

TESTIMONY OF FLOYD AZURE, CHAIRMAN
ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX TRIBES OF THE FORT PECK RESERVATION TO
THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR AND RELATED AGENCIES ON THE IHS, BIA AND EPA FY 2024
BUDGET

March 3, 2023

I am Floyd Azure, Chairman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation. I would like to thank the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee for the opportunity to present testimony concerning FY 2024 appropriations for the Indian Health Service (IHS), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The Fort Peck Reservation is in northeast Montana, forty miles west of the North Dakota border, and fifty miles south of the Canadian border, with the Missouri River defining its southern border. The Reservation encompasses over two million acres of land. We have approximately 13,000 enrolled tribal members, with approximately 7,600 tribal members living on the Reservation. We have a total Reservation population of approximately 12,000 people.

Congress has long recognized that the foundation for economic development and prosperity in Indian country lay in community stability, which begins with quality health care and infrastructure, such as safe drinking water, roads, and public safety, and a clean environment.

A. INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE FUNDING

We strongly support full funding for the Indian Health Service. The COVID-19 pandemic showed the nation the chronic health care deficiencies in Indian country. Native people acquired and died of this disease at some of the highest rates in the nation. This is because we suffer from the comorbidities at higher rates, we lack access to adequate health care, and we lack basic community infrastructure.

As we are coming out of the pandemic, Indian country is preparing for the next health crisis, a mental health and addiction crisis. Our people were engaging in self-harming behaviors at drastic rates before the pandemic. We fear that because our people have suffered tremendous losses and have not been able to properly grieve, that this grief will manifest itself in unhealthy behaviors. Congress must focus on addiction and mental/behavioral health programs to ensure that we do not have another epidemic to respond to.

B. BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS

We strongly support the increased funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

1. Social Services and ICWA Funding

There is a dire need for increased funding for our Tribal Social Services program is critically

needed. There has not been any increase in this program for several years. Over 35% of the children in the foster care system in Montana are Indian children - Indian people represent less than 7% of the State population. We need more support to recruit and retain licensed foster care homes on the Reservation. Importantly, we need to provide social services to families so that they have the tools to be the best parents possible, so that their children do not enter the foster care system.

Montana is one of six states in the country to have instituted an ICWA court. This court handles State ICWA cases in Yellowstone County from the Fort Peck, Northern Cheyenne, and Crow Tribes. The team approach of the ICWA Court in Montana fosters collaboration between State and Tribal stakeholders, promotes meaningful State compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act, and improves outcomes for Indian children and their families involved in the foster care system.

In this era where ICWA is under constant attack, in spite of it providing needed protections for Indian children, families and Tribes, the Committee should encourage the BIA to work collaboratively and strategically with Tribes to expand ICWA courts across the country. This kind of support and dedicated staff can only be done through additional funding for the BIA Tribal Social Service and ICWA programs.

2. Tribal Court Funding

Relatedly, while we appreciate the increased funding for Tribal courts that Congress has provided, it has not been enough. Tribal Courts are the backbone of tribal sovereignty. Without sound tribal courts, we could not be a community where people feel safe, where business want to open and where our children and our most vulnerable receive protection. The Fort Peck Tribal Court is one of the oldest in the country and we are very proud of the work our judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and clerks do.

Currently, the Bureau of Indian Affairs only provides a fraction of the funding to operate our Tribal Court. Our court is one of the few Tribal Courts in the Country exercising expanded VAWA jurisdiction and enhanced sentencing under the Tribal Law and Order Act. This work is important to making our Reservation a safe place for women and families. However, this takes additional resources to retain properly trained defense counsel, prosecutors, and judges, and provide services to defendants and families requires additional resources. .

3. Law Enforcement

There is critical need for increased law enforcement funding throughout Indian country. Our Police Chief estimates that 70%-80% of criminal conduct has a drug component to it, with assaults and burglaries arising out of drug use-and addiction. We are dealing with violent crimes, in particular violent crimes against women and children. We need to emphasize community policing but to do this we need more law enforcement personnel to live and work in our community. The crime in our community is impacting the most vulnerable in our community the most and it is time that we stop accepting this as normal. It is not normal, it is tragic.

4. Housing

One of the reasons the Pandemic impacted our community so significantly is that too many people on our Reservation are living in overcrowded conditions. In many homes, there are three or more families living in 4-bedroom homes. Across Indian country it is estimated that approximately 20% of all homes are overcrowded, it is much higher on the Fort Peck Reservation.

This overcrowding situation is contributing to the social disfunction that our children experience. In many instances, it is the grandparents who take in their adult children and grandchildren. Sadly, these adult children are in the grips of addiction, and other unhealthy behaviors, which their children can't escape from as they are living with it every day. Moreover, when a grandparent allows an active user to live in their home, they are putting their own housing security at risk, because our Housing Authority does not allow active users to live in a HUD home, and thus, these elders can face eviction. In short, in order to have a healthy community, we must have more housing. This includes not only more housing for families, but also recovery housing so that people with addictions are not forced to go homeless.

In addition to overcrowded housing on the Reservation, the housing shortage also impacts our ability to recruit professionals, including education, law enforcement, and especially health care workers. Thus, we need housing that is not only directed to low-income families, but also working families so that we can attract the professionals we need to work in our schools, clinics, and police stations.

Importantly, housing funding must include the resources for infrastructure to ensure any new housing has water, sewer, electricity, and broadband access.

5. Bison Program Funding

We want to thank the Subcommittee for funding that you provided for the Tribal Bison program. This funding is critical to bringing traditional food and traditional practices back to our communities. The Fort Peck Tribes have implemented a robust bison restoration program and now have partnered with the National Park Service to conduct post quarantine assurance testing of NPS bison from Yellowstone National Park. Most recently, in January 112 Yellowstone Bison to were transferred to Fort Peck. Since 2019, a total of 294 Bison have transferred to Fort Peck. Of this, 170 have been translocated to 23 tribes across 12 states for their herd development. This vital to cultural, economic and

C. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

There is an important need to increase funding for tribal environmental programs with the Environmental Protection Agency. This in includes the Indian Environmental General Assistance Program, the Solid Waste-Indian Lands Program, and the Tribal Clean Air Program. None of these programs have received and increase in funding in several years. It is important to support these programs with increased funding.