

Fort Belknap Indian Community

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Fort Belknap Indian Community
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Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Elected to administer the affairs of the community and
to represent the Assiniboine and the Gros Ventre
Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Chief of Police Joshua Roberge
Fort Belknap Indian Community

Testimony on Examining the Trump Administration's Work Combating Transnational Cartels in Indian Country

July 22, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Dexter, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Joshua Roberge and I serve as the Chief of Police of the Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) Nations of the Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC). I am a Member of the Assiniboine Nation and appreciate the opportunity to testify about our work combating transnational drug cartels on the Fort Belknap Reservation.

Transnational drug cartels are assaulting our Reservation, our communities, and our families with chemical warfare. Our families and youth are suffering from a plague of drug use, violent crime, human trafficking, and sex abuse. We are easy pickings. Cartel members blend into our communities, make a huge profit margin, and we lack the law enforcement personnel and resources to root them out.

Our Reservation is in north central Montana and is rural, remote, and isolated. We are forty miles south of the Canadian border. We are a large land base tribe. Our Reservation includes about 652,000 acres and is almost as large as the State of Rhode Island. We have nearly 7,000 members living on or near our Reservation.

Our police force is on the front line. **We have a total of seven patrol officers which means about 2 officers per shift patrolling a Reservation the size of a small state.** While we appreciate the focus on immigration and drug enforcement in Congress and in the Trump Administration, we need four times the funding and double the number of police officers on our Reservation. Without funding increases and the resources our officers need, we are losing the battle. We invite you to visit our homeland and see the battle we are fighting firsthand.

Trump Administration's Work Combating Transnational Cartels

In the past 10 years we saw a steady and frightening increase in transnational cartels flooding our Reservation and much of Indian Country with illegal and dangerous drugs. As a result, our Reservation and much of Indian Country experienced significant increases in drug use and violent crime. This includes human trafficking, murder, domestic violence, child abuse, suicide, and sexual abuse. This impacted Indian Country in a negative way and completely changed most communities. We are still working to recover our families and communities.

The Trump Administration's focus on law enforcement and border security has helped. We have seen the effects that securing our northern and southern borders can have on the flow of drugs into our communities. Since we last testified on drug cartels about a year ago, we have seen some recent improvements, but we are still fighting the war on drugs with limited funds and resources.

With the Trump Administration's focus on arresting and deporting members of transnational drug cartels as well as efforts to secure the northern and southern borders, we are finally seeing some reduction in drug trafficking and distribution. Thanks to these efforts, drug activity on our Reservation has gone down from an "elevated" state to a more "neutral" state. Dangerous drugs such as methamphetamine and fentanyl are still being trafficked to Indian Country and the cash is still flowing back to Mexico but in slightly lower quantities.

In addition, the cartels seem to have pulled back some. They seem to be more prevalent in larger cities and towns as opposed to everywhere. However, our young men and women are still being recruited on social media and through interpersonal networks with the promise of making a name for themselves and getting rich. This comes at the grave cost of never "getting out of the game" or death.

This is especially problematic on Indian reservations like ours where unemployment rates are extremely high. The unemployment rate on our Reservation is around 30 percent. Our Reservation is rural and remote. Agriculture is our primary economic asset and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) does not have the funding to maintain its irrigation project on our Reservation. We lack resource rich assets like oil and gas, or income-producing enterprises such as casinos, but we still need jobs and opportunities for our youth.

Without these opportunities, our youth often turn to dangerous drugs and dangerous lifestyles promising a quick return. With the drug supply slowing down at the borders, we are seeing an increase in prices on our Reservation and in rural areas in Indian Country. For example, an individual can go to a large urban area like Seattle, Washington and purchase a fentanyl pill for fifty cents. After purchasing fentanyl for cheap, that individual can then return to a rural Tribal community and sell that same pill for \$60 to \$100. At these prices, even with supply slowing down, the drug business is still very profitable.

This is an extremely personal issue for the Fort Belknap Indian Community and families across Indian Country. We all have family members and know people who are suffering from drug

abuse and violent crime. Many of us have drug abuse in our homes. Where there is drug abuse and addiction, abuse and violent crime can happen at any moment.

