

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Fiscal Year 2027 American Indian/Alaska Native Public Witness Hearings
Testimony of Ryman LeBeau, Chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe
March 18, 2026**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree and Members of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies. My name is Ryman LeBeau and I am the Chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (CRST). The CRST Reservation is one of the largest reservations in the United States at nearly 2.8 million acres – about the size of the state of Connecticut. The Reservation is one hundred miles long and sixty miles wide, and includes two counties Dewey County and Ziebach County, South Dakota. With an extraordinarily high unemployment rate, these counties consistently rank as among the most impoverished in the U.S. The CRST Reservation is home to four bands of the Teton Lakota Sioux – the Mnicoujou, Siha Sapa, Itazipco, and Oohenumpa – and is located in a rural area of north-central South Dakota. We have just over 26,000 enrolled tribal members. Our tribe is not a gaming tribe, and thus our revenue is limited to taxation, tribal enterprises, and land leases. This is not enough to bring our people into a place where they can thrive. Today I will discuss our funding priorities for key programs at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and Indian Health Service (IHS).

We appreciate that this subcommittee last year (FY 2026) rejected the funding cuts to tribal programs proposed by the Trump Administration that would have been devastating to our communities. We urge you to go even further this year and provide increased funding to these programs that are critical to the safety, health and economic opportunity of our people. The funding freezes and reductions in force (RIF) of federal staff by the Trump Administration have also impacted our government operations and services. The United States fulfills its trust and treaty obligations through both the direct delivery of tribal programs and services and through provision of federal funding to tribal Nations and tribal organizations serving tribal Nations. Tribal Nations are sovereign. This unique government-to-government relationship establishes a responsibility for a variety of services and benefits to Indian people based on their political status as Indians, including health care, education, public safety, economic support and more. This relationship has been defined in statute and case law as a political relationship that further distinguishes Indians from racial classification for purposes of affirmative action laws and in other federal statutes that establish federally funded programs for the general public. Any funding freezes that interrupt these resources has a negative and dangerous effect on the provision of critical services to our people. Federal employees providing services across the federal government – not only at Interior and the IHS – are essential to us. We call on Congress to work with the Administration to exempt from any future RIFs all employees of the IHS, BIA BIE and all tribal offices throughout all Federal agencies, as well as other Federal employees whose role is to deliver services or funding to Tribal Nations or their citizens or communities.

Funding for Tribal Public Safety and Justice Programs at the BIA

As this subcommittee knows well, the unmet need for law enforcement officers on tribal lands is overwhelming and must be addressed. We appreciate your efforts in recent years to increase funding for tribal law enforcement and bring more public safety resources to our lands. CRST and

neighboring Great Plains tribes are suffering a wave of violent crime, drug trafficking and drug related violent crime, and statistics show that American Indians are victimized by violent crime at a rate five times that of the general population. Despite the extensive territory for which CRST is responsible for providing law enforcement services, our annual allocation from the BIA only allows for a total force of 18 officers, which is sorely short of what is needed to cover such a large land base and well below FBI recommendations for officers per capita. We estimate that our base funding needs to double so we can hire 23 additional officers to reach the recommended FBI level. We are also seeking funding for surveillance cameras at all 17 communities and at all points of entry to monitor the safety of our reservation due to under-staffed law enforcement and under-funded programming.

The underfunding of tribal law enforcement and justice systems is well-documented. Since 2016 the BIA has submitted annual reports to Congress required by the Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA) regarding existing and needed spending, staffing, and estimated costs for BIA-funded Public Safety and Justice Programs (PS&J) in Indian Country. The most recent TLOA report released in February 2024, estimates for a minimum base level of service to all federally recognized Tribes requires a total of \$1.7 billion for tribal law enforcement, \$1.5 billion for Tribal courts, and \$284 million for existing detention centers. Based on enacted funding in FY 2026 – a total of just over \$570 million was provided for BIA PS&J programs. This means that tribal law enforcement, detentions/corrections, and tribal courts are funded at a staggeringly low amount of 18% of estimated need! In line with recommendations put forth by the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC) we urge this subcommittee to provide a total of \$3.017 billion for BIA PS&J funding, with \$1.47 billion for BIA and tribal law enforcement (criminal investigations & police services), \$257 million for detention/corrections and \$1.155 billion for tribal courts in FY 2027.

Another key improvement would be to have more training opportunities for officers in South Dakota or elsewhere in the Great Plains region to help us recruit and retain more officers. It is a big hindrance for our potential recruits to go to the BIA training center in New Mexico for an extended period, away from their families. Allowing tribal recruits to train at the South Dakota state law enforcement academy in Pierre and expanding opportunities at the BIA's Advanced Training Center (ATC) at Camp Grafton, North Dakota, could help. We urge this subcommittee to explore these and other innovative ways to expand law enforcement training opportunities.

BIA Housing Improvement Program

In 2023 CRST declared a State of Emergency on our reservation due to the unmet need for housing that currently exists. It is estimated that an additional 2,500 units of housing is required to adequately address this crisis. While we are exploring alternative methods of constructing houses and also pursuing Indian Housing Block Grants (IHBG) and the Indian Community Development Block Grants, the BIA's Housing Improvement Program (HIP) also plays a key role in helping us provide safe and accessible housing to our people. The IHBG does not cover all housing related needs and HIP provides funding for housing repairs and renovations of existing homes, construction of modest replacement homes, housing down payments to use in conjunction with other Federal and State programs, or construction of modest homes for families who do not own a home but have ownership or lease of sufficient land suitable for housing. For FY 2027 we urge the subcommittee to fund HIP at an amount of at least \$20 million. This would represent more than a \$6 million increase from the FY 2026 enacted level.

