



SPIRIT LAKE TRIBE

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**Testimony of Honorable Lonna J. Street
Chairperson, Spirit Lake Nation
Before The House Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations
Hearing On American Indian and Alaska Native Public
Witness Day 2
Wednesday, March 18th, 11:05AM
Room 2008 of the Rayburn House Office Building.**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, Rep. Fedorchak and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Bill on **the Spirit Lake Tribe's Priorities for FY 2027**.

I serve as the Chairperson of the Spirit Lake Nation. We are the Mni Waukan Dakota. Mni Waukan, means Spirit Lake, Dakota means Friends. We are the Dakota in North and South Dakota, the original homelands of our People. Our 1867 Treaty acknowledges that we are Allies of the United States of America.

Demographics of the Spirit Lake Nation

Spirit Lake Nation is a large tribe with about 8,000 tribal members and 450 square miles of reservation, land including Devil's Lake, North Dakota's largest natural lake. In our 1867 Treaty, America acknowledged that Devil's Lake was essential to our Reservation and yet, the Federal Government acquired our Lakebed for the Garrison Diversion Project. We seek the return of our Lakebed for the future of our people, our cultural heritage, our tribal homeland and our economy, which includes sport fishing and ice fishing.

Spirit Lake Reservation has a persistently high poverty rate of 27.2% of residents, mostly tribal members, compared with the 12.5% poverty rate nationally. We suffer poor health status and reduced life expectancy, only 47 years for Dakota men and 56 years for our Dakota women. Among Native Americans, the homicide rate is 4x higher according to CDC. Our statistics are always worse than the Native American national average. Poor infrastructure, unemployment, social and economic dislocation are major factors in this increased mortality.

Tribal Health Clinic—Section 105(l)

At Spirit Lake Tribe, our Treaty mandates competent physician led health care. Yet, we suffer poor health—diabetes, heart disease, violent crime including homicide, suicide, poor housing, poor nutrition, and poverty. We are moving forward with the construction of a new Health Care Clinic to improve the health care and health status. We plan to use Section 105(l) of the Indian Self-Determination Act. Spirit Lake requests that Congress keep this essential program fully funded. (Spirit Lake Tribe applied for funding under the separate Joint Venture Program but we were denied because our IHS Health Clinic plan was too basic for the reviewers).

Request for Immediate Return of Land to Spirit Lake Tribe

Since 1904, when President Teddy Roosevelt reserved the land from a surplus land sale of reservation lands, the United States held 999.5 acres of Spirit Lake Agency Reserve land for Tribal Education and Agency Purposes. Last year, the BIA returned 680 acres.

The USFWS still holds 319.5 acres of non-contiguous White Horse Hill National Game Refuge lands on the Spirit Lake Reservation (WHH Return Lands) for waterfowl breeding purposes. The lands are no longer essential to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for White Horse Hill National Game Refuge administration. We ask the Committee to direct U.S. Fish and Wildlife to return our lands, which we need for our Indian Health Clinic.

The Tiwahe Program

In Dakota language, Tiwahe (ti-wah-hay) means family in Dakota. The Tiwahe Program is a community fostered initiative that affords Indigenous leadership the opportunity to provide culturally appropriate community support for Native families by integrating tribal practices, cultural norms, values and traditions into social service programs.

Tiwahe is grounded in Tribal values and principles, which guide the goals and objectives of a coordinated service delivery model among agencies and justice systems. The Tiwahe Program provides for integration of Job Placement and Training, Social Services, Housing, Pathways to Wellness, ICWA, Tribal and Wellness Courts. We need full funding for our Spirit Lake Tiwahe Program.

Tiwahe is a bold initiative that started in 2015 with a simple idea: “... *The idea (that) we need to be bringing our services together more around serving families rather than leaving them in silos serving individuals*¹.” The Tiwahe Initiative is “*a family-centered whole-of-Government response to assist families in becoming self-governing, thriving contributors in communities*².”

In that regard, Spirit Lake’s Tiwahe Initiative is designed to empower our Tribal families, especially our children, to realize their fullest potential, protect and nurture them, and build upon their inherent dignity and strengths.

¹ Kevin Washburn, Former Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs, Testimony at the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing, 2014.

