

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF COUNCILMAN EUGENE DECORA SR.  
WINNEBAGO TRIBE OF NEBRASKA  
U.S. HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES  
AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE PUBLIC WITNESS HEARING  
MARCH 18, 2026**

**Summary of Budget Requests:**

- **Bureau of Indian Affairs** – Increase Funding for Public Safety & Justice
  - a. Criminal Investigations & Police Services
  - b. Detention/Corrections
  - c. School Resource Officers
- **Bureau of Indian Education** – Increase Funding for:
  - a. Tribal Colleges & Universities
  - b. Tribal Colleges Facilities Improvement & Repair

Greetings, Chair Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies (“Subcommittee”). My name is Eugene DeCora Sr., and I have the honor of serving on Tribal Council for the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska (“Tribe”). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Tribe’s funding priorities within the Subcommittee’s jurisdiction for Fiscal Year 2027 (“FY27”).

**I. Increase Funding for BIA Public Safety & Justice**  
**a. Criminal Investigations and Police Services**

Longstanding BIA law enforcement staffing shortages and the overall insufficient level of police services on the Winnebago Reservation created serious public safety concerns and placed a tremendous burden on existing officers. As a result of the BIA’s failure to provide adequate staffing and resources, the Tribe assumed full operations of the Winnebago Tribal Law Enforcement Department on October 1, 2025, marking a new era of self-determination and accountability in public safety for our community.

We proudly swore in our new Chief of Police, Jeremiah Lonewolf, a Marine Corps veteran and graduate of Winnebago Public School. Since that time, we have filled four officer positions and one administrative support position. Our certified Wildlife and Parks Officers are assisting by backfilling the schedule as needed, and we continue to actively recruit for lieutenant and criminal investigator positions.

Although our new Chief of Police and his team are stretched thin, they have hit the ground running. They have done an exceptional job engaging with the community and strengthening partnerships with neighboring jurisdictions and public safety agencies. Their commitment reflects the Tribe’s determination to build a professional, community-centered law enforcement program.

However, the transition has not been without significant challenges. Due to the federal government shutdown, the Tribe’s Fiscal Year 2026 BIA funding was substantially delayed. We did not receive our FY 2026 funds until January 2026, requiring the Tribe to cover 100 percent of law enforcement

operational costs from October 1, 2025, forward. The Tribe continues to significantly supplement its law enforcement budget with its own resources to ensure continuity of services and community safety.

Additionally, the transition of operations from BIA District I was marked by limited and delayed response. Four months after the Tribe assumed responsibility for the law enforcement program, BIA completed the transfer of vehicle titles, equipment, investigation reports, and other administrative matters. District I has indicated that staffing shortages contributed to these delays. While we appreciate the eventual completion of these tasks, the delays created operational burdens and uncertainty during a critical transition period.

#### **b. Detention/Corrections**

The Tribe is also preparing to assume responsibility for the corrections program. This transition includes recruiting corrections officers and establishing contracts for detention facilities. Although the original tentative transition date was January 1, 2026, the Tribe has adjusted that date to July 1, 2026, to allow sufficient time for recruitment, hiring, and training.

Until that transition occurs, BIA remains responsible for providing corrections services. However, corrections officers are currently available only Monday through Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., despite the fact that detention is a 24/7 public safety function. The Tribe has requested around the clock coverage, but it appears BIA does not have—or will not deploy—the necessary resources. This gap places an unreasonable burden on the Tribe and creates risks to public safety.

The lack of nearby adult and juvenile detention facilities further exacerbates our serious public safety challenges. The closest adult detention facilities are located on the Omaha Tribe's Reservation, approximately 11 miles away, and in Thurston County, roughly 20 miles away. However, BIA has repeatedly failed to maintain consistent contracts with these facilities, and bed space is frequently unavailable.

When no local contracts or beds are available, Winnebago Police Officers must transport detainees to the BIA detention facility in Wagner, South Dakota—a five-hour round trip—or to other distant facilities. These transports occur regularly because no other personnel are available to conduct them. Each time an officer leaves the Reservation for hours at a time, the already understaffed Police Department is left without adequate law enforcement coverage, placing the community at greater risk.

The repeated lapse of local correctional facility contracts for both adults and juveniles—allowing agreements to expire without extensions or replacements in place—combined with chronic staffing shortages in law enforcement and transportation, is unacceptable. At present, BIA maintains only one adult and one juvenile detention contract. When beds are unavailable, adult detainees must again be transported hours away to the BIA facility in Wagner. These long-distance transports are costly, strain limited personnel resources, and remove individuals far from their families and legal counsel. Contracts with facilities within a reasonable distance of the Winnebago Reservation must be consistently maintained to ensure reliable access for both adult and juvenile detainees.

As the Tribe prepares to assume responsibility for corrections, we plan to establish multiple local detention contracts to ensure continuity and accessibility. However, we anticipate that we will need to supplement BIA funding with Tribal resources to meet actual operational costs. Current BIA funding levels are woefully insufficient, and the historical data relied upon to justify those funding levels does not accurately reflect the true needs of our community.

