

**TESTIMONY OF NATASHA SINGH  
ON BEHALF OF THE TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE  
TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES  
CONCERNING THE FISCAL YEAR 2019 BUDGET  
FOR THE BIA AND IHS  
May 9, 2018**

The Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony to the Subcommittee regarding our priorities for Fiscal Year 2019 concerning appropriations for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Indian Health Service (IHS). My name is Natasha Singh and I am General Counsel to TCC. I am Athabascan and a Stevens Village Tribal Member. TCC is grateful for this Subcommittee's bipartisanship, reflected in the final FY 2018 omnibus measure, Pub. L. 115-141, which Congress passed in March, and for the positive results the Subcommittee has made possible in Alaska. TCC asks the Subcommittee to build on successes in the FY 2018 budget when deciding on funding for BIA and IHS programs for FY 2019.

TCC is a non-profit intertribal consortium of 37 federally-recognized Indian tribes and 41 communities located across Alaska's Interior. TCC serves approximately 18,000 Alaska Natives in Fairbanks where TCC headquarters is located, and in the rural villages in Alaska's vast Interior, located along the 1,400 mile Yukon River and its tributaries.

To give you an idea of that great distance, it's just over 1,400 miles from the Rayburn House Office Building where I now sit to Lawton, Oklahoma in Congressman Cole's district, and 1,400 miles to Red Lake Falls, Minnesota in Congressman Peterson's district. There's a lot of country between here and Lawton, Oklahoma and Red Lake Falls, Minnesota. Imagine how our 41 Alaska Native communities feel in Alaska's vast Interior. These villages are remote, often inaccessible by car. Alaska Native residents must overcome many challenges to sustain healthy communities, educate their children, ensure their health and safety, and care for their elders and themselves. This Subcommittee, better than most, understands the great unmet needs in healthcare, public safety, education and job training faced by Alaska Native communities which struggle to provide essential services to maintain their members and culture.

About a year ago, in a similar hearing as today's, Congressman Cole laid out the stark truth; 2016 Federal per capita healthcare spending on Alaska Natives and American Indians, compared to Federal spending on Medicare, Veterans, and Medicaid recipients was "at the absolute bottom, and not by a little bit, but by a lot." The figures don't lie: \$2,834 in per capita spending for IHS medical care expenditures per person versus \$12,744 in Medicare spending for 2016. That is about four and-a-half times the per capita expenditure level by the IHS. Federal appropriations for IHS would need to more than triple just to match the per capita *national* health spending level of \$9,990 per person (2016). Congressman Cole could not understand the basis for the Administration's proposed cuts to IHS funding proposed that year and neither could we. He stated that a \$300 million cut in IHS funding was "not defensible or acceptable."

That is why TCC opposes the Administration's FY 2019 budget for IHS. The Administration's FY 2019 budget for IHS Services and Facilities totals \$4.451 billion, which is \$368 million

*below* the \$4.819 billion enacted by Congress for FY 2018 for IHS Services and Facilities (excluding Contract Support Costs), which Congress passed a little over one month ago. TCC supports the recommendation of the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) to fully fund the IHS through the enactment of a true “needs based budget,” phased in over 12 years, with at least a 33% increase (to \$6.4 billion) in IHS funding for FY 2019, as well as providing advance appropriations for the IHS. So long as the IHS budget is part of the Interior appropriation, such increases will remain our great collective challenge.

Nonetheless, we urge the Subcommittee to continue its bipartisan work and increase FY 2019 appropriations above the FY 2018 enacted level to reduce continued healthcare disparities between Alaska Native and American Indians and non-Natives. According to the IHS:

- Alaska Natives and American Indians born today have a life expectancy that is 4.4 years less than the U.S. all races population (73.7 years to 78.1 years);
- Alaska Natives and American Indians continue to die at higher rates than other Americans in many categories, including chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (nearly 5 times the rate), diabetes mellitus (3 times), unintentional injuries (2.5 times), assault/homicide (2 times), suicide (2 times), and alcohol-induced death (7 times);
- According to a 2016 study examining behavioral health programs and Medicaid in Alaska: “Statewide gaps in the continuum of care combined with gaps in health care coverage perpetuate a cycle of crisis response and create costly inefficiencies.”
- According to the CDC, the suicide rate among Alaska Natives is almost four times the U.S. general population rate and at least six times the national average in some parts of the State.
- According to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, in 2011, over 50% of some 4,500 reports of maltreatment substantiated by Alaska’s child protective services, and over 60% of nearly 800 children removed from their homes were Alaska Native children.

We must stop this cycle of abuse and destruction. Alaska Native villages require the resources to build healthy families and communities. They do so by ensuring Alaska Native families have such basic necessities as housing, healthcare and public safety services. This Subcommittee has worked in a bipartisan manner to increase funds for Alaska Native villages and tribes in such areas in recognition of the great unmet needs faced by Alaska Native communities. When the Administration requests so little funding for tribal needs, it makes our job, as tribal advocates, and your job, as Congressional appropriators, more difficult to obtain a greater share of FY 2019 discretionary dollars for tribal needs.

For rural Interior Alaska Native communities, facing a State budget deficit for FY 2019, federal appropriations make the difference between the success and failure of our efforts and, in turn, the wellness of our tribal members. We have faith that this Subcommittee will defend and increase FY 2019 Federal funding levels for Indian Country.

