

Written Testimony of Liana Onnen
Chairperson, Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation
before the
United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Regarding FY2016 Indian Affairs Budget- BIA, IHS, and BIE
March 24, 2014

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony. My name is Liana Onnen. I am the Chairperson of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. Our reservation is located north of Topeka, Kansas, where we serve nearly 5,000 members. Our Nation provides important services to our people, from fire and police protection, road or housing construction, transit services, land management, maintaining an elder center and a Boys & Girls club, to maintaining a herd of bison.

In the past, our Reservation lands were carved up by allotment and forced sale, and our Tribe was impoverished by federal mismanagement. Today, we are a healthy tribal government and community, and come to this Committee to share our priorities for funding in the FY 2016 appropriations cycle. In solidarity with our neighbor tribes, we present the following-- which is important to our Nation and also the tribes in the Southern Plains Region.

The priorities include the following:

- \$42 million for Johnson O'Malley Programs
- \$15 million for Haskell Indian Nations University
- \$50 million for adult education and scholarship support in the BIA budget.
- Increased funding for TPA programs in the BIA budget
- Support for mandatory Contract Support Costs appropriations without a sunset date.
- \$23 million in funding for Housing Improvement Programs at the BIA.
- Priority funding for Human Services budget line items at the BIA.
- \$40 million for BIA Road Maintenance Funding
- Full funding for Tribal Law & Order Act needs, \$82 million for tribal courts, and \$528 million for BIA Law Enforcement.

Funding Priorities.

1. The Johnson O'Malley (JOM) Program, Haskell University, and Scholarships

The JOM program addresses the basic educational needs of our children, and promotes their success by providing access to critical resources including tutoring, language programs, leadership conferences, and school supplies. These resources help Indian children receive the education they deserve and ensure they can participate in activities such as laboratory time, post-secondary entrance exams, and graduation ceremonies. JOM funding helps our Nation's students thrive in public school.

The President's FY 2016 budget requests a \$2.6 million increase for the JOM program, which will go a long way toward rectifying past shortfalls. However, the total \$17.4 million requested for the program falls far short of the amount estimated to ensure all students receive JOM

support. **The Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation supports the National Congress for American Indians' (NCAI) FY2016 request for \$42 million for the JOM program.**

Adequate funding levels are also needed for Haskell Indian Nations University, an Indian Country institution which educates many of our young adults and is located nearby the Nation. Haskell is operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and each semester nearly 1,000 students attend the school. Due to sequestration, in FY2013, Haskell received \$635,000 less than in FY2012. The President's Budget Request for Haskell has been flat since FY 2014, however, and the school receives just over \$12 million a year. This is insufficient to provide the University with the resources it needs to educate its students and sustain an enriching campus environment. **The Nation requests at least \$15 million be appropriated in FY 2016 for Haskell Indian Nations University.**

We also want to convey the great need for adult scholarship support for our students attending college. Native students are negatively affected by the ever-increasing cost of attending college, and Native families are often the least able to fund a promising student's higher education. We have seen many of our students drop out of college because it is unaffordable, and student loans are simply untenable. While the Nation assists its students as much as possible, scholarship support will help prevent drop outs, and will enable us to help our future leaders finish college or trade school. **We request that the Scholarship and Adult Education line item be funded at \$50 million.** The President has requested a modest increase of \$4.6 million this year, but more funding is necessary for us to keep pace with our students' needs.

2. BIA Tribal Government Funds and Tribal Priority Allocations (TPA)

Funding under the BIA for Tribal Governments is necessary for tribes to successfully exercise self-determination and assume BIA programs themselves. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, Public Law 93-638, has been nothing short of a revolution for Indian tribes. It has enabled us to put tribal sovereignty to work to administer programs and services to our people at less cost and with more efficiency than the BIA. Funding to the BIA, however, is still essential, as the agency provides tribes with critical technical assistance and support. Further, since the agency is the only one that can carry out inherently federal functions, there must be adequate funding to avoid short staffing and lack of resources that can create bottlenecks for tribes at the BIA. This funding should not come at the expense of funding to Tribal programs, however. Aid to Tribal Government and other TPA funds enable tribes and the BIA to work together.

The President's Budget Request contains approximately \$583.8 million for Tribal Government Programs, a \$36 million increase from FY 2015 enacted levels. This includes \$246 million for Contract Support Costs (CSC), an increase of \$26 million. The Administration's proposed increases are welcome, but the amount for Tribal Government Programs and important Tribal Priority Allocations (which give much more control to tribes than the intermittent grant funding the BIA has offered in recent years), have been underfunded for decades. This Committee showed support for these programs when it exceeded the Administration's FY 2015 request. We ask that you do so again by increasing funding to TPA-based line items in BIA's Tribal Government Programs funds.

