



The Catawba Nation

Office of Tribal Government

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Testimony of Chief Brian Harris on Behalf of the Catawba Nation
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Public Witness Day – February 25, 2025

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Brian Harris and I am honored to appear before you today as the Chief of the Catawba Nation. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of our people and advocate for the continued support of federal programs critical to the well-being of our children and families. Today, I would like to highlight three areas: funding for child welfare programs; the Carlisle Industrial School; and DOGE's potential impact on Indian Health Service.

Indian Child Welfare Services

One of the most pressing concerns for the Catawba Nation, as well as for many tribal nations across the country, is the need for sustained investment in child welfare programs that ensure the safety, stability, and cultural identity of our children. Federal programs administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) provide essential services, and any reduction in funding would have devastating consequences for our communities.

I urge this committee to maintain full funding for the following programs:

1. Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Title II Grants – These grants support tribal initiatives to establish child and family service programs. ICWA was enacted to protect the well-being and best interests of Indian children and families. It upholds family integrity and stability and keeps Indian children connected to their communities and cultures. It is widely recognized as following best practices and being the gold standard in the field of child welfare. ICWA remains a cornerstone of our efforts to keep Native children connected to their families, communities, and culture. The FY 2024 appropriation for this program was \$16,903,000.
2. Welfare Assistance - Child Assistance Payments – This program provides temporary financial assistance for foster care placements, helping to ensure that our children have safe and stable environments during times of crisis. The FY 2024 appropriation for Welfare Assistance, which includes Child Assistance Payments, was \$78,494,000.
3. Social Services - Services to Children, Elderly, and Families – This funding supports protective services for at-risk children and families, offering preventive services that can reduce the need for out-of-home placements. The FY 2024 appropriation for Social Services was \$52,954,000.

4. Indian Child Welfare Act 638 Authority – This allows tribes to contract with the federal government to administer child welfare programs directly, ensuring that culturally appropriate services are delivered efficiently. ICWA also reaffirms the inherent rights of tribal nations to be involved in child welfare matters involving their citizens. It ensures tribes can advocate for the best interests of their tribal members and protect their tribal children. The FY 2024 appropriation for Tribal Government activity, which includes this program, was \$398,987,000.

5. Tiwahe Initiative – While not a line-item appropriation, the Tiwahe Initiative has been instrumental in fostering holistic, culturally grounded service delivery. Continued support for this initiative strengthens tribal families and promotes self-sufficiency. The program is supported through annual appropriations language rather than a specific funding line.

These programs are not merely budgetary considerations; they are lifelines for tribal children who deserve the same opportunities for safety, stability, and success as any other child in this country. For too long, Native children have been overrepresented in foster care systems that do not always reflect their cultural values or support family reunification efforts. The funding for these programs allows tribes to create and implement solutions that work for our communities and prioritize the best interests of our children.

Recommendations Regarding the Carlisle Indian Industrial School

For the second consecutive year, I appear before you to call attention to the painful and unresolved legacy of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. While progress has been made, much more remains to be done to ensure that the Native children lost at Carlisle are finally returned home to their reservations and families. The injustices committed under the federal government's assimilationist policies continue to affect Native communities, and we must take further action to bring accountability and resolution to this long-standing issue.

For the Catawba Nation, this issue remains particularly personal. One of our own, Wade Ayres, was sent to Carlisle as a young boy in 1903. Less than five months after his arrival, he died from complications associated with a vaccine given during his time at the school. His grave, like many others, was mismanaged over the years, especially when the U.S. Army relocated burial sites in 1927 without consulting the affected tribes or families. This lack of respect and care has left many Native families struggling to reclaim their ancestors and provide them with proper burials in their homelands.

To address these ongoing concerns, I urge Congress to take the following actions:

1. Clarify NAGPRA's Applicability to the U.S. Army – Congress should amend NAGPRA to explicitly state that it applies to all federal agencies, including the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army, removing any ambiguity that allows agencies to claim exemptions.

2. Direct Appropriations for Repatriation Efforts – Congress should allocate specific funding to facilitate the repatriation of Native American remains from military-controlled sites, ensuring that financial constraints do not obstruct compliance.

3. Mandate a Review of Federal Policies on Native American Cemeteries – A government-wide review of policies governing Native cemeteries under federal control, particularly those tied to boarding schools, should be conducted to promote accountability and adherence to repatriation obligations.

4. Enhance Enforcement Mechanisms – Strengthening NAGPRA’s enforcement provisions should be a priority, including imposing penalties on federal agencies that fail to comply, so that tribal nations are not forced into lengthy legal battles to reclaim their ancestors. At least \$1.5 million should be dedicated to NAGPRA enforcement.

5. Codify Timelines for Repatriation – Congress should establish clear timelines for repatriation requests under NAGPRA and mandate annual reporting on compliance by federal agencies to prevent indefinite delays.

6. Expand Tribal Consultation Requirements – Legislation should require agencies such as the U.S. Army to consult with tribal nations before any excavation, relocation, or repurposing of sites containing Native American remains, ensuring that tribal voices are central in decision-making processes.

Repatriation is a fundamental issue of justice, dignity, and tribal sovereignty. The U.S. government must uphold its obligations to Native nations and facilitate the long-overdue return of our children to their rightful resting places. Congress has the power to ensure that Native communities receive the respect and recognition they deserve in their efforts to reclaim their ancestors and heal from this painful chapter in history.

Impact of Department of Government Efficiency Layoffs on the Indian Health Service

Recently, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) initiated a series of federal workforce reductions, resulting in the termination of numerous probationary employees across various agencies, including the Indian Health Service (IHS). Initial reports indicated that approximately 950 IHS employees were affected, with subsequent estimates suggesting the number could be as high as 2,500. These layoffs threatened to exacerbate the existing 30% vacancy rate within the IHS, further compromising healthcare delivery to the 2.5 million American Indian and Alaska Native individuals who rely on these services. The Catawba Nation, a direct service tribe, would have lost seven full-time staff under this proposal, including three individuals having direct patient contact.

In response to widespread concern and advocacy from tribal organizations, including the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), the National Council of Urban Indian Health,

and the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the layoff orders for IHS employees were rescinded on the evening of February 14, 2025. This decision underscores the critical importance of maintaining a stable and adequately staffed healthcare system for Native communities.

While the immediate crisis has been averted, this incident highlights the vulnerability of essential services to policy decisions that may not fully consider the unique obligations the federal government holds toward tribal nations. To prevent similar situations in the future, I recommend that Congress:

1. **Implement Protective Measures for Essential Tribal Services:** Enact legislation that safeguards critical services, such as healthcare, education, and law enforcement, from abrupt workforce reductions, ensuring that any proposed staffing changes undergo thorough impact assessments in consultation with tribal leaders.
2. **Enhance Consultation Protocols:** Mandate that federal agencies engage in meaningful and timely consultation with tribal nations before implementing policies that could affect the delivery of services in Indian Country. This collaborative approach will help identify potential adverse impacts and develop strategies to mitigate them.
3. **Affirm Commitment to Trust and Treaty Obligations:** Reaffirm the federal government's dedication to upholding its trust and treaty responsibilities by providing consistent and adequate funding and support for programs serving Native communities, thereby preventing future disruptions caused by administrative actions.

By adopting these measures, Congress can help ensure the stability and reliability of essential services for tribal nations, honoring the commitments made through treaties and trust responsibilities.