

OPENING STATEMENT

Good morning and thank you to our witnesses for being here to testify at this hearing.

Today we will be examining a report released by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights entitled *Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans*.

This report shines a bright light on what leaders and advocates from Indian Country have been telling us for years:

That the federal programs designed to support the social and economic well-being of Native Americans are woefully and chronically underfunded.

The Federal government's trust responsibility charges us with supporting the general welfare of tribes, protecting their lands and resources, and promoting tribal self-governance.

The trust responsibility originally arose out of hundreds of treaties ratified by the U.S. in which we agreed to provide "all proper care and protection" to Tribes in return for the seizure and occupation of **their** land.

This responsibility is based on Tribes' status as sovereign political entities with guaranteed rights.

This responsibility is enshrined in statute, in jurisprudence, and in Article II of the U.S. Constitution.

This responsibility is **not being met**.

The programs we are examining today are not some sort of special treatment for tribes. These aren't handouts.

They are our **legal responsibility**, solemnly agreed upon by both Tribes and the Federal Government.

The report we are looking at today isn't even the first time the Federal government has received this wake up call: the *Broken Promises* report was commissioned as an update to a 2003 report documenting huge unmet need in Indian Country.

The *Broken Promises* report confirms that little has changed, and that the stakes of our failure are extraordinarily high.

Native Americans continue to rank near or at the bottom of all Americans in terms of health, education, and employment.

They are victims of violent crime at rates two times the national average.

Native Americans have long experienced negative health disparities relative to other Americans, including lower life expectancy and higher rates of disease, depression and suicide.

Native American students have less access to educational opportunities, lack experienced teachers, and have the highest dropout rate of any racial or ethnic group.

There are also huge gaps in affordable housing, modern infrastructure, and economic development opportunities.

Chronic underfunding in Indian Country also has less obvious consequences.

Underfunding means staffing shortages at hospitals, schools and agencies like BIA, IHS, BIE, HUD, and DOJ.

Less people to administer programs means longer wait times for funds to be released, and less accountability for the funds that are allocated.

Simply put - underfunding these programs reduces their capacity to fulfill their core mission.

The *Broken Promises* report is comprehensive in scope, but it boils down to one fundamental issue: the federal government must do more to live up to its responsibility.

It is true that some of the programs have received small year-to-year increases, but rarely has funding kept up with inflation or population growth.

The end result is that the “actual” funding for most of these programs has been decreasing steadily for decades.

I want to thank the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for their tireless work on this report and for providing us with a blueprint to change this shameful reality.

I and this Subcommittee are committed to working to change this legacy of neglect and failure.

Moving forward, I call on the Administration and on Congress to have the fortitude and the political will to make these programs a priority and to provide adequate funding that will allow Indian Country not only to survive, but to **thrive**.

I would now like to recognize the Ranking Member for any opening remarks.