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TESTIMONY OF DOREEN LEAVITT
SECRETARY AND DIRECTOR OF NATURAL RESOURCES
IñUPITAT COMMUNITY OF THE ARCTIC SLOPE

Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Regarding the FY 2027 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and the Bureau of
Land Management (BLM) Budgets

March 18, 2026

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS), I want to thank you for this important opportunity to testify on our appropriations priorities for Fiscal Year (FY) 2027.

ICAS is one of two federally recognized regional Alaska Native tribal governments in Alaska that operates under a federally approved constitution pursuant to the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 (25 U.S.C. 461 et seq). Since August 26, 1971, ICAS has provided direct support to our Tribal members directly through shared program administration and indirectly by creating social service programs and economic development opportunities that benefit more than 13,478 ICAS tribal members, about half of whom are also dually enrolled in the Village Tribes of Anaktuvuk Pass, Atkasuk, Barrow, Kaktovik, Nuiqsut, Point Hope, Point Lay, and Wainwright.

Like most Tribes in Alaska, ICAS is a landless Tribe. Yet, our service delivery area is larger than the State of Minnesota. Being the regional Alaska Native tribal government located in America's arctic, ICAS is often faced with unique obstacles - weather, location, a changing landscape, reliance on planes and barges to ship in basic supplies and food, lack of reliable broadband infrastructure, workforce and housing shortages, and much more. All of these obstacles make economic and infrastructure development challenging. For this reason, ICAS strategically and creatively uses the federal funding provided to the Tribe to support the needs of ICAS Tribal members. While we do our best, federal funding always falls short forcing ICAS to offset these shortages by seeking burdensome grant programs, which puts an enormous strain on the limited workforce we have access to.

When preparing funding for tribal governments for FY 2027, ICAS urges you to consider the challenges Tribes in Alaska face as outlined below.

I. Fully Fund the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

For the past 30+ years, ICAS has received little to no increases in our federal funding. And of the funding we receive, there is often not enough dollars to make an impact on our community beyond

paying salaries, or portions thereof, for staff who are doing the best they can with the limited resources available to them. As you will hear from every Tribal government, when the BIA falls short, the federal trust responsibility falls to Tribes to deliver federal services to its members. With the resources Congress provided to us to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, ICAS strategically bolstered our governance infrastructure, improved the delivery of our services, and hired additional staff to manage the increased workload. However, this funding will run out by the end of this year forcing ICAS to look for innovative ways to offset our revenue. Fulfilling the federal trust responsibility should not be our sole responsibility. Your trust obligation requires you to provide meaningful services to our people and we need your support to find long-term solutions to chronic underfunding.

II. Increase Funding for Social Services and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

ICAS supports the requests of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) and the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC) to fully fund programs authorized by ICWA. This funding is critical to supporting the next generation of ICAS families that struggle with economic, social, mental, and physical health ailments. With high mortality rates in our Arctic communities because of these challenges, our funding is not enough to provide the critical services our youth and families need. Currently, ICAS currently only receives enough funding to pay our employees serving one of our eight Village Tribes - Point Lay. If we truly want to put an end to intergenerational trauma, Congress must dedicate additional dollars to support these families.

III. Provide Resources that Supports the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) to Address its Significant Backlog of Probate Cases

DOI has reported that it has a backlog of more than 48,000 unresolved Tribal probate cases. This backlog has real consequences for ICAS Tribal members. Unresolved probate cases create barriers to housing and economic development in a place where housing is already limited and economic development proves challenging. According to a report prepared by the North Slope Borough, there is an estimated 225 probate-affected homes across our region. In five of our eight Village Tribes - Anaktuvuk Pass, Kaktovik, Nuiqsut, Point Lay, and Barrow - 15.6 percent of all housing units are tied up in probate and therefore unavailable. With the current federal process taking ten to fifteen years, these delays not only limit housing options, but lead to substantial financial losses through forgone rental income, accelerated physical deterioration, and necessary protective heating and maintenance, amounting to an estimated \$7 million per year. Additionally, because construction costs often exceed \$600,000–\$700,000 per housing unit, it is extremely difficult to replace these much-needed units. While DOI has suggested that it will use AI to address its backlog, we know that this alone will not resolve every case. Additional funding is needed to support judges, probate specialists, records management, and modernize case processing systems to reduce the backlog and ensure that cases are resolved in a timely manner.

