S. Sen. Mark Begich today highlighted the progress made in Alaska in delivering affordable and local health care to rural veterans, and stressed the unique needs veterans who live outside of Alaska's major cities face when accessing health care.

During a hearing in the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to confirm Dr. Thomas Sowers, nominee for the position of Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Veterans Administration (VA), Sen. Begich talked about the agreement signed in May between the VA and several Alaska Native tribal health programs allowing Alaska Native veterans to receive health care services in tribal clinics in various parts of Alaska and not have to travel to Anchorage or Seattle to receive services. Under the agreement, the VA will reimburse the participating health care entities for the services.

"We think this is going to be a model for the rest of the country in how to access and utilize our federal resources at a much better level than we are today," Begich said at the hearing.

Dr. Sowers told Sen. Begich in the hearing that as a rural veteran himself, he understands the challenges of reaching out to veterans in rural areas and that better outreach to tribes will be an area of focus for him if he is confirmed.

Begich met with Sowers in his D.C. Senate office yesterday to discuss the needs Alaska's rural veterans have and about reducing homelessness among veterans. Dr. Sowers is a combat veteran of the Iraq War and a former senior advisor to the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Begich, a member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, has been working with the Department of Veterans Affairs for an agreement with the tribes in Alaska and VA for the last four years. His idea of an "Alaska Heroes Card" moved closer to reality when the reimbursement agreement was announced in May. To date, 21 tribal health programs have signed the agreement for care with the VA. Begich's vision is to one day have a special card for all veterans to use at any health care facility and have the VA reimburse the facility.

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