Senators Introduce Bill on Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts

On October 22, 2015, US Senators Jon Tester [D-MT] and Alan “Al” Franken [D-MN] introduced a bill, the Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts Act, to assist tribal nations in establishing Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts.¹ Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts are a form of drug court, adapted to fit the unique culture, history, and community needs of tribal nations.²

About Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts
Drug courts are an alternative to standard criminal and family court proceedings for participants with substance abuse problems, including “criminal defendants and offenders, juvenile offenders, and parents with pending child welfare cases.”³ These courts maintain a specialized docket comprising cases related to drug possession, driving under the influence, and child welfare.⁴ Drug courts offer teams of judges, attorneys, law enforcement officers, probation officers, social workers, and substance abuse treatment service providers, among others, to help participants complete treatment programs.⁵

Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts offer a tailored approach to drug courts to fit tribal nations’ individual needs: “Tribes and tribal courts (including Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts) can be radically diverse in their cultures, languages, needs, governance structures, and laws.”⁶ Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts also incorporate Native healing and wellness concepts and cultural teachings and practices while also respecting and supporting tribal sovereignty.⁷ As of May 2014, more than seventy of these courts were operating or under development across tribal nations.⁸

About the Proposed Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts Act
The bill, which has been referred to the Senate Committee of Indian Affairs, authorizes funding for a program through which the US Attorney General may grant competitive funding to tribal nations to support Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts.⁹ The bill specifically outlines that, at the discretion of the tribal nation, Tribal Healing to Wellness Court services can include cultural activities.¹⁰

To receive funding, the bill requires that that grantees establish “mandatory periodic testing for each participant for the use of controlled substances or other addictive substances during any period of participation in the tribal healing to wellness court.”¹¹ The bill also prohibits the participation of violent offenders¹² in Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts funded through the Act.¹³
For more information about Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts, visit the Tribal Court Clearinghouse, a Tribal Law and Policy Institute project. The clearinghouse offers various resources on Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts including a policies and procedures guide, judicial bench book, and program development guides.

Acknowledgments and Disclaimers
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For further technical assistance with this inventory, please contact phlawprogram@cdc.gov. PHLP provides technical assistance and public health law resources to advance the use of law as a public health tool. PHLP cannot provide legal advice on any issue and cannot represent any individual or entity in any matter. PHLP recommends seeking the advice of an attorney or other qualified professional with questions regarding the application of law to a specific circumstance. The findings and conclusions in this summary are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.

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2 Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts: The Key Components, TRIBAL LAW AND POLICY INSTITUTE, viii (2d ed. May 2014).
3 Drug Courts, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE (last visited Nov. 19, 2015).
4 Id.
5 Id.
6 Tribal Law and Policy Institute, supra note 2 at vi.
7 Id. at ix, 6–8.
8 Id. at ix.
9 S. 2205, supra note 1, at § 3(a)(1).
10 Id. at § 3(a)(2).
11 Id. at §§ 4(a)(1), 3(a)(1)(B)(i).
12 The bill defines “violent offender” under § 5(a).
13 Id. at § 5(b)(1).
14 Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts, TRIBAL COURT CLEARINGHOUSE (last visited Nov. 19, 2015).
15 Id.