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Testimony & Written Statement for the Record
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
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Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA): Tiwahe Initiative

Good morning. My name is Vivian Korthuis. I serve as the Chief Executive Officer for the Association of Village Council Presidents.

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and written statement for the record regarding the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), specifically regarding the Tiwahe Initiative and related Social Services and Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) program investments that support tribally driven, family-centered services.

Tiwahe (Lakota for *family*) is a proven, tribally designed approach that helps Tribal Nations organize services around families. Other goals include improving coordination across programs, strengthening prevention and reunification, and supporting Native children to remain safely connected to family, culture, and community whenever possible.

Tiwahe: a proven, tribally designed approach to strengthening Native families.

Tiwahe began in 2015 with a simple, practical idea: organize services around families rather than leaving people to navigate disconnected systems. Tiwahe has since evolved into a “whole-of-government” framework. This framework operates at the federal, state, and tribal levels, which helps Tribal Nations align programs, reduce duplication, fill service gaps, and improve outcomes for children and families.

The Tiwahe model is tribally led, grounded in sovereignty, and focused on prevention, stability, and reunification when families enter child welfare systems.

Over the past decade, six original pilot Tribes helped design, implement, and refine Tiwahe, documenting lessons learned and demonstrating the benefits of family-centered coordination across Social Services, ICWA, and related programs. AVCP is one of the original 6 demonstration sites and was the only site in Alaska with that designation.

More recently, Tiwahe has expanded to additional demonstration and incubator sites, creating a pathway for more Tribes to participate as appropriations allow. This progress is encouraging, but

the program still requires stable, predictable funding and clear congressional direction so the model can be sustained, evaluated, and expanded equitably.

Demonstrated outcomes: What Tiwahe delivers for families and children.

Community example: Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP). Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Alaska.

AVCP is the largest tribal consortium in the Nation, serving 56 federally recognized Tribes across the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Western Alaska. Our Tribes are located in 48 villages in a service area roughly the size of the State of New York. Our communities are “off the road” and accessible only by plane, boat, or seasonal ice road/snowmachine routes, making service access and coordination uniquely complex.

From 2005–2015, AVCP experienced enormous program growth without parallel investment in administrative infrastructure. By 2015, AVCP managed 157 open grant streams supporting 26 programs, largely siloed by funding source, with no true organizational infrastructure to sustain integrated service delivery at scale. This fragmented structure constrained our ability to serve families effectively, despite the breadth of resources flowing into the region.

Tiwahe was the turning point. In 2015, AVCP’s Executive Board and key staff developed the Tiwahe proposal as a blueprint to change how we operate. Tiwahe became the catalyst that enabled AVCP to move from siloed programs toward a coordinated, family-centered system. Tiwahe provided the support and flexibility needed to do the hard work of organizational transformation, creating the “clearing” (space) to evaluate operations end-to-end and rebuild infrastructure that matches the scale of need across our vast region.

Through Tiwahe, AVCP designed and built a service delivery model that worked for us. Our model works in extreme rural conditions (what I call extreme remote America) and strengthened our ability to braid services. We aligned multiple funding sources and program delivery so that families experience a clearer, more navigable pathway to receive the services that they need.

Tiwahe supported AVCP’s development of an integrated service delivery model with “Healthy Families” at the center, shifting the core question from “how do we satisfy the grantor?” to “how do we best serve our Tribes and Tribal Members?” This shift enabled AVCP to reorganize and re-engineer programs into a structured framework that improves access, reduces duplication, and expands services at the village level not just for families and children, but for all our clients. We went beyond just focusing on families and children and applied this strategy across all AVCP program delivery to form a strong foundation to stand on.

Just as importantly, Tiwahe helped AVCP build and deploy quality improvement as an operating discipline, supporting phased organizational change (right-sizing and growing administrative capacity; building a braided division structure; and advancing toward wrap-around village-level delivery and community safety). This quality improvement approach allows AVCP to continuously

refine how we deliver services across a large, remote region while maintaining accountability to Tribes and families.

Appropriations request.

I respectfully urge the Subcommittee to:

(1) increase funding for Tiwahe so that demonstration sites have parity with the original pilot sites and can sustain staffing and coordination functions that make Tiwahe effective;

(2) provide resources for innovation, reporting, evaluation, and expansion across participating Tribes, including incubator pathways; and

(3) support congressional direction that will preserve Tiwahe and make it permanent so Tribal Nations can plan, retain staff, and build durable cross-program systems that strengthen families.

This request also includes supporting Senator Murkowski's comprehensive draft legislative package related to *The Way Forward* report of the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children.

Conclusion.

Tiwahe works because it recognizes Tribal sovereignty and supports Tribal Nations in designing solutions tailored to local realities. It also improves the effectiveness of existing federal investments by aligning services around families, emphasizing prevention and reunification, and strengthening accountability through clear roles and coordinated case management.

With stable appropriations and permanency, Tiwahe can continue to grow as a best-practice model that helps ensure Native children are safe, supported, and connected to their communities.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and for your continued commitment to Tribal children and families. I would welcome the opportunity to provide additional information for the record.

Thank you.