## **1. Improve Tribal Health Care Quality and Access (IHS)**

Build on the FY 2018 Enacted Budget for IHS. TCC greatly appreciates the nearly \$500 million *increase* Congress included in the FY 2018 enacted budget for the Indian Health Service, including a \$244 million increase in funding for IHS Clinical Services, a \$322 million *increase* in IHS Facilities funding, and full payment of Contract Support Costs. We are especially appreciative of the \$33 million increase in Purchased/Referred Care (P/RC) for FY 2018, \$15 million for small ambulatory clinics construction, and \$11.5 million for staff quarters, which is critical to our tribal communities. TCC remains one of the only tribal health entities in Alaska that does not have a regional hospital so our members are more dependent on village clinics to provide routine and emergency health care. We also rely heavily on P/RC funds. We also appreciate your acknowledgment that housing shortages in Alaska contribute to the high vacancy rates for medical personnel, especially in rural areas.

TCC cannot understand why the Administration proposes in FY 2019 to eliminate funding the Indian Health Care Improvement Fund (-\$72 mil.), the Community Health Representatives program (-\$62.8 mil.), the Health Education Program (-\$19.8 mil.), or reduce funding for the Alaska Immunization program *below* the FY 2017 enacted level. Nor can we understand the Administration cutting IHS Facilities program funding some \$40 million below the FY 2017 enacted level – and \$362 million below the FY 2018 level – when our needs are so great.

TCC greatly appreciates the Administration including \$150 million in the FY 2019 budget for the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI) and \$150 million for Alaska Natives and American Indians to fight the opioid epidemic. We recommend that this Subcommittee, in report language, or Congress, in legislation such as S. 2680, the “Opioid Crisis Response Act of 2018,” or similar such bills, direct the IHS to allocate the 5% set-aside for tribes in a manner similar to how the SDPI funds are now allocated, to ensure every tribal community receives a share of the \$25 million set-aside within the State Response to the Opioid Abuse Crisis funds.

With respect to the payment of full Contract Support Costs, we are appreciative of the Subcommittee’s use of an indefinite appropriation, as well as the Subcommittee’s direction to IHS in the FY 2018 Conference Report that transfers of Substance Abuse and Suicide Prevention Program and other funds be awarded to tribes *through* Indian Self-Determination Act compacts and contracts, and *not through* separate grants, so that associated “administrative costs” will be covered through the contract support cost process.

The IHS has made its CSC policy, however, unduly complicated and we urge the Subcommittee to continue to monitor that the agency faithfully implements direction from the Subcommittee on this subject as well as Supreme Court holdings. Full payment of CSCs means just that and the IHS should not be permitted, by its policies, to undermine that essential goal.

## **2. Expand public safety and Tribal court in interior Alaska**

As our Chief and President, Victor Joseph, testified last year, we cannot stress enough the importance village leaders place protecting our children, and all tribal members from sexual abuse, domestic violence and substance abuse. TCC is on record with numerous resolutions to express our members’ exasperation over insufficient public safety services in our remote Alaska Native Villages. We cannot state it any clearer: Interior Alaska’s rates of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and child rape are among the highest in the Nation. We have a crisis.

For that reason, we oppose the proposed cuts to the BIA budget included in the Administration's FY 2019 budget, a reduction of \$600 million *below* the FY 2018 enacted level of \$3 billion, with a \$409 million cut to the BIA Operation of Indian Program (OIP) programs, including a cut of \$55 million to the Public Safety and Justice funds from the FY 2018 enacted level. TCC urges the Committee to reject this budget.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's \$13 million appropriation in FY 2018 for P.L. 280 courts and Conference Report language that expresses the Subcommittee's "concern" about Tribal courts' needs identified in the Indian Law and Order Commission's November 2013 report, which highlighted the fact that "Federal investment in Tribal justice in 'P.L. 280' States [like Alaska,] has been more limited than elsewhere in Indian Country." The Subcommittee directed the BIA to work with tribes and tribal organizations in P.L. 280 States to consider options that promote, design, or pilot Tribal court systems for tribal communities that are subject to full or partial State jurisdiction under P.L. 280.

TCC has limited recurring funds to pay for our Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program which works in conjunction with Alaska State Troopers. Our VPSOs are the "First Responders in the Last Frontier" and they respond to emergency calls, fire, EMS and search and rescue. With limited funds for public safety, the role of Tribal Courts in Alaska Native villages is critical. It allows our villages to address public safety concerns at the community level and break the cycle of arrest, prosecution and incarceration.

We urge the Subcommittee to provide increased funds for P.L. 280 courts so that we may better address public safety issues in our remote Interior Alaska tribal communities. We also appreciate the \$7.5 million in FY 2018 BIA Public Safety and Justice funds to help people affected by opioid addiction.

### **3. Expand Tribal Opportunities for Job Training and Economic Development**

TCC continues its mission to assist hundreds of tribal members in Fairbanks and in our Native villages with CDL classes, employment training in such areas as facility maintenance, flooring and cabinet installation, plumbing, plastic and cooper pipe fitting, wildland firefighting training, and cooking. With unemployment rates among Alaska Natives and American Indians multiple times the national unemployment rate of 4.1%, we cannot understand the lack of funding within the BIA's Community and Economic Development Programs, nor the Administration's proposal to reduce FY 2019 funding for Job Placement and Training by 33%, to \$8 million. We appreciate the Subcommittee including \$12.5 million for FY 2018 for job placement and training and hope that a portion of those funds reach Alaska Native Villages. There is great dignity in learning a trade and providing for your family.

Please provide meaningful increases to the BIA budget for these and related programs in FY 2019 to help promote job creation in our rural Native villages where work is seasonal and unemployment remains high. Our current resources are simply inadequate to the task at hand.

Thank you for permitting the Tanana Chiefs Conference the opportunity to submit written testimony.