

House approves Indian Health Care Improvement Act

Washington, D.C.—By a vote of 310 to 9, the U.S. House of Representatives July 30, approved H.R. 2525, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 1976, according to Alaska Rep. Don Young, who co-sponsored the legislation.

H.R. 2525 is designed to improve health care for Indians

and Alaskan natives by providing for: an Indian-oriented health manpower program; additional health care facilities and services; safe water supply and waste disposal facilities; and assured access of both reservation and urban Indians to community health resources.

Representative Young was the minority floor manager for the bill during the House action. In a statement made on the floor in favor of the bill, Young told his colleagues that "the purpose of the bill is to provide the direction and resources necessary to overcome the appalling deficiencies in the federal Indian health care program.

"It is designed to provide a comprehensive effort to raise the health care status of Indians and Alaskan natives to a level at least comparable to that of the general population."

During floor debate, Young attacked the Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare's opposition to the bill and faulted HEW for its past handling of Indian health care programs.

Young said the Indian Health Service (which took over health care programs from the BIA in 1954) had done a commendable job over the past 20 years but added that the IHS's efforts "have been hamstrung by manpower shortages, insufficient resources and support services and sub-standard facilities."

In a statement critical of HEW's handling of Indian health care programs, Young said:

"Not once since this legis-

lation has been under consideration has anyone in HEW's secretary's office been candid enough to admit that there are critical problems facing the Indian Health Service. This is not only regrettable, it is ridiculous in view of the fact that most of the documentation of the unmet needs and inadequacies in manpower, services and facilities has come from the department's own sources.

"With its head in the sand, HEW has had to misrepresent history and facts in order to make its case against this legislation," charged Young.

Young said that for the last 10 years HEW has requested funds for the construction of three new hospitals while ignoring its own studies "which show that the IHS hospital is deteriorating steadily, that 21 of the 51 IHS hospitals need replacement and another 14 need major renovation. At HEW's pace it would take 150 years to meet the current needs," stated Young.

The bill authorizes \$29.2

million over three years for a health manpower "package" consisting of five coordinated programs to train professionals to serve Indian health needs.

A total of \$70.07 million over three years is authorized for general health services.

\$337.1 million is authorized over three years to construct and modernize health facilities (including hospitals).

Young said that Alaska natives, by virtue of the fact that they make up some 20 per cent of the population served by the Indian Health Service, stand to benefit greatly from the passage of this bill.