

Mr. Austin Lowes, Chairman
Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
Before the House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies
Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Fish and Wildlife Service
May 7, 2024

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians is in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The Tribe administers 23 governmental divisions and manages over 75 federal, State, local and tribally funded programs across our seven-county service area—Alger, Chippewa, Delta, Luce, Mackinac, Marquette and Schoolcraft counties. We have a tribal membership of 43,376. Our territory includes 2,800 acres of trust land and our ceded territories throughout Michigan where we exercise our Treaty reserved rights to fish, hunt and gather. For almost fifty years the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe has built its governmental capacity to provide the full range of services to its members including health care, education, elder services, law enforcement, housing, family and social services, and cultural programs.

The Tribe operates 8 health clinics across our seven-county service area. In these clinics we offer a wide range of services including medical, dental, behavioral health, special diabetes, nutrition, pharmacy, wellness programs, and traditional medicine. We are proud of our work in this space, but it is time to fully fund Indian Health Services.

The Tribe wants to express its deep appreciation for the Congress’s action in providing advanced appropriations for FY 2025 for the Indian Health Service. Given the very uncertain fiscal times facing our nation, the security in knowing that the base budget of our Indian health system is secure critical. This allows our programs and our staff to plan on how best to continue to meet the health care needs of our people.

A. Indian Health Service

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Treatment

One of the greatest threats to the future of tribal communities is substance abuse and mental health conditions. Since the Heroin / Opioid Public Health Emergency of 2018 illicit drug use and mental health illnesses have only escalated to a National Emergency, particularly in Indian Country. With Health Care Staff Shortages, long waiting lists and patients in crisis, the need for Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Services is overwhelming. It is clear that funding and staff shortages continue to be primary barriers to services.

According to 2021 National survey on Drug Use and Health, “nearly half of young adults aged 18 – 25 in 2021 had either Any Mental Illness (AMI) or a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) in the past year”. American Indian or Alaskan Native were 11.4% higher than all other nationalities, (at 34.2 percent) to have had either an AMI or an SUD in that same time period. Illicit Drugs are the number one drug of choice for adults aged 18+ by Mental Health Status. Adolescents aged 12-17 who had both a past year Major Depressive Disorder (MDE) and a past year SUD (i.e., drug use disorder, alcohol use disorder, or both) were classified as having co-

occurring MDE and SUD, greatly increasing instances of SMI, SUD, Overdose, and Suicide among American Indian communities. However, as these rates continue to climb, the access to necessary hospital treatments to combat the Mental and Opioid Epidemic Crisis continues to be non-existent. Key programs offered by IHS, SAMHSA, DOI, and partnering agencies provide limited respite to exhausted communities and health staff.

While the Department of the Interior (Bureau of Indian Affairs), Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Justice have been tasked with coordinating certain existing department programs pursuant to the Tribal Law and Order Act. However, funding to expand and implement successful prevention, treatment, after care programming is stagnant.

The current interagency agreement calls for the development of a Tribal Action Plan. However, funding is limited to SAMHSA's available competitive funding instruments, leaving out necessary full funding of Tribal Action Plans that have been adopted by tribes. Notwithstanding the lack of funding for the Tribal Action Plans, the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians was one of the first tribes in the Nation to have completed a Tribal Action Plan to combat substance abuse on reservations. The Tribe now needs the resources to implement this Plan. We would call on the Committee to provide additional funding to both the BIA and IHS to fund the implementation of Tribal Action Plans.

2. Sanitation Facilities

Health Care facilities and sanitation program continue to be underfunded, given the vast need of facility space and staffing needed to take care of the overwhelmed health care systems in Indian Country. Alaskan villages are still living in third world standards when it comes to access to clean water. New facilities in Indian Country, require additional utility infrastructure from communications cabling to large wells and sewage systems. Residential scale water and sewage programming is underfunded, leaving many American Indians without necessary clean water sources. This was a key factor for why the pandemic was so devastating to tribal communities across America.

B. Bureau of Indian Affairs

1. Tribal Natural Resources Division

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians are co-managers of a large part of lakes Michigan, Huron, and Superior, as we hold Treaty-protected rights to fish in these lakes under the 1836 Treaty. We also hold Treaty-protected rights to fish in inland lakes, hunt, and gather across the 13.8 million acres of Ceded Territory. Thus, it is critical that Congress provide full funding for the Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority to ensure proper management of the resources consistent with the court-approved consent decrees.

The BIA's Natural Resources Management Endangered Species program is an important program, vital to the maintenance of important threatened and endangered species. Since 2012, Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians has identified several endangered species needs and submitted funding requests. To date, however, our funding requests have not been granted. This

is due to the competitive nature of limited funds available to the Midwest region. My Tribe recommends full funding for the program.

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians has relied on the BIA Forestry Program for several planning and management of forestry projects on the Reservation and are working with the BIA Fire Program. While my Tribe does not have substitutive commercial forest resources, we do have over 2,000 acres of forest lands that are maintained, and are actively acquiring more forest lands to be held in trust. The management of, and restoration of prescribed fire on, these acres are dependent on the Forestry and Fire Program funds and the BIA staff that work on our behalf. We have a strong interest in increasing our capacity for forest and fire management. We see this as an opportunity for the Tribe to create new jobs for Tribal members and increase access to natural resources for subsistence harvesting. We strongly recommend full funding of the BIA Forestry and Fire Programs.

2. Tribal Court Programs

Our Tribal Court program, an integral component to our Tribe's sovereignty, is significantly underfunded. In fact, the federal government provides only 3.76% of base need funding necessary to operate a Tribal Court capable of meeting our Tribe's service population needs. In fact, federal base funding for our Tribal Court program has only increased a total of \$3,000 in the past 21 years. In the end, our Tribe provides additional funding necessary to meet the needs of basic needs of our government, but that money is taken from other governmental programs, such as health, education, and care for the elderly.

Even with this strong tribal support for our program, our courts are still lacking. Our most recent BIA assessment of our courts identified the need to upgrade the Court's technology and improve the Tribal Court building's security. We recommend Congress fully fund Tribal Courts base funding levels to meet the budget model provided by the BIA.

C. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians has prioritized the resilience of coastal ecosystems throughout the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory, with special emphasis on coastal wetlands along the St. Mary's River. We have relied on partnerships with, and funding from, the Fish and Wildlife Service to plan and implement stewardship of our coastal communities. We recommend increased funding for the Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program to provide more science support for our Tribe's coastal resilience work, with more scientists located in our communities and positioned to contribute to research in these unique ecosystems directly. We support full funding of the Wildlife Co-Op Unit as it provides valuable science support within the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory.

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe applauds the USDOJ efforts to increase staff and funding in the Great Lakes Basin and looks forward to increased emphasis on engaging our Tribal communities in the implementation of Joint Secretariat Order 3403. We have felt the increased presence of

Tribal liaisons in our region and have appreciated their contributions to advancing meaningful engagement of Tribes in advancing treaty rights. We support increased engagement in the co-stewardship and co-management of federal lands, however, this cannot come at the cost of our already underfunded programs. We would like to see new funding tools aimed at providing adequate support for tribal fish, wildlife, forestry, and fire programs to fully engage in co-management and co-stewardship processes.