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**Submitted Testimony of Chuck Hoskin, Jr., Cherokee Nation Principal Chief
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
February 26, 2025**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Interior Appropriations subcommittee:

Osiyo. On behalf of the citizens of Cherokee Nation, I thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts on the fiscal year 2026 appropriations process. The subcommittee, in formulating and considering its FY26 Interior Appropriations measure and upcoming spending bills, should:

- Carry out the Trump administration’s landmark campaign against wasteful Federal spending by **rejecting calls for duplicative funding lines** and redundant programs and services in FY26 and beyond;
- Ensure the Indian Health Service is properly spending taxpayer resources by **conducting robust oversight of IHS spending decisions and policy actions**, particularly around the Purchase and Referred Care program and the Joint Venture Construction Program;
- Promote public safety in eastern Oklahoma by **continuing to provide direct funding for the Tribes impacted by the *McGirt* decision**;
- **Encourage the revitalization of Native languages** through increased appropriations for Native language programs and revitalization efforts;
- Where possible, and in the manner you see fit, **communicate with the administration about the unique legal and political status of Native American tribes**, and **work to ensure that tribes, tribal citizens, and tribally-owned businesses are not harmed by funding cuts, funding freezes, executive actions, and reductions to Federal staff**, particularly within the Department of the Interior, Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Bureau of Indian Education.

With a population of more than 470,000, Cherokee Nation is the largest Native American tribe in the United States. Many of our citizens reside on our Treaty-guaranteed land, a 7,000-square mile reservation covering 14 counties in northeast Oklahoma. The remainder of our citizens are spread throughout the United States, living in all 435 congressional districts.

We are the economic engine of northeast Oklahoma, employing more than 15,100 people and providing for safety, health, and comfort of those who live within our reservation boundaries and the communities located on our land. Cherokee Nation and its businesses have a major economic impact, and that impact is not limited to our citizens. We remain steadfast in our commitment to expand our regional economy, helping our non-Cherokee friends and neighbors improve their quality of life.

This year we will make substantial strategic investments that will help Cherokee families become happier, healthier, stronger, and safer. We are moving forward with historic investments in infrastructure—including a new justice center in Tahlequah—mental health, drug treatment, career readiness, housing, language preservation and revitalization efforts, and public safety, and continuing to build out the largest tribally-operated health care system in Indian Country.

First, I urge you to provide strong oversight over IHS through the appropriations process to ensure that the agency is properly and efficiently using taxpayer resources. I point specifically to two areas of focus—Purchase and Referred Care (PRC) and the Joint Venture Construction Program.

Last year, in clear indifference to Congress's repeated rejections of IHS's request to provide PRC funding to the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, IHS cobbled together other agency dollars and provided this tribe \$5.6 million for the purposes of establishing a UKB-only health care system. The Biden administration sent Congress multiple anomaly requests last fall looking for funding to backfill this unilateral expenditure of taxpayer funds and provide dedicated funding for UKB moving forward—Congress ignored each request. The House should continue to reject future attempts to provide PRC funding to the UKB and push back against efforts by IHS's national office to forgo the opinions of local IHS area officials and stand up a redundant health care system to provide services that Cherokee Nation has been providing with skill and efficiencies for many, many years.

Continued PRC funding for UKB would be completely improper given the Trump administration's strong desire to cut wasteful and duplicative spending. Cherokee Nation already maintains an outstanding tribally-operated health care system that serves 14 counties in northeast Oklahoma; funding another parallel and duplicative line of tribal health care services would be completely unnecessary and wasteful.

Cherokee Nation, in partnership with IHS, has made significant fiscal investments to ensure that all tribal citizens within the Cherokee Nation Reservation—UKB citizens included—will receive the highest quality health care for generations to come. Our health system provides more than 2 million patient care visits a year, and boasts a track record of world-class care. Our facilities are strategically placed so that no person living on the Cherokee Nation Reservation is more than 30 minutes away from care, and according to IHS patient statistics approximately 94.4 percent of the UKB user population currently receives care from Cherokee Nation. Increasing IHS spending for the sole purpose of standing up a duplicative health care system that will only serve a single tribe—one that is already receiving excellent health care services through the most advanced and largest health care system in Indian Country—is the definition of waste.

We similarly question IHS's decision-making around the most recent running of the Joint Venture Construction Program. IHS moved a UKB proposal to build an ambulatory care project within the Cherokee Nation Reservation on to