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Assistant Secretary of the Interior Eddie Brown today ordered the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to revise procedures and to focus attention on increased monitoring and inspections to curtail abuses and mismanagement in federal programs to improve housing for American Indians.

"BIA officials who misuse or allow the misuse of these funds are in effect robbing the very poorest members of tribes who desperately need improved housing," Brown said. The Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs made his remarks today in Phoenix, Arizona, at a special meeting of BIA officials who have responsibility for overseeing the federal programs. "BIA officials have a responsibility to monitor this and all other programs closely," Brown said. "Failure to carry out this duty is a very serious breach of responsibility which undermines not only this needed program but the reputation of the entire BIA."

Brown cited a recent investigation by the Interior Department's Inspector General which found abuses in the federal Housing Improvement Program (HIP) in the Albuquerque area. The report said the BIA provided housing assistance to ineligible individuals, provided improvements that did not result in decent, safe and sanitary housing, and inadequately controlled procurements, disbursements and construction materials and supplies. Another draft audit report found similar problems in the Pit River Tribe in the Sacramento area. The Assistant Secretary said a review is currently being conducted to determine which BIA managers should be held accountable for actions identified in the Inspector General's Audit Report.

Today's meeting in Phoenix was the most recent in a series of actions Brown has ordered to stem these abuses. Other steps include:

Revision of procedures to reflect regulatory changes and areas of non-compliance that were identified in audits by the Inspector General.

Issuance of a bulletin on procurement, contracting and payment processes that will target current practices ·subject to fraud, waste or abuse.

Initiation of a regulatory change to tighten the income base for HIP eligibility to assure that the assistance is concentrated on the most needy.

A directive that contracting officers obtain recommendations form HIP staff prior to awarding or making any decision on tribal HIP contracts to assure proper program administration.