A part of this budget category, full CSC funding, is essential to tribal self-determination and program functioning. This Committee's work toward fully funding CSC, and the Administration's later agreement to do that, are especially welcome. We wholeheartedly support

the current effort to provide mandatory appropriations for CSC. The Supreme Court and this Committee has made it clear that these funds are not optional. Furthermore, mandatory funding of CSC will also protect vital service and program funds that could otherwise be raided to cover CSC shortfalls. **We request that this Committee support the effort to make full CSC funding mandatory going forward.**

3. Human Services

The BIA's budget for Human Services is a vital one to tribes like ours that still receive many direct services from the Bureau. It includes critical programs like welfare assistance for citizens and children, housing improvement, and social services that provide basic needs like clothing, food, and burial assistance. These services enable our Nation's families to support themselves despite joblessness, ill health, or poverty. Current funding for human services is simply insufficient for our Nation's needs.

For example, the BIA itself has identified a need of over \$670 million for Housing Improvement Programs (HIP), alone. This program, part of the BIA's human services budget, provides grants to tribal people to repair, maintain, or replace their homes; homes that are often crowded far beyond capacity. This program was slashed by one-third in 2014 to a paltry \$8 million. We have nearly 300 people on a waiting list for housing on our reservation; these funds are critical. HIP reached a recent high in 2005, with funding at \$23 million. **The Nation requests the Committee to fund HIP at \$23 million for FY 2016.**

In FY 2013, due to sequestration, BIA's Human Services budget was \$7.6 million below FY 2012, and FY 2014 funding was approximately \$3.6 million below FY 2012 levels. The Administration's proposed increase of \$6.4 million from the 2015 level is a step in the right direction, but we are playing a losing game of catch up at those levels. **We request that the Committee focus on the Human Services budget for increases in this funding cycle.**

4. Road Maintenance

One important value of the Nation is to maintain and take care of what we have. Our road system is one of our assets, and it allows our citizens to get to school, work, and to visit one another. But harsh winters and delayed maintenance have taken their toll on our transportation network. The BIA's road maintenance fund is designed to help us protect the federal-tribal investment in that system.

However, road maintenance funding is nearing all-time lows given the number of miles in Indian Country. The fund is little more than a placeholder at this point, and funding for other transportation programs is not large enough to cover our maintenance needs. Last year, the Nation received a meager amount of BIA road maintenance funding: \$984. We obviously had to redirect funds from otherwise needy programs to cover our maintenance needs. The low funding of road maintenance is a real safety concern for the Nation. Accordingly, we **request that \$40 million be allocated for the BIA Road Maintenance Program in FY 2016.**

5. Real Estate Services

We have entered a new area of economic development in Indian Country with the recent updating of the Bureau's fee-to-trust and land leasing regulations. These important changes will enable us to access and use energy resources for tribal sources and engage in economic development more easily than ever before. Additionally, the Nation has entered into an agreement with the BIA as part of the *Cobell*-initiated tribal Land Buy-Back Program. The Land

Buy-Back Program is particularly important for our Nation. Our Reservation was so affected by allotment that many parcels are not realistically usable due to the fractionation of land interests.

These developments mean that the real estate services provided by the BIA—land acquisition, trust conveyances, surface and sub-surface leasing, rights of way conveyance and monitoring, and technical assistance—are more important now than ever. Also, some new regulations come with stringent timelines to carry out activities and provide approvals. This means that the BIA must have more personnel to meet the needs, keep up with industry demands, and put more lands in the hands of tribes and individual Indians.

The Administration has requested a \$16.7 million increase over FY 2015's level of \$127 million. This is a step in the right direction. **We, however, support a 25% increase in funding (\$31.75 million) for Real Estate Services to meet the needs of land acquisitions, energy development and the Land Buy-Back Program.**

6. Public Safety and Justice

Ensuring that our citizens are safe within our homelands is a fundamental exercise of sovereignty. Through the passage of the Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA) and the Violence Against Women reauthorization (VAWA), Congress has taken significant steps toward recognizing the exercise of tribal criminal jurisdiction. However, tribes require both financial and technical support to exercise expanded jurisdiction under TLOA and VAWA and to support current safety and justice initiatives.

Public safety and justice was also hit hard by sequestration. In FY2013, the public safety and justice budget was \$18.6 million below the FY2012 amount. The President's FY 2016 Budget Request includes approximately \$364.4 million for public safety and justice, an \$11.5 million increase over the enacted FY 2015 level (which was more than the President's request, thanks to this Committee). However, we must concur with NCAI's request that TLOA and VAWA efforts be fully funded. Increased funding is required to maintain and strengthen tribal court systems, reduce crime and drug rates in Indian Country, and perform law enforcement functions, all of which are vital to the Nation. **We request full funding for TLOA needs, \$82 million in base funding for tribal courts under the Indian Tribal Justice Act, and \$528 million for BIA Law Enforcement.** Tribal nations require this support to protect the physical safety of their citizens, and sometimes that of surrounding counties, and to eliminate harmful social and economic consequences of violence and crime from their communities.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or need additional information.