ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

January 4, 2016

Dear Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program Grantees,

As many of you know, homelessness and housing instability are a challenge for families in many American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities. At the 7th Annual White House Tribal Nations Conference on November 5, 2015, the President announced before tribal leaders an effort to reduce systemic homelessness in tribal communities. Several federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to implement strategies toward ending homelessness among AIAN populations, including working together to improve housing and services, improve data collection, elevate awareness of homelessness in tribal communities, and continually engage with tribal leaders and experts.

In this context, we are writing you to stress the importance of providing home visiting services to homeless families and their young children within your tribal communities. Ensuring the well-being of our youngest children is essential to the work of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and our partners at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and is especially urgent when considering the vulnerability of young AIAN children who experience homelessness or housing instability.

In the United States, more than 1.6 million children under the age of six live on the streets, in homeless shelters, in campgrounds, temporarily doubled up with others, or are otherwise without a stable home. Research shows that children who experience homelessness or housing instability experience higher rates of chronic illness, more developmental delays and poor educational outcomes, and greater anxiety and depression than children who live in stable homes. AIANs are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness. Data in the recent MOU suggests that while only 1.2 percent of the national population self-identifies as AIAN, 2.3 percent of all people experiencing sheltered homelessness, 2.0 percent of all sheltered individuals, and 2.9 percent of all sheltered families self-identify as AIAN. These data represent AIANs experiencing homelessness primarily off tribal lands, yet we know the problem also exists on tribal lands.

Many of you are already serving families who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. We thank you for your efforts and ask that you continue your outreach and services to this population and identify additional strategies to maximize your collaboration with partners. In particular, we encourage you to consider the following, and to explore ACF's resource page on Expanding Early Care and Education for Homeless Children, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ecd/interagency-projects/ece-services-for-homeless-children. ACF will provide technical assistance to help you continue to provide high-quality services and build partnerships to improve the wellbeing of families who are homeless or at risk for homelessness.

- **Provide Quality Home Visiting Services to Homeless Families:** Ensure that high-quality home visiting services are available to homeless families or those at risk for homelessness in your communities. Home visiting programs can screen families for homelessness and assess risk for

homelessness, as well as collect and analyze data about families' housing needs. Home visitors can meet with families where they currently live, provide ongoing support and consistency in the lives of children who may be highly mobile, and strengthen parents' capacity to promote their children's health and development.

- **Offer Flexibility to Homeless Families and those At-Risk:** Examine the documentation required to enroll in your programs and, where appropriate and with fidelity to your home visiting models, provide "grace periods" that give families sufficient opportunity to gather the required documentation for participation, such as immunization records, within a reasonable timeframe.

- **Have Policies in Place for Families who are Temporarily Homeless after a Disaster**: Home visiting program policies and procedures should ensure that families have streamlined access to services that are essential to recovery in an emergency situation. Home visiting programs may assist in relief efforts by engaging families in emergency shelters, referring to and coordinating with other local supportive services, and – prior to an emergency – partnering with families to develop safety plans.

- **Coordinate with Tribal Housing, HUD Continuums of Care (CoC), and Local Liaisons:** Tribal Home Visiting grantees can coordinate at tribal, state, and local levels to reach out to homeless families or those at risk for homelessness; connect families served by programs to available CoC resources as well as health and social services; and collaborate with key partners serving homeless families, including the state office for Education of Homeless Children and Youths authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act, runaway and homeless youth programs, and state, local, and tribal housing authorities, among others. Of interest to tribal communities, the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) recently issued a final rule (available at http://www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OIS/HumanServices/HousingImprovementProgram/) aligning its Housing Improvement Program with other federal requirements to allow leveraging of housing funds to increase the number of AIAN families served, promoting tribal sovereignty and self-determination by providing tribes with more flexibility in determining how to address waiting lists of tribal members awaiting housing assistance.

- **Work with Homeless Coalitions:** Tribal Home Visiting grantees should participate in or establish homeless coalitions which bring together homeless programs with other community and tribal organizations. The purpose of these coalitions is to ensure that services available to families experiencing homelessness (particularly support services beyond housing) reflect the needs of the community. Participation in these coalitions will help ensure the unique needs of pregnant women and young children are well represented.

The wellbeing of our youngest children is essential, not only for the development of the child and the stability of the family, but for the ongoing success of our nation and all Tribal Nations. We thank you for your tireless work to serve your most vulnerable children, and are humbled to be able to support your efforts to further ensure access to high-quality home visiting services for young AIAN children and families who are homeless and at risk for homelessness.

Sincerely,

Linda K. Smith

Linda K. Smith
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development