

**TESTIMONY OF JASON T. SCHLENDER**

**VICE CHAIRMAN, LAC COURTE OREILLES BAND OF LAKE SUPERIOR CHIPPEWA  
INDIANS**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on  
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

**Regarding the FY 2019 BIA and IHS Budgets, May 10, 2018**

Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member McCollum, thank you and the other distinguished members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians ("Lac Courte Oreilles"). Lac Courte Oreilles is a large tribe with 8,014 members. Our 77,000-acre Reservation is held in trust by the United States. We are responsible for a large land area over which we exercise limited governmental authority and control, in conjunction with the United States. Due in part to our remote location, there are few job opportunities available for tribal members. While unemployment in Sawyer County, which is in Wisconsin, is only 8 percent while ours remains close to 24 percent. The lack of adequate roads, reliable communications systems, and other necessary infrastructure continues to be a barrier in our economic development at Lac Courte Oreilles. The budget appropriation process is a major path through which the United States fulfills its trust responsibility and holds true to its obligations to Indian tribes. To that end, we request that your Subcommittee provide the necessary funding for these programs to function at an optimum level.

Please understand that our community is in a state of emergency because of the abuse of methamphetamine, heroin and other opiates. This epidemic is a burden on our tribal budget and drains the funding received by the United States. The resolution to this issue should be a collective one and that's why these requests are about mutual assistance as well obligations to tribal nations.

**BIA: Indian Child Welfare Act.** *Increase appropriations to the Indian Child Welfare Act grant program to \$20 million.*

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was a response to a crisis affecting American Indian families. Findings revealed that state and private child welfare agencies were steadily removing Indian children from their homes, and communities at an astounding rate, often without due process and under questionable circumstances. To prevent these troubling practices, which unfortunately still occur today, Congress enacted protections to Indian families in state child welfare and judicial systems under ICWA. It also recognizes the authority of tribal nations to provide child welfare services and adjudicate child welfare matters. ICWA authorized grant programs to fund child welfare services on or near reservations and for ICWA support in off reservation, urban Indian programs.

ICWA was passed in 1978, Congress estimated that between \$26 million–\$62 million would be required to fully fund tribal child welfare programs on or near reservations. Even after an important FY 2015 increase as part of the Tiwaha Initiative, current funding levels fall far short of this estimate—especially after adjusting for inflation. This funding must be reinstated.

The Lac Courte Oreilles ICW program is habitually underfunded. The lack of funding puts our program at a disadvantage and we cannot compete with state agencies that can offer a more competitive wage.

**BIA: Wildlife & Parks Program.** *Increase appropriations to \$10 million*

This program supports the mission of fulfilling Indian trust responsibilities by enabling tribes to meaningfully exercise their treaty fishing, hunting, and gathering rights. Funding is provided to tribes to fund tribal activities in the areas of fisheries, wildlife, outdoor recreation, tribal youth initiatives in natural resources. Lac Courte Oreilles realizes that our natural resources are key to maintaining strong health and wellness and our inextricably linked in battling addictions and common afflictions that deteriorate our natural human condition.

The lack of funding received from this program has left the human resources depleted when it comes to conservation, and wildlife enforcement, assessment, and regulation. The request for additional funding would help Lac Courte Oreilles with infrastructure and human resource development.

**Bureau of Indian Education.** *Increase appropriations to the BIE to \$ 890 million.*

The Band operates the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe School. Our school serves an average of 270 children from pre-K through 12th grade. Our students come from very low-income households; more than 90% of our students qualify for free or reduced rate lunches. We rely on federal funds from both the Interior Department and Education Department to run this school. The high school graduation rates for LCO were 84% in 2016-17, but are still well-below state-wide rates. We have always been limited by a dearth of resources. Past federal funding for education has never kept pace with need. The School staff are underpaid and the lack of funding leaves the school with limited options to reward staff with wage increases.

We very much appreciate the funding available in education for FY 2018, but we are deeply disturbed by the President's request to cut funding by \$143 million. This would be a major step back in the process to achieve top notch educational results for tribal schools. The drastic cuts that the President proposes will only hurt students and tribal families.

Because education is so critical to success later in life, we urge Congress to increase federal funding for Indian education programs. At a minimum, funding for these programs should be maintained at FY2017 levels. The key elements of Indian education funding through Interior are:

- *ISEP which is the primary source of school funding provided through Interior. It covers salaries for teachers, teacher aides, and administrative personnel and is essential to our ability to recruit and retain qualified teachers. We request an increase to the WSU from 5,272 to \$7,000 per pupil.*
- *School Facility Operations and Maintenance which keeps the building safe, pay for preventative maintenance, and cover insurance and utility costs.*
- *Early Childhood Development funds (FACE), which is critical to providing preschoolers with skills to be school-ready.*
- *Johnson O'Malley, which assists Indian children in public schools with supplies and tutoring.*

**Indian Health Service.** We very much appreciate Congress's decision to increase funding for IHS in FY19, as this is essential to address the substantial unmet obligations for health care among Indian people. Indians at Lac Courte Oreilles, like Indians throughout the Nation, continue to face disproportionately higher rates of diabetes and its associated complications, than the rest of the population. As mentioned earlier in this testimony that my tribal nation is the midst of a drug epidemic.

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 Budget requests \$5.4 billion for the Indian Health Service (IHS), which is \$413 million or eight percent above the FY 2018 Continuing Resolution. The Budget continues to prioritize the provision of direct health care services across Indian Country through targeted funding increases to support improved health outcomes for American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Administration continues to honor its commitment to members of more than 567 Federally-recognized Tribes.

The FY 2019 Budget provides increased funding for Clinical Services programs, which fund direct health care services through hospitals and health clinics, dental health, mental health, alcohol and substance abuse services, and the Purchased/Referred Care Program. The Budget also fully funds staffing for new and replacement facilities, and supports Indian self-determination by fully funding Contract Support Costs, which assists Tribes that administer their own health programs and facilities. We are thankful for these initiatives.

**IHS: Behavioral Health.** American Indians and Alaska Natives have a high prevalence of behavioral health problems compared to the broader United States population. Specifically, this population has the highest suicide rates of any racial/ethnic population. Similarly, American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest rate of substance use disorders, including alcohol abuse, compared to any other racial/ethnic population. To combat these health disparities, the FY 2019 Budget requests a total of \$340 million for Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Abuse programs, which is an increase of \$30 million above the FY 2018 Continuing Resolution. Thank you for the increase in funding as these funds go towards preventative measures to assist tribal people in living a healthier life.

**IHS: Fighting the Opioid Epidemic.** The Budget provides \$10 billion in new resources across HHS to combat the opioid epidemic and address serious mental illness. As part of

this effort, the Budget includes an initial allocation of \$150 million in IHS to provide multi-year competitive grants based on need for opioid abuse prevention, treatment, and recovery support in Indian Country. American Indians and Alaska Natives had the highest drug overdose death rates in 2015, and the largest percentage change increase in drug overdose deaths from 1999-2015 of any population at 519 percent. The funding is necessary to facilitate trauma informed care initiatives to help tribal people heal, recover, and progress in their lives.

Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to testify on behalf of my tribe. The Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, for the record, these are just some of the most immediate unmet obligations for FY 2019.