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WOMEN'S ISSUES

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Thank you Secretary Salazar, Assistant Secretary Haze and our own Nick Pula, the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for OIA, for once again convening a meeting of the IGIA for 2009. I also want to acknowledge and say “Good Afternoon” to Governors Tulafono, Camacho, Fitial and my own Governor DeJongh.

Before I discuss the two main issues that I will focus on today, I want to mention a couple of issues that we raised in a letter to then President-elect Obama that have not been responded to.

First my Congressional colleagues and I have jointly requested that the Office of Insular Affairs be headed by an Assistant Secretary; a position which we understand is still available but has not been filled. I strongly reiterate that request today.

In the same letter we also requested that there be someone appointed in the White House to address the concerns of the territories and that the IGIA be jointly chaired by Interior and the White House as happened in the past.

To expect our Governors and members of Congress to continue to come to these meetings without having high level decision makers, to me suggests disrespect for our offices, especially when we don't see much come out of these discussions. Although I am here today, it is not easy to any of us to leave the Hill, especially when Congress is in session. If these meeting continue in the same way, I doubt I will be back.

Why should our governor come here when he can meet with the Secretary and the Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs one on one.

In one such one-on-one meeting between Governor DeJongh and Inter-Governmental Affairs Director Cecilia Munoz recently, they discussed many of the issues I am sure he will raise today - the administration's approach to the territories, the DOE fiscal intermediary problem, and the need for OIA to provide Technical Assistance to help us make optimal use of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds. For example, compiling a total population count would give us a more accurate assessment of our unemployment so we can qualify for set asides for distressed communities which we need and to help us meet the transparency and accountability requirements.

The following are some of the specific issues I want to bring to this meeting's attention:

EDUCATION

We need the Department of Interior and the White House would tell the U.S. Department of Education to stop trying to discredit the process of selecting a new fiduciary agent for the Virgin Islands and to step back and allow us to move forward. In the ARRA a significant portion of the funding will be devoted to education. If it is the intention to ensure that we utilize it to raise some of the lowest testing scores in the nation, we need them to do so now. I would be happy to have an off line conversation with DOE and DOI and you can be sure I will raise it when I am at the White House on Thursday. By the way, the agency the USDOE guided the VI to choose in the first instance has been a disaster!

As you should know my bill that established a sense of Congress that the history and contributions of the people of the territories should be included in history curricula in our country was signed into law last year. I would like support for UG and UVI as well as the assoc of VI historians and the corresponding organization in Guam to develop the curriculum that will realize the intent of my legislation. And I would like to see that position in USDOE responsible for the Territories filled and enabled to have substantive visits with each of us.

HEALTH:

Last year I made a request for a comprehensive End Stage Renal Disease initiative for the Territories and I am pleased that we have begun the process with a general look at health care in the Territories and Veterans Health in particular in part. We need to continue this process because our chronic disease burden is unsustainable.