

Final Opening Statement
Chair Teresa Leger Fernández
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Hybrid Legislative Hearing on *H.R. 5444*

Today, we've listened with tears in our eyes, and purpose in our heart to tragic stories of the treatment of young Native American children, who were torn from their parents, torn from their culture, torn from their homelands, and forced into conditions that would be decried as torture today.

The generations of young children who suffered this tortuous treatment had done nothing more than be borne to Native American families and tribal members.

Congress played a role in this in 1819 when it passed the Indian Civilization Fund Act to appropriate funds to church-run schools to quote 'civilize' American Indian and Alaska Native children. By 1925, 60,889 American Indian and Alaska Native children were forcibly taken to Indian boarding schools.

Our own country allowed children to die in federally funded schools. At least 53 burial sites for Indigenous children in marked and unmarked graves exist across this country.

Yesterday, the Department of Interior released a report that confirmed that the United States directly used federal Indian boarding schools as a system to dispossess tribes. 76

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schools were in present-day Oklahoma, 47 in Arizona, and 43 in my own state of New Mexico. The *Report* further calls for an investigation on the legacy impacts of federal Indian boarding schools.

It is undeniable that these events have led to intergenerational trauma. American Indian and Alaska Native children experience post-traumatic stress disorder rates at the same rate as veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course they do, they suffered this harm as young children, torn from their families.

H.R. 5444 will establish a much-needed Commission to formally investigate and document the stories of survivors, and human rights violations that occurred against American Indian, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

This bill also includes a nationwide hotline service for survivors, family members and other community members. H.R. 5444 will focus on the historical and intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities.

Again, I want to thank the witnesses, especially the survivors here today, for sharing their deeply powerful and personal experiences.