

## WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JASON T. SCHLENDER

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

#### "Public Witness Testimony: Fiscal Year 2020 Appropriations"

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

**Requests:** (1) BIA - \$15 million for a BIA roads improvement program for targeted projects; (2) BIA HIP – at least \$23 million; (3) BIA - increase funding for Welfare Assistance, Social Services, and Tiwahe; (4) BIA Wildlife & Parks – at least \$10 million; (5) DOI, BIE - \$78 million for tribal grant support costs and \$430 million for BIE construction funds for a total increase in Indian Education funding to \$890 million; (6) BIA Social Services and Welfare Assistance – a surge of funding for these critical programs; (7) IHS - permanently reauthorize the Special Diabetes Program for Indians, fund the IHS Behavioral Health program at \$340 million for Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Abuse programs and maintain \$10 billion funded across HHS to combat the opioid epidemic and address serious mental illness.

**Introduction.** We thank this Subcommittee for its substantial efforts to protect the interests of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians (hereinafter “Lac Courte Oreilles” or “Tribe”) in the FY2019 Interior Appropriations and for once again rejecting the President’s inadequate budget requests for tribal programs. Chronic underfunding of Indian Country programs and treaty obligations over the years has taken an enormous toll on our Tribe and our members. We urge Congress to provide advance appropriations for the BIA and the IHS so that their crucial programs, and Tribes and their citizens are not impacted by government shutdowns or delays in funding. Advance appropriations align with the United States’ treaty obligations and trust responsibility.

#### **I. Strengthening Tribal Communities Via Infrastructure and Services**

Targeted Roads Funding. The BIA simply cannot address our road and bridge needs with its limited BIA Roads Maintenance account. Our backlog continues to grow while we struggle to address immediate concerns. Our Reservation is replete with treacherous and sometimes impassable roads, especially in winter with snowy and muddy conditions. This presents dangerous conditions for our residents and visitors. Dire circumstances require bold solutions. We believe one bold solution is to create a new roads maintenance account that targets backlogged road and bridge projects that would rectify treacherous conditions, taking mile inventory, remoteness, and weather conditions into consideration. **We urge Congress to allocate an initial amount of \$15 million for a BIA roads improvement program for targeted projects.**

Ensure BIA Housing Improvement Program (HIP) Has the Funding it Needs. Our Reservation has a terrible housing shortage. Many of our citizens live in dilapidated, overcrowded, and often unsafe conditions that no American should endure. Chronic and even short-term exposure to these conditions affects the physical, social, and mental state of our people. HIP is a safety-net program that provides grants to repair, renovate, replace or provide housing; it helps the neediest of the

needy Indian families. We appreciate this Subcommittee's efforts to restore and fund HIP and ask for a surge in FY2020 funding for this critical program. A stable living environment translates into improved family conditions, employment rates, and academic achievement. **We ask Congress to provide at least \$23 million for HIP in FY 2020.**

Maintain Critical Social Services, Welfare Assistance, and Expand the Tiwahe Initiative. Our people are plagued by poverty. The BIA's Social Services and Welfare Assistance umbrella accounts provide an array of irreplaceable services to tribal citizens. They are essential for helping to meet our citizens' complex needs and promoting their well-being. Further, we want to be included in the Tiwahe Initiative. In line with its original intent, Tiwahe funding should be expanded to other Tribes, like ours, that have Social Services (ICWA), Tribal Courts, Job Placement and Training, HIP and Road Maintenance Programs along with the need. The Lac Courte Oreilles ICW program is habitually underfunded. **We recommend Congress increase funding for Welfare Assistance, Social Services, and Tiwahe in FY 2020.**

Maintain BIA – Wildlife and Parks Program. 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 are 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. **We recommend Congress increase funding for BIA – Wildlife & Parks Program to at least \$10 million in FY 2020.**

