

INUPIAT COMMUNITY of the ARCTIC SLOPE

an IRA Regional Tribal Government



P.O. Box 934 • Barrow, Alaska 99723
Ph: (907) 852-4227 1-888-788-4227 Fax: (907) 852-2449

TESTIMONY OF DOREEN LEAVITT SECRETARY AND DIRECTOR OF NATURAL RESOURCES INUPIAT COMMUNITY OF THE ARCTIC SLOPE

Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Regarding the FY 2026 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Budgets

February 26, 2025

Chairman Mike Simpson, Ranking Member Chellie Pingree, and distinguished members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies:

On behalf of the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS) Tribal Council, I want to thank you for this important opportunity to discuss our appropriation priorities for FY 2026 with you.

ICAS is one of two federally recognized regional Alaska Native tribal governments in Alaska that operates under a federally approved constitution pursuant to the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 (25 U.S.C. 461 et seq). Since August 26, 1971, ICAS has provided direct support to our Tribal members directly through shared program administration and indirectly by creating social service programs and economic development opportunities that benefit more than 13,478 ICAS tribal members, about half of whom are also dually enrolled in the Village Tribes of Anaktuvuk Pass, Atqasuk, Barrow, Kaktovik, Nuiqsut, Point Hope, Point Lay, and Wainwright.

ICAS is a landless Tribe with a service delivery area larger than the State of Minnesota. Being the regional Alaska Native tribal government located in America's arctic, ICAS is often faced with unique obstacles - weather, location, a changing landscape, reliance on planes and barges to ship in basic supplies and food, lack of redundancy in critical broadband infrastructure, workforce and housing shortages, and much more. All of these obstacles make economic and infrastructure development challenging. For this reason, ICAS strategically uses its federal funding provided to the Tribe as part of the federal government's trust obligation to support the needs of ICAS Tribal members. While we do our best, federal funding always falls short forcing ICAS to offset these shortages with our own pool of financial resources and seek additional, burdensome grants, which further put a strain on the limited workforce we have access to.

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

Fully fund the BIA and provide additional earmarked funds to end ICAS' 30+ years of flat, inadequate funding. For the past 30+ years, ICAS has received little to no increases in our federal

funding.¹ And of the funding we receive, there is often not enough dollars to make an impact on our community beyond paying salaries, or portions thereof, for staff who are doing the best they can with the limited resources available to them. As you'll hear from every Tribal government, when the BIA is short, it is the Tribe that invests its own money to deliver federal services. With the resources Congress provided to us to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, ICAS strategically bolstered our governance infrastructure, improved the delivery of our services, and hired additional staff to manage the increased workload. However, this funding will run out by the end of 2026 forcing ICAS to look for innovative ways to offset our revenue. This however, should not be our sole responsibility. Your trust obligation requires you to provide meaningful services to our people and we need your support to find long-term solutions to chronic underfunding.

Increase Funding for Social Services and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). ICAS supports the requests of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) to fully fund programs authorized by ICWA, including \$80 million for social services and \$5 million for off-Reservation ICWA grant programs. This funding is critical to supporting the next generation of ICAS families that struggle with economic, social, mental, and physical health ailments. With high mortality rates in our Arctic communities because of these challenges, our funding is not enough to provide the critical services our youth and families need. Currently, ICAS currently only receives enough funding to pay our employees serving Point Lay. If we truly want to put an end to intergenerational trauma, Congress must dedicate additional dollars to support these families.

Provide Resources for Building Necessary Broadband Redundancy. Many federal programs supporting broadband development and deployment do not support building necessary redundancy to accommodate for the realities of our region. On June 11, 2023, sea ice severed Quintillion's undersea fiber-optic cable, which connects the Arctic Slope to internet and cell phone coverage to our region. Because of the lack of redundant broadband infrastructure, there were outages across the entire Arctic Slope. ICAS Tribal members were not only disconnected from communication with the outside world, but more importantly they were unable to access critical services needed for everyday life such as medical and public safety. Phones stopped working, hospitals and clinics suffered from unusable medical equipment, local flights were stopped, and sadly, a young child died because the family was unable to call emergency services. In January 2025, sea ice once again damaged the subsea fiber optic cable owned by Quintillion, causing widespread internet outages in Alaska. While ICAS tried to apply for funds through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Grant (TBCG), we were unfairly denied because the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) deemed our area served. The U.S. Department of Agriculture ReConnect Broadband Program also deems our area served. We are currently working with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to apply for funds through the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant, but we are unsure if and when we will receive these funds. For this reason, we are asking this Subcommittee

¹ Note that this funding received by ICAS does not include pass-through funding received for ICAS' Village Tribes, including Point Lay, Anaktuvak, and Kaktovik. However, in order to better serve all of its Village Tribes, ICAS needs additional dollars appropriated specifically for ICAS.