Finally, the Tribe has begun planning for a comprehensive Justice Center that would house Tribal Court, Law Enforcement, and Detention facilities under one roof. Modern, appropriately designed facilities are essential to delivering coordinated and effective justice services. While the Tribe will pursue all available funding opportunities, meaningful federal investment will be necessary to make this critical project a reality.

For Fiscal Year 2027, we respectfully urge the Subcommittee to increase funding for BIA Public Safety and Justice accounts, Criminal Investigations & Police Services and Detention/Corrections, to ensure that Tribes exercising self-determination have the stable and sufficient resources necessary to protect their communities.

### **c. School Resource Officers**

The Tribe strongly supports the role of School Resource Officers (“SROs”) in schools on Tribal lands. SROs uphold the Tribe’s values while enforcing laws, investigating crimes, and responding to emergencies to ensure a safe school environment. For many years, the Tribe had a full-time SRO position assigned to serve the Winnebago school system. Unfortunately, the last officer assigned to this position was recently detailed elsewhere, leaving a critical gap in school safety just as the Tribe was assuming responsibility for law enforcement functions under the Tribal Self-Governance Program.

In September 2025, the Tribe submitted to compact the Police Officer/School Resource Officer position in Phase II of its Tribal Self-Governance transition, a position historically duty-stationed at the Winnebago Agency and dedicated to serving the Winnebago School System. To date, the BIA has not responded to the Tribe’s letter regarding this position. While we await clarification, the Winnebago Public School recently decided to fund an SRO position and will reimburse the Tribe for this position, since the school and Tribe both view this as a critically needed position.

BIA-OJS has communicated that SRO positions are funded under the Division of Drug Enforcement Program and operate nationwide, employing an average of 63 full-time employees (FTEs) stationed across the country, with none assigned to a particular tribe. BIA-OJS stated that reallocating an FTE to one tribe would compromise service delivery to the remaining 574 federally recognized tribes.

With only 63 positions for 574 tribes, it is impossible to meet local needs effectively. This structure also restricts the ability of tribes to compact funding for positions that are critical to school and community safety. If Congress intended for all tribes to be served, additional funding is clearly required. The Tribe urges the Subcommittee to provide additional funding for SROs, ensuring that tribal schools can maintain safe learning environments, provide critical mentorship, and support the overall well-being of our students.

## **II. Increase Funding for Bureau of Indian Education**

### **a. Tribal Colleges & Universities (TCUs)**

Little Priest Tribal College (“LPTC”) was established as an educational institution by the Winnebago Tribe to fulfill the goal of its namesake, Chief Little Priest, “Be Strong and Educate My Children.” Its major focus is to provide two-year associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates and to prepare students to transfer and successfully complete a degree at a four-year institution. Another equally important part of the college’s mission is to promote Ho-Chunk language and cultural awareness, as well as to provide training opportunities that help upgrade job skills and improve employment opportunities. Over the past four years, the college’s enrollment has more than doubled. The current spring enrollment is 243, which is the highest enrollment ever recorded in a single semester. The college has also doubled the number of programs from six to twenty over the past five years. Last year, the college celebrated its largest graduating class.

The Indian Student Count (ISC)—a formula based on the number of Native enrolled full-time equivalent students—serves as the foundational operating support for TCUs. However, stagnant funding levels place significant pressure on already limited institutional budgets. TCUs, such as LPTC, must stretch these limited resources to cover instruction, student services, facilities operations, and basic institutional infrastructure while continuing to meet accreditation standards and support student success. To support LPTC’s continued growth and its positive impact on the community, the Tribe respectfully urges the Subcommittee to increase funding for Tribal Colleges and Universities.

### **b. Tribal Colleges Facilities Improvement & Repair**

Many LPTC buildings are between 20 and 70 years old and are in need of improvements and/or repairs. Funding for large, deferred maintenance projects is needed for the Library and Museum/Student Services Building, the Food Service Building, and the Administration Building, which was built in 1947. In addition, funding is needed to address overcrowded classrooms, limited housing, and lack of office space. Funding is also needed for LPTC to implement its Master Plan, which would expand the campus onto an adjacent 10-acre site. Five new buildings are planned at an estimated total cost of \$60 million. Planned buildings include a Career & Technology Education Building, a Cultural & Student Center, a Dormitory, a Wellness Center, and a Day Care Center.

LPTC is thankful for Facilities Improvement & Repair funds that have enabled the College to respond quickly to routine repairs and maintenance. LPTC has also been able to use federal COVID funds for the construction of a new Science building, USDA funds to help construct a Career and Technical Education (CTE) building, and Department of Labor funds to help launch LPTC’s newly approved Carpentry program. As the cost of many of these facilities continue to rise, LPTC is working diligently to secure the necessary funds to avoid using resources that currently support its free-tuition program. The Tribe urges the Subcommittee to provide increased funding for Tribal Colleges Facilities Improvement and Repair.