

Austin Lowes, Chairman
Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
Before the House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies
Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education
Fish and Wildlife Service, the Indian Health Service,
and Tribal Historic Preservation Offices
FY 2027 Budget

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My name is Austin Lowes, I am the Chairman of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. My Tribe serves one of the largest and most geographically expansive tribal communities in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Across our seven-county service area, we administer 23 governmental divisions and more than 75 programs that touch every aspect of our citizens' lives. With a tribal membership of 43,376 and 3,900 acres of trust land, our people continue to exercise treaty-reserved rights to fish, hunt, and gather throughout the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory.

For nearly sixty years, we have built a modern tribal government capable of delivering essential services—health care, education, elder care, law enforcement, housing, social services, and cultural preservation. We operate eight health clinics offering comprehensive, culturally grounded care, including medical, dental, behavioral health, pharmacy, optical, and Traditional Medicine. We are proud of this work, but pride alone cannot close the chronic federal funding gaps that undermine our ability to meet the needs of our people. It is time to fully fund the Indian Health Service and the federal trust obligations that remain unmet.

A. Bureau of Indian Affairs

1. Social Services

As a trained social worker who has served multiple reservations, I know firsthand that investing in qualified professionals and culturally informed services pays dividends for generations. If we fail to invest in social services, we will continue to overburden the criminal justice system—an expensive and ineffective substitute for prevention, healing, and family stability.

Thus, while I appreciate the Subcommittee's efforts to preserve social services funding, the reality is stark: tribes cannot thrive in the 21st century without meaningful investment in children and families. Although BIA social welfare funding has increased by roughly 23% over the last decade, inflation and population growth have erased those gains. The data shows, the BIA Tribal social services funding per person has been cut almost in half over the last 35 years.”

Meanwhile, Native children continue to be disproportionately represented in the child welfare system—15% of all children in care despite being only 3% of the U.S. population. This is not a statistic; it is a warning.

The Tiwahe Program has proven that holistic, culturally grounded, family-centered support works. It allows tribes to integrate housing, financial literacy, parenting support, cultural education, mental health services, and more into a single, coordinated system. Tiwahe should be expanded, fully funded, and permanently authorized.

2. Tribal Natural Resources Division

Our Tribe is a co-manager of vast portions of Lakes Michigan, Huron, and Superior under the 1836 Treaty of Washington. We also hold treaty-protected rights to hunt, fish, and gather across 13.8 million acres. Effective co-management requires full funding for the Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority (CORA), but it also requires direct investment in the Sault Tribe's Natural Resources Division. Our fishers account for approximately 50% of all CORA commercial harvest and 90% of subsistence harvest, yet our funding does not reflect this responsibility.

We also rely on BIA Forestry and Fire Programs to steward more than 2,000 acres of forest lands, with more acquisitions underway. As federal agencies move toward a unified wildland fire service, it is essential that BIA forestry and fire personnel remain locally based. Local expertise is not optional—it is the backbone of effective permitting, fuels management, training, and trust land stewardship.

We urge full funding for BIA Forestry, Fire, and Fish, Wildlife & Parks programs, including expanded support for tribal hatcheries and habitat restoration.

3. Tribal Court Programs

Our Tribal Court is a cornerstone of our sovereignty, yet federal support covers only **3.76%** of the base funding needed to operate a court system that meets the needs of our population. Federal funding has increased by less than \$3,500 in 21 years—an amount that does not even cover basic inflation.

To keep our courts functioning, we must divert funds from health care, education, and elder services. This is unacceptable. Congress must fully fund Tribal Court base budgets according to the BIA's own model.

B. Bureau of Indian Education

Our JKL Bahweting Anishnabe School—serving K–8 students—is a lifeline for Native children in our territory. Yet BIE funding has remained stagnant despite rising costs for salaries, transportation, food, and insurance. Additionally, thousands of our children attend state public schools and rely on the Johnson-O'Malley program for cultural and academic support. JOM funding has also stagnated and must be prioritized.

C. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

We are deeply committed to restoring and protecting the coastal ecosystems of the St. Mary's River and Straits of Mackinac. Our work depends on strong partnerships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Increased funding for the Coastal Program and Tribal Wildlife Grants will ensure that more scientists and restoration experts are embedded in our communities, where their work is most urgently needed.

D. Indian Health Service

The Tribe operates 8 health clinics across our seven-county service area. In these clinics we operate nutrition, pharmacy, wellness and traditional medicine programs. We are proud of our work in this space, but it is time to fully fund Indian Health Services.

The Tribe wants to express its deep appreciation for the Congress's action in providing advanced appropriations for FY 2026 for the Indian Health Service. Given the very uncertain fiscal times facing our nation, the security in knowing that the base budget of our Indian health system is secure critical. This allows our programs and our staff to plan on how best to continue to meet the health care needs of our people.

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment

Substance abuse and mental health conditions pose one of the greatest threats to the future of tribal communities. Since the 2018 opioid emergency, the crisis has only deepened. Rural tribal communities face severe staff shortages, long waitlists, and limited access to inpatient treatment.

According to the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, nearly half of young adults aged 18–25 experienced a mental illness or substance use disorder. Among American Indian and Alaska Native people, **35%** were affected—meaning one-third of our future generation is struggling.

The Tribal Law and Order Act envisioned coordinated federal support for public safety, justice, and behavioral health. But without adequate funding, Tribal Action Plans remain largely unfunded mandates. The Sault Tribe was one of the first in the nation to complete a Tribal Action Plan; now we need the resources to implement it.

We urge the Subcommittee to provide dedicated funding to both BIA and IHS for Tribal Action Plan implementation.

2. Sanitation Facilities

Health Care facilities and sanitation program continue to be underfunded, given the vast need of facility space and staffing needed to take care of the overwhelmed health care systems in Indian Country. Alaskan villages are still living in third world standards when it comes to access to clean water. New facilities in Indian Country, require additional utility infrastructure from

communications cabling to large wells and sewage systems. Residential scale water and sewage programming is underfunded, leaving many American Indians without necessary clean water sources. This was a key factor for why the pandemic was so devastating to tribal communities across America.

E. Tribal Historic Preservation Offices

The protection of our cultural heritage is inseparable from the protection of our sovereignty. Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs) carry the responsibility of safeguarding sacred sites, ancestral landscapes, and irreplaceable cultural resources—yet they continue to operate with funding levels that fall far short of the federal trust responsibility.

Last year, the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers has requested **\$34 million** from the Historic Preservation Fund for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices. This request is not only reasonable—it is essential. Tribal nations are increasingly asked to review federal undertakings, consult on infrastructure projects, and protect cultural resources threatened by development, climate change, and erosion. These responsibilities grow every year, but funding has not kept pace.

For the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, this work is deeply personal. Our ancestral homelands span the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory, and our cultural sites—burial grounds, fishing camps, ceremonial places—are woven throughout this landscape. As we stated earlier in our testimony, “our members exercise treaty-reserved rights to fish, hunt, and gather throughout our ceded territories,” and those rights depend on the protection of the cultural and environmental integrity of these lands.

Yet our THPO, like many across Indian Country, is forced to do more with less: more reviews, more consultation, more threats to cultural resources, and fewer staff and fewer dollars to meet these obligations.

Congress must fully fund Tribal Historic Preservation Offices. This investment will strengthen tribal capacity, honor treaty and trust responsibilities, and ensure that the cultural heritage of Native nations is protected for future generations.

F. Conclusion

We want to express our deep appreciation for the opportunity to submit this testimony for the record.