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A new federal framework to assist American Indian and Alaska Native communities in achieving their goals in the prevention, intervention, and treatment of alcohol and substance abuse was announced today by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Department of the Interior (DOI) Secretary Ken Salazar, and Attorney General of the United States Eric Holder.

The framework, captured in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed by Secretary Sebelius, Secretary Salazar, and Attorney General Holder was published in the Federal Register today - http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-08-05/pdf/2011-19816.pdf. It was called for in the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010, which President Obama signed into law in July 2010.

The MOA describes how the Office of Indian Alcohol and Substance Abuse established in HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) http://www.samhsa.gov/tloa will coordinate tribal substance abuse programs across the federal government with a special emphasis on promoting programs geared toward reaching youth and offering alternatives to incarceration.

"Alcoholism and addiction are among the most severe public health and safety problems facing American Indian and Alaska Native people," said HHS Secretary Sebelius. "It doesn't have to be this way. With help that is based in the rich Indian culture these conditions just like other heath conditions can be successfully prevented and treated."

"There is a clear need to align, leverage, and coordinate federal resources so that we can best support tribal efforts to build healthy and safe communities," said Secretary Salazar. "This new office will serve as the federal focal point for this critically important work."

"A truly holistic approach is necessary when addressing substance abuse in Indian Country because we know that where alcohol and substance abuse are prevalent, public safety concerns are similarly prevalent," said Attorney General Holder. "This new office will help further the commitment of the Justice Department and our partner agencies to build and sustain safe, secure, and healthy tribal communities."

An interdepartmental coordinating council will guide the overall direction of the new federal effort to improve its work with tribal communities beginning with determining the scope of the problem -- identifying and assessing national, state, tribal, and local alcohol and substance abuse programs and resources; and creating standards for programs.

SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde, J.D. said, "The collaboration among agencies and departments that got us to this announcement today is already paying off. Our work with tribal communities has resulted in a new $50 million budget proposal in 2012 for Tribal Prevention Grants, better understanding of law enforcement and judicial training needs, and serious new work and investments in suicide prevention in Indian country."

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SAMHSA is a public health agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.