

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF SANDRA M. LEWIS, TRIBAL COUNCIL RECORDER

LITTLE RIVER BAND OF OTTAWA INDIANS

**BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR
ENVIRONMENT and RELATED AGENCIES CONCERNING THE PRESIDENT'S
FY2019 BUDGET REQUEST**

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 9, 2018

Chairman Calvert, Respected Members of the Committee:

I am Sandra Lewis, Tribal Council Recorder of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians. I am honored to present this testimony on behalf of my nation, regarding our views and priorities for the fiscal year 2019 President's Annual Budget Request.

I would like to begin by thanking this Committee for the continued respect of our native sovereign nations and particularly for prioritizing funding for Indian Country in 2018. While it seems that there is never enough to meet the needs of our people, we recognize your efforts to honor the treaty obligations. We are grateful that the proposed cuts to programs in both the BIA and the IHS did not take place in 2018. We ask for similar consideration related to the President's 2019 budget. We call on Congress to reject the currently proposed cuts, which include cutting more than fifteen percent from the BIA's budget and the reduction or elimination of many of the most impactful programs for us.

I am certain I echo the testimony of several other nations when I commend the proposed increase to IHS. Further, we request the 2019 budget address the important issue of contract support costs. Congress sent a clear message to the administration related to this funding, but the Tribes have yet to see IHS act. I believe we all recognize the need to address health concerns and specifically we are heartened by Congress and the administration's evolving attitude toward funding programs related to substance abuse and mental health programs. However, when grant programs are not considered in the calculation of contract support costs the Tribes pay the price. Covering administrative costs for programs by cutting in to other vital programs.

Furthermore, while we applaud the increase in funding to address the opioid crisis, it is important to recognize the funding is largely targeting the problem after it has already manifested and destroyed members of our community. Focusing our funding on health care and substance abuse programs ignores the root cause of this problem. Proposed cuts and elimination to the funding of several BIA programs compounds the issue.

As a Tribal Councilor of a tribe with self-governance compacts with the Interior and IHS, I share similar responsibilities to the members of this committee—as a body we create Tribal law and manage the budget for our tribe. We as legislators, sit in a unique position to create policy

for future generations. We look at our budget and program development as investments. We are trying to build a strong foundation for our nation, because without that foundation our programs will fall. At Little River, we recognize common goals and we aim to benefit both our tribal citizens and our local communities. The work of the programs the administration is proposing to cut at the BIA is not done. We are not done.

We are working through historical trauma and it takes a generation of dedicated time and funding to reap the rewards of these programs. I speak from experience when I tell you that twenty-four years after federal recognition, we are just now beginning to see our hard work pay off. We are seeing our Tribal programs for buying school clothes, laptops, book stipends, and education funding become Tribal Members returning to our homeland as professionals. We hired our first Little River citizen attorney in 2016 and this year we will have a citizen medical student interning in our clinic.

A long-term solution for the substance abuse issues that plague many communities like ours is a commitment to programs that create opportunity and an alternate path. The President's budget proposes to eliminate programs for housing improvement and education, including job placement and training programs. The proposal also includes severe reductions to social services, rights protection, roads and transportation programs, and infrastructure grants. Moreover, this administration that speaks a good game of supporting law and order has proposed cuts to our law enforcement and Tribal Courts funding.

All of this is information you already have in front of you, so I would now like to speak in specifics about my nation and what we are trying to do for our people and our community.

While the overall increase to IHS funding is a good start the concern about contract support cost funding lingers. In addition to this issue, the proposed budget has eliminated the funding to Community Health Representatives and Health Education. These are critical services that allow our Clinic to understand our population and what they need. In addition to this, grant programs that include transportation costs are vital to reaching our citizens.

We have taken our commitment to education a step beyond what federal funding would allow us and by seeking and winning local grants, we have been able to open an early childhood development center: The Next Generation Learning Center provides much needed childcare and early childhood education options for a rural community that struggles to meet this need. While we hope to build this venture into self-sufficiency, a new small business takes time and investment. Federal funding of programs allows the Tribe to focus on efforts like Next Generation.

We also focus on historical preservation of our culture and language because we believe it has a lot to teach our citizens and the United States. We include traditional medicine in our healing practices. We encourage federal programs, specifically addressing substance abuse, to allow for the freedom to embrace culturally relevant teachings. Recognition of religious practices and native languages builds pride in our community and affirms who our people are. This heals generations of trauma. In managing our IHS funds, we look to the whole person: the spirit, the

emotion, and the physical. We recognize the cycle of sickness and dependency. In the last year, we have been able to expand our offered services to include tele-psychiatry and we have opened a tribal pharmacy. Funding, especially contract support cost funding, is vital for the administration of these programs. We are in a rural area and services like this are limited—the cost to run these programs runs at a premium and requires constant funding of contract support costs.

Promotion of our homeland through programs and services happens in two major ways. The first is through providing housing and services in our trust land. The new proposed budget cuts native housing programs drastically through cuts to the BIA programs and through HUD's housing block grants and housing loan guarantee programs. Our Tribal Council has committed to building quality housing for our community—in the last two years we have built twelve new homes and are on track to build two more homes this summer and are beginning plans for a complex for our Tribal Elders. The Tribe has consistently sought additional grant funding and applied for a tax credit program to alleviate some of the reliance on federal programs. Being a rural community puts us at a disadvantage when it comes to the tax credit program and to date, no tribe in Michigan has been successful when applying. We have waiting lists for every type of housing we offer. We cannot imagine our housing situation is unique compared to other tribes across the nation and urge Congress to reject any cuts to the costs of housing programs.

The second way we promote our homeland is through our natural resource management and preservation. The Tribe works with the state of Michigan, tribes, and other organizations to protect our waters and promote the return of native fish and wild rice. The connection of our people to the water is a spiritual connection. As people, we are made of water and we rely on water to sustain our life. The water does not discriminate; it does not make distinction of race, religion, or politics. Our belief is that it is a living spirit supporting us all and this should be honored and respected. We agree with the President's budget request that includes an increase for the Clean Water State Revolving fund but the proposed cut to the Great Lakes Restoration Fund should be rejected. All Michigan Tribes take our stewardship of the Great Lakes very seriously. It is one of the United State's greatest resources. The health and future of the Great Lakes has never been more important—it is the largest collection of freshwater in the world and we are blessed to be able to protect it. We require Congress's assistance to continue this effort.

Lastly, our protection of our land also includes protection of our people. As you are aware, the ability for the increase of criminal jurisdiction over non-tribal citizens addresses a critical need for justice in the native community. However, that justice comes at a price because the program for jurisdiction extension requires the traditional tribal court to change. The emphasis on law trained judges and funded defense for indigent offenders is supported but not easily achieved. For example, we are currently working on a public defense program, we have proposed legislation for a Victims Bill of Rights Ordinance, and any changes to our court system will require a constitutional amendment. These changes come at significant expense for the Tribe—both in attracting candidates and in educating our citizens.

Little River Band appreciates the opportunity to present this testimony to the Committee on these important matters. I am happy to answer any questions the Members of the Committee may have.

KchiMiigwech (Many Thanks)
Gdagaanaagaanik (All Our Relations)