² The Native Children’s Commission Implementation Act - Discussion Draft, Section 205

Our goal is to ensure that our children can remain safe with their families whenever possible and stay connected with their culture, traditions, and their homelands of the Spirit Lake Tribe. Key Outcomes include:

Social Services

Through the Tiwahe initiative, the delivery of Social Service programs has been reorganized to more effectively address the specific needs of families, leading to a **42% reduction of children in protective care** between 2022 and 2025.

Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

Tiwahe has **expanded our workforce capacity through the addition of case workers** focused on supporting family reunification. Furthermore, Tiwahe has enhanced foster care recruitment by creating specialized **Foster Care Recruitment positions**, partnering with Spirit Lake, and expanding outreach within a 100-mile radius of tribal boundaries.

The Tiwahe program brings together Federal and tribal programs to provide better support for families, improves employment opportunities for economically challenged workers, improves social service support, and keeping families together reduces the need for foster care. The purpose of the Tiwahe Program is to extend comprehensive support services to Native children and families in need of assistance through employment, housing, drug courts, rehabilitation, education opportunity, and cultural traditions. At Spirit Lake Nation, we embrace our Dakota traditions, culture and language. And, as we fashion “Tiwahe”—Native family type programs, we are kind to our children, and we work to fashion tribal programs that support safe homes, strong families, and healthy children.

TIWAHE allows for healing by returning our Dakota People to our traditional values of WoDakota, a loving, nurturing family and community. Bringing the recovering person back to the sacred circle provides an opportunity for a return to the person’s sense of self, sense of true family and community, and we find that our people rejoin the community as a respected person of his or her community and family and the success is found in a restored balance in sober life. Prayer circles, cultural ceremonies are important to restoring the cultural identity, family and community connections.

The Tiwahe Program should be enacted as a nationwide program to serve all Indian nations and the important reforms of the “**Native Children’s Commission Implementation Act**” are essential to save this generation of Native Youth.

BIA Law Enforcement Compact, DOJ Block Grants and Master Plan for Public Safety

DOJ explains, Tribal police are “critical to resolving criminal cases because they discover the crime, interview witnesses, and understand the circumstances.” In FY 2026, the House proposed \$771 Million for BIA/Tribal Law Enforcement. The final FY 2026 funding was less than \$600 Million. Please secure funding of \$950 Million for FY 2027. We need the funding to save lives. We will be 638 Self-Governance Compacting our Tribal law enforcement this year, and we need Tribal Police Officers. *We had a young lady who was out walking along the lake,*

and coyotes threatened her, so she went into the freezing water. BIA police were slow in responding, although she placed an emergency called, and she drowned by the time they got there. We need help—enactment of an Indian Country Violent Crime Fighting Act with the Secretary of the Interior and the U.S. Attorney General as co-chairs with Tribal Leaders—basically codifying President Trump’s Lady Justice Task Force. We need Joint BIA—DOJ funding for Annual Tribal Master Law Enforcement Plans.

Safe BIE School Roads and Equal Education Opportunity

At Spirit Lake, we need help with our BIE Tate Topa School Road. Tate Topa is our children’s school, our chance for educational opportunity, yet the road to our school is so bad it destroys our school buses and family vehicles. We need \$2 Million to repair our BIE Tate Topa School Road. Tate Topa Tribal School is a Tribally Controlled Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school located on the Spirit Lake Reservation. We currently serve 443 K–8 students. As our student enrollment continues to grow, our available space is no longer adequate. For example, we will need to add another kindergarten classroom next year, but no available space exists to accommodate this need. Several essential programs—including our FACE program, alternative classroom, G/T services, and a middle school culture classroom—are currently housed in portable units outside our main building. We need a new roof and major building upgrades to provide our students with an equal education opportunity. As tribes, we should be eligible for impact aid funding to pay for classroom instruction.

American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services

In FY 2027, the United States and Indian nations must join together to promote the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services with:

- **Increased funding** to serve growing numbers of Native adults with disabilities.
- **More VR counselors and job-placement specialists**, especially those trained in culturally grounded rehabilitation.
- **Stronger partnerships with local employers** to create job pathways in Tribal and regional economies.
- **Transportation solutions** for clients in rural and remote areas.
- **Expanded training and technical assistance** for Tribal VR staff (grant management, case management, cultural best practices).
- **Support for wrap around services** (housing, mental health, substance-use recovery) that affect employment outcomes.

To serve People with disabilities, we need our Special Education Programs and AIVRS Program.

Conclusion

We thank Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree and Representative Fedorchak for supporting Indian Self-Determination.