Congress and the Administration Must Provide the Funding Needed on the Frontlines

Our Reservation and reservations across Indian Country are on the frontlines of the war against transnational drug cartels, but our police force is chronically underfunded. Congress and the Administration are not providing the funding we need to win this war. Our Reservation is overrun with dangerous drugs and violent crime. As noted above, we are easy pickings. Indian Country is another entry point for drugs into the United States. Congress and the Administration must finally provide the funding and resources needed by BIA and Tribal law enforcement.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act should have included the funding we need to fight transnational drug cartels on our frontline Reservation. The Act includes about \$170 billion for immigration and border enforcement but leaves BIA and Tribal law enforcement behind. We know that this funding for immigration and border enforcement will help to slow the flow of drugs, but we need base funding added to BIA and Tribal law enforcement to get more boots on the ground.

Congress could have doubled our law enforcement budget and doubled our ability to fight the drug cartels on our Reservation with about \$1 billion. If Congress provided all 574 federally recognized Indian tribes with a \$1 million increase in law enforcement funding, that \$574 million would have still only been 0.3 percent of the \$170 billion provided for immigration and border enforcement. This would have been a drop in the bucket for the Federal government, but would have had a significant impact on our ability to fight drug cartels on our Reservation.

Grant funding is also not the answer. Congress and the Administration must secure increases in base funding for BIA and Tribal law enforcement. We cannot staff and run law enforcement for an area the size of a small state with intermittent grant funding or one-time end of the fiscal year funding. At current base funding levels, our BIA and Tribal law enforcement are forced to fight the drug cartels with one hand tied behind our back.

In the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Indian tribes only have access to the \$450 million that was provided for Operation Stonegarden (OPSG) and, even then, tribes are forced to go through state governments to get this funding. OPSG provides funding to state, local, and Tribal law enforcement agencies to support border enforcement. However, only State Administrative Agencies are eligible applicants and local units of government, including Indian tribes, may apply to the State Administrative Agencies for funding.

Grant funding and state “pass-through” funding does not fulfill the United States Treaty and trust obligations to FBIC and Indian tribes generally. We paid for law enforcement services upfront through the vast lands and resources FBIC ceded to the United States in Treaty. We do not have a government-to-government relationship with state governments. We have a government-to-government relationship with the Federal government. The state governments have no obligation to ensure that Indian tribes get their share of this funding.

Grant funding also requires FBIC and other tribes to staff and maintain grant writing professionals. We should not have to pay grant writing professionals to get the funding the United States owes to us in Treaty. Grant funding is also unpredictable. We cannot rely on grant awards in the middle of a war with drug cartels. Our Tribal police officers work long shifts, often alone in remote areas, and suffer from burnout. Transnational drug cartels have the personnel, funding, and resources to out gun us.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act was an opportunity to put funding to battle drug cartels where it was needed most. We recognize that there are many needs and many officers at work. Immigration and border enforcement has helped, but Congress and the Administration cannot forget the frontlines on Indian reservations.

Increased Funding is Needed for Law Enforcement Not Budget Cuts

With the focus on law enforcement, drug enforcement, and border security, we expected the Trump Administration to propose increases in Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 funding for BIA and Tribal law enforcement. We were shocked to see the President's proposed budget include a \$107 million reduction to streamline Tribal law enforcement programs and reduce so-called redundancies. As the Chief of Police at Fort Belknap, I am forced to make difficult choices regarding staffing, equipment, and resources to protect our Reservation and communities. Making a small budget even smaller for the sake of efficiency is counterintuitive and will hurt our law enforcement efforts.

Currently, FBIC has nine certified law enforcement officers to protect a reservation the size of Rhode Island. Since the last time we testified on drug cartels, we have had an increase of one law enforcement officer. Seven of our nine officers are patrol officers, and we typically have only two officers on patrol at a given time. FBIC needs at least double the number of officers to protect the community.