IV. Increase Funding for Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) to Keep Our Remote Communities Safe

Alaska Native communities face unique public safety challenges due to their geographic isolation, limited law enforcement presence, and the vast areas that must be covered by a small number of

officers. In many of our villages, there is no permanent state or local police presence, and the nearest law enforcement officer may be hours away by air. The Village Public Safety Officer Program (VPSO) is therefore a critical lifeline for our communities. VPSOs serve as first responders to emergencies, provide basic law enforcement support, assist in search and rescue, respond to fires, and help address public safety concerns that would otherwise go unanswered. Their presence saves lives and provides a measure of safety and stability for communities that would otherwise face unacceptable gaps in emergency response.

Despite the essential role VPSOs play, the program remains significantly underfunded relative to the need across rural and remote Alaska. Many authorized VPSO positions remain vacant due to limited funding for recruitment, training, salaries, housing, and equipment. Increasing federal investment in the VPSO program would help Tribal organizations recruit and retain officers, expand coverage to villages that currently lack protection, and ensure that VPSOs have the tools necessary to respond effectively to emergencies. For Alaska Native communities, strengthening the VPSO program is not simply a funding request—it is a matter of basic public safety and the federal government’s responsibility to support safe and thriving Tribal communities.

V. Include Language in Pub.L. 118-42 Which Requires the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to Consult with Tribes

The success of economic development projects in America’s arctic, including, but not limited to, oil, gas, and mineral development, largely depend on BLM’s permitting and approval process. When I testified last year, I noted that in recent years, BLM has failed to engage in meaningful consultation with Alaska Native Tribal governments when it comes to development projects within our traditional homelands. We are encouraged that this administration has taken a different approach. BLM officials have visited our community and have been open to working with us. To ensure that BLM continues to work with ICAS, we encourage you to include language that you included in the explanatory statement for the Interior-Environment bill in FY 2024 (P.L. 118-42) that specifically directs BLM to consult with Tribal governments:

Consultation.—Prior to the finalization of the Proposed Rule for Management and Protection of the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (Fed. Register Number 2023-18990), the Committees direct the Secretary to consider engaging in additional meaningful, in-person consultations with any federally recognized Tribes and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act Corporations affected by the proposed rule.

VI. Ensure that DOI Has Adequate Resources and Staff to Implement the Interagency Agreements (IAAs) Entered into with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)

ICAS is proud to operate the only Tribal College and University (TCU) in Alaska - the Qargi Academy Tribal School, an independent school formed under ICAS law and located in one of ICAS’ eight Village Tribes - the Village of Wainwright. Qargi Academy hires local educators who serve as culture bearers, facilitate learning, and manage daily operations in the Inupiat language and based on Iñupiat culture and ways of being and attracts students who have not been successful

in the public school system or who desire an education based in the Inupiat language, culture and ways of being.

With the recent IAAs entered into with ED, DOIs, and DOL, intended to strengthen coordination across federal agencies so that Tribal students and schools can better access federal education, workforce development, and career training programs, this Subcommittee must ensure that DOI, and BIE in particular, has adequate funding, staffing, and technical capacity to effectively implement the agreements. For many Tribal communities, particularly those in rural and remote regions such as Alaska, navigating multiple federal systems can be complex and resource intensive. However, without adequate personnel and operational support, BIE will struggle to effectively coordinate these programs and ensure that Tribal schools and students receive the full benefit of the partnership envisioned in the agreement. In addition, ICAS requests this Subcommittee to consider its role in the implementation of the IAAs. As I testified last year, due to the “Steven’s rider” codified at 25 U.S.C. 292b, ICAS is prohibited from utilizing BIE funds to provide education to our members. We must ensure that any transfer of funds, authorities, and programs do not negatively impact the limited ED and DOL funds that we can use simply because they are being administered by BIE.