to provide additional dollars through DOI to ensure there is necessary broadband redundancy in our region so we can promote the well-being of our Tribal members.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Put Teeth into BLM’s Tribal Consultation Efforts. The success of economic development projects in America’s arctic, including, but not limited to, oil, gas, and mineral development, largely depend on BLM’s permitting and approval process. However, BLM has failed to engage in meaningful consultation with Alaska Native tribal governments when it comes to development projects within our traditional homelands. This is why Congress specifically directed BLM to consult with us as part of your six-bill appropriations package for FY 2024 (P.L. 118-42).² However, we need your continued support holding their feet to the fire. Too often, BLM only consults with us after we go to our Congressional delegation and the media, and this consultation is nothing but a check the box exercise. In the case of the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPRA), BLM only consulted when you directed them to. Yet, it did not change anything. ICAS, the regional Alaska Native tribal government, knows what is best for our community. And our community is unlike most in this country. Being located in America’s arctic, we are faced with limited opportunities for economic development, difficult terrains for building infrastructure, and an abundance of natural resources that can be used to only benefit our people. For this reason, we urge you to codify language that puts teeth into BLM’s consultation policy by withholding funding if meaningful consultation does not occur.

Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)

ICAS urges this Subcommittee to repeal the “Steven’s rider” codified at 25 U.S.C. 292b. ICAS is proud of the Qargi Academy Tribal School, an independent school formed under ICAS law and located in one of ICAS’ eight Village Tribes - the Village of Wainwright. Qargi Academy hires local educators who serve as culture bearers, facilitate learning, and manage daily operations in the Inupiat language and based on Inupiat culture and ways of being and attracts students who have not been successful in the public school system or who desire an education based in the Inupiat language, culture and ways of being. Despite our success at Qargi Academy, ICAS is hindered in our ability to expand these education opportunities to new schools in each of ICAS’ seven other Village Tribes. This is due to the “Steven’s rider” codified at 25 U.S.C. 292b, which prohibits federal funds from being used to fulfill BIE’s trust obligation of providing education to members of Alaska Native Tribes. The rider reads: *“The Bureau of Indian Affairs shall not expend any other funds for the operation of any secondary education program or facility in the State of Alaska after June 30, 1983...”*³ Tribal organizations have stood unified in their opposition to this discriminatory rider because it has significantly hindered the ability of Alaska Native tribes to

² The explanatory statement for the Interior-Environment bill, which was among the measures included, contains the following direction to the Department: *Consultation.—Prior to the finalization of the Proposed Rule for Management and Protection of the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (Fed. Register Number 2023-18990), the Committees direct the Secretary to consider engaging in additional meaningful, in-person consultations with any federally recognized Tribes and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act Corporations affected by the proposed rule.*

³ 25 U.S.C. 292b.

access BIE dollars which would enable us to fully develop educational programs that enhance and transform the disproportionately negative educational outcomes that Native students in the state currently experience.⁴ It is time to move away from this discriminatory past and into a future that supports and uplifts all Native youth.

Additionally, ICAS encourages this Subcommittee to fully fund BIE and provide additional earmarked funds for Alaska Native Tribes upon removal of the “Steven’s rider”. ICAS knows far too well the limitations on existing funding for the BIE and other federal programs serving Indians. And we actively oppose appropriation changes that essentially “rob Peter to pay Paul”. ICAS recognizes that the removal of the Steven’s rider alone will not change the ability of Alaska Native tribes to access BIE funding. This is only the first step. We will need Congress’ help to first and foremost, fully fund the BIE, but secondly to increase the BIE budget to provides additional dollars specifically for the onboarding of Alaska Native Tribes to BIE. This will ensure that the current Tribes served by BIE will not see a reduction in their own funding and Alaska Native Tribes will have parity with those Tribes in the lower 48. While it will be difficult to fund all Alaska Native Tribes in one sweep, we encourage you to take the first step in righting this wrong.

Finally, ICAS urges this Subcommittee to provide \$55.2 million for the Johnson O’Malley (JOM) program. JOM is one of the sole accounts that ICAS receives federal dollars from BIE. As you are well aware, JOM is critically underfunded and the cost per student is far below what it should be given inflation. For this reason, ICAS supports the requests of the National Indian Education Association to increase funding for JOM.

⁴ See National Indian Education Association, *Resolution 2014-18: Support of Tribally-Operated Schools and Culturally-Appropriate Education Opportunities for American Indian and Alaska Native Youth* (Oct. 18, 2014), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cffbf319973d7000185377f/t/5fd10475d387d5556362bb5f/16075336860/2014-18.pdf>.