Funding for the BIA Road Maintenance Program

As you can imagine, on a reservation the size of ours, roads are absolutely critical to all aspects of everyday life linking our people with schools, jobs, medical services, and commerce. Central thoroughfares become impassable during inclement weather and lead to much longer commutes for our citizens to get to school or work, complicate the delivery of goods to market and creates a life-threatening situation by lengthening response times for our emergency responders.

To illustrate the dangers posed by crumbling and substandard roads at CRST and the lack of resources to fix them I would like to tell the subcommittee about a road known as BIA Route 11. It leads to the Takini School, which houses Kindergarten through 12th grade students. Route 11 is hilly and has so many problems that during winter weather, the bus driver stops at the bottom of steeper stretches of Route 11 and unloads the children. He then guns the bus to the top of the hill. The children walk up the hill and get back on the bus again and he repeats this same routine at the next hill. He doesn't do this because the bus lacks the power, he does it because he is fearful the bus will slide off the side of the road, a road with almost no shoulders and drop offs on either side. His theory is that if the bus slides off the road and flips over, it is better that he be alone.

Funding for BIA road maintenance has largely remained stagnant and has not even kept up with inflation in recent years. FY 2026 saw funding stay flat at \$39.19 million. This is despite that fact the BIA admits that only 16% of BIA roads are in "acceptable" condition. As a result, there is a huge backlog of repair and maintenance needs for BIA roads – estimated by the agency to be nearly \$400 million. Large land-based tribes are forced to transfer our Tribal Transportation Program (TTP) dollars to BIA road maintenance, resulting in Tribes falling farther and farther behind on tribal road preservation and improvement programs. In recent years, tens of millions of TTP construction dollars were repurposed for road maintenance but the figures are still so low that tribes and the BIA spend less than one-tenth of the amount per mile for maintenance than states and counties do. We support funding the BIA Road Maintenance program in FY 2027 at level of at least \$58 million.

BIE School Construction Funding

The Cheyenne Eagle Butte School (CEB) located on our reservation in the town of Eagle Butte is operated by the BIE and serves our students in grades kindergarten through 12. The school facility and campus is in desperate need of being replaced. The facility is over 60 years old and as early as 1993 the BIE has said that the school was unsafe and unfixable. Simply put, the school is crumbling and presenting a danger to our children, educators and staff. Our children often attend school in the winter with heavy jackets on due to a deficient and malfunctioning heating system which results in many classrooms having a temperature below 50 degrees. Mold is a major health concern at CEB as it continues to grow in latent areas and there is also asbestos exposure due to failing walls, floors and ceilings and cracks in the foundation. There is also unrepaired water damage from flooding and leaking in the roof which results in dangerous electrical hot spots. The inadequate electrical system has prevented us from placing any additional computers in classrooms – this denies our students access to the technology that is needed to succeed in the today's workforce.

We have successfully worked with the BIE to plan for a new CEB school and in November 2024 we signed a revised space allocation agreement with the BIE laying out the plans for a new school

campus. The campus will include not only a new K-12 school, but also related facilities including a student dormitory, teacher and staff housing, and an athletic stadium. Given that the total enacted BIE construction budget was only \$234 million in FY 2026 we ask that in FY 2027 funding for these critical functions be at least doubled to an amount of \$470 million.

Indian Health Service (IHS) funding

While we often hear talk in the media about the “rapid rise” in health care costs, CRST has not seen a “rapid rise” in our IHS budgets. What people often forget is our people are caught in a vicious circle caused by underfunding across the board. Poor housing leads to poor health, poor health leads to poor educational achievement, and poor educational achievement leads to a poor economy, which in turn means that fewer and fewer people can afford to address any one of the above. This is why we are so alarmed at efforts to cut IHS and other key tribal programs to address national budget deficits that are not created by us. It is one thing to cut funding for programs that are wasting money. It is another to cut programs that are already hanging by a thread, not to mention programs that are so clearly underfunded to start with – like Indian health.

One key area where more funding is sorely needed is for substance abuse prevention and treatment. We have gone from alcohol, which is still a major problem; to prescription drugs, to meth and fentanyl. We need the means to address addiction head-on, in our own community, in our own culturally sensitive facility. Treatment is most effective when it is local because local treatment allows family participation. I am therefore asking for dedicated funding for treatment facilities at Cheyenne River and in the Great Plains region for treatment and the long-term staffing of this important health care service. We do not want to see any more of our members lost to these terrible diseases, especially when new treatment programs have been shown to decrease the loss of life. To be successful, however, this facility needs to have permanent funding.

The current prohibition that has unfortunately been contained in the annual Interior appropriations acts for many years preventing tribes from using Indian Health Service (IHS) sanitation facilities construction (SFC) for new homes that are funded through U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant programs has made it more difficult for Cheyenne River and other tribes to develop new housing. While NAHASDA funds can be used for housing-related infrastructure – including water and sanitation – NAHASDA does not provide dedicated funds for that purpose. Therefore, tribes must balance their needs for additional housing and related infrastructure, like sanitation facilities, when choosing how to allocate already limited NAHASDA funds. Additionally, this makes hooking up homes to water and sanitation more complicated and costly when we have projects and areas with some HUD funded homes and some homes funded through other sources. We request the subcommittee not include this prohibition in the FY 2027 bill.

With respect to overall IHS funding, we appreciate this subcommittee’s support for enacting Advance Appropriations for IHS and for providing increases to the IHS budget. In FY 2027, we would urge you to go further and support transitioning the IHS to mandatory funding at a level of \$72 billion. This includes full amount estimates for all services, facilities and improvements needed to bring the Indian health system up to the same standards as the U.S. population. These figures were derived by the IHS National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup (NTBFWG), through tribal input from across all 12 IHS Areas.