We have three new hires that are currently attending the BIA police academy in the southwest. We are all praying that these new hires complete training, clear background checks, come to work on the Reservation and stay with us long term. We also need a new BIA police academy in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain region. It is difficult for our new recruits to travel all the way to the southwest to get trained. And it is difficult for us to retain officers that are from other areas. We need to home grow our own law enforcement.

We appreciate the recent action by the House Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations to approve an increase in BIA's law enforcement budget by 39 percent over FY 2025. The increase provided by the Subcommittee will support our law enforcement on the frontlines of this war. The President's proposed \$170 million cut to Tribal public safety would have devastated our ability to fight the drug cartels. We ask that the full House support the funding level provided by the Subcommittee and that Congress pass a budget that supports tribal law enforcement efforts.

We also ask that the Committee exercise its oversight authority over BIA's funding of P.L. 93-638 contracts for law enforcement. In our experience, BIA prioritizes funding for the law

enforcement that it provides directly as opposed to law enforcement that is contracted under P.L. 93-638. For example, in 1997, BIA provided \$1.2 million to FBIC to administer law enforcement under a P.L. 93-638 contract. In 2023, *27 years later*, BIA has only increased this amount to \$1.3 million. An increase of \$100,000 over 27 years. This small increase has not allowed us to keep up with rising salaries and the resources our officers need.

For P.L. 93-638 self-determination contracts to be successful, there needs to be adequate and consistent funding. Adequate and consistent funding will allow for more law enforcement officers to keep our communities safe. P.L. 93-638 self-determination contracts are supposed to allow Tribes the opportunity to provide for their own police departments and other public safety services through federal contracts. This allows Tribes to customize solutions to fit their communities, but for P.L. 93-638 contracts to be truly successful and allow true self-determination they must be adequately funded.

To be successful, FBIC needs four times the amount of funding. This small amount would have a huge impact. We appreciate the one-time funding from the Department of the Interior when funds are available, however it is not sustainable and FBIC cannot hire additional officers based on temporary funding increases. Additional law enforcement funding needs to be part of the base amount to ensure we can hire more officers.

Jurisdiction Fixes Are Necessary to Combat Cartels

Having additional funding and law enforcement officers is not enough when Tribal law enforcement does not have the authority to arrest and convict those who bringing illegal drugs into our communities. Supreme Court rulings and laws passed by Congress have made jurisdiction in Indian Country very complicated and cartels have the knowledge on how to exploit those loopholes. Restoring full tribal criminal jurisdiction over our Reservation is vital to ensure that Tribal governments can protect Tribal communities from non-Indian offenders, like drug cartel members.

On our Reservation and across Indian Country, there is a strong correlation between drug use and violent crime. We need the authority to make arrests and enforce the law for these crimes on our Reservation no matter who the perpetrator is. Just like the tribal jurisdictional provisions included in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), we need our jurisdiction restored so that we can enforce the law across our Reservation. The longer Tribal law enforcement continues to operate without the necessary authority to enforce the law against all perpetrators, Indian and non-Indian, the longer our Reservation will be a home base for drug cartels to operate on United States soil.

FBIC strongly supports the Protection for Reservation Occupants against Trafficking and Evasive Communications Today (PROTECT) Act of 2025 (H.R. 3773 and S. 1967). The PROTECT Act would be an important step in allowing Tribal law enforcement greater access and jurisdiction to combat threats from cartels, traffickers, and other violent and drug-related offenders that target reservations. The PROTECT Act would include “drug trafficking and related offenses” as well as “firearms offenses” if used in drug trafficking crimes under Special Tribal Criminal

Jurisdiction. The PROTECT Act would allow us to enforce the law across our Reservation against all perpetrators.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration's focus on immigration and border security is just the beginning. We are seeing some improvements in the flow of drugs, but more is needed for the Fort Belknap Indian Community to win the war against transnational drug cartels on our Reservation. We need to four times the base funding in our law enforcement budget and we need Congress to restore our jurisdiction over our Reservation. FBIC is dedicated to ensuring the safety of our people and we are ready to work with Congress and the Administration to provide for the safety of our people, children, and communities that was guaranteed in our Treaty with the United States.