## **II. Education and Success of our Youth**

Provide Adequate Funding for BIE Construction and Repairs to Address Critical School Safety Needs. Our facilities serve as safe havens – places of emotional and cultural support, nutritional meals, academic rigor, and athletic excellence. Yet, our facilities are also exceptionally dangerous – places of outdated electrical systems, crumbling infrastructure, and health and environmental hazards. **We strongly recommend that Congress provide \$78 million for tribal grant school support costs and provide \$430 million in system-wide school construction and repair funding for the BIE to address this area of critical need.**

Provide Adequate Funding for the BIE and Indian Education Programs. The Tribe 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 2017-18 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 2019, but we are deeply disturbed by the President's request to cut funding. 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. **We recommend Congress increase funding for these programs to \$890 million. The key elements of Indian education funding through Interior are: Increase ISEP – WSU which is the primary source of school funding provided through Interior to \$7,000 per pupil; Increase School Facility Operations and Maintenance which keeps the building safe, pay for preventative maintenance, and cover insurance and utility costs; Maintain Early Childhood Development funds (FACE), which is critical to providing preschoolers with skills to be school-ready; and Increase Johnson O'Malley, which assists Indian children in public schools with supplies and tutoring.**

Protecting Tribal Youth. Our Child Protection Services (CPS) and ICWA program conduct integrated child and family services on our Reservation. Families form the bedrock of our community. Providing safe, nurturing home environments for our children is one of our primary goals, but we have been hampered by underfunding, which limits our ability to deliver services, manage caseloads, and recruit and retain qualified staff. The lack of funding puts our program at a disadvantage and we cannot compete with state agencies that can offer a more competitive wage. **We ask Congress to increase funding for BIA ICWA and child protection services, so we can better provide foster care, guardianship, and adoption services.**

### **III. Promoting Steps Toward Economic Development**

Assist with Our Citizens' Entrepreneurial and Financial Preparedness. Our Credit and Finance Program assists our citizens in their efforts to establish or expand their own businesses and move toward self-sufficiency; strives to add new services for tribal credit needs; and broadens access to the private sector funding availability. The Program's overall goal is to overcome economic development barriers and develop a private sector for economic sovereignty on our Reservation. The Program also furthers our Promise Zone's objective of attracting investments, jobs and education opportunities to our Reservation. **We ask Congress to increase funding for this important program as we need additional staff to enhance the services we provide to our citizens.**

Prepare our Citizens for the Workforce. Our Job Placement and Training Program seeks to reduce the astronomically high unemployment rate on our Reservation by providing financial assistance to our citizens for tuition, books, fees and living expenses for school and relocation for job opportunities. **We ask Congress to increase funding for our Job Placement and Training Program.**

### **IV. Tackling Health Care Needs**

One of the United States' most sacred treaty obligations is the provision of healthcare for our people. We appreciate this Subcommittee's past efforts, but the IHS continues to struggle to carry out its duties. We need a surge of personnel and funding in our Region along with an

accounting of how the Region is spending the monies it receives. We need adequate funding levels for successful medical and administrative personnel recruitment and retainment, appropriate medical equipment supplies and adequate facilities repair, management and maintenance. **We ask Congress to continue to focus attention on our Tribe's inordinate health care needs and to permanently reauthorize the Special Diabetes Program for Indians.**

Provide Adequate Funding for the 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. My tribal nation is in the midst of a drug epidemic. **We ask Congress to continue 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.**

We request Congress to maintain 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. **We ask Congress to continue to fully fund 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.**

Provide Adequate Funding for the 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, we ask Congress to fund this program at \$340 million for Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Abuse programs, as these funds go towards preventative measures to assist tribal people in living a healthier life.**

Provide Adequate Funding for the IHS: Fighting the Opioid Epidemic. 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. Adequate funding is necessary to facilitate trauma informed care initiatives to help tribal people heal, recover, and progress in their lives. **We request Congress to maintain \$10 billion funded across HHS to combat the opioid epidemic and address serious mental illness. As part of this effort, we request that Congress maintain the 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.**

For the record these are just some of the most immediate requests for FY 2020, thank you for allowing me an opportunity to testify on behalf of my Tribal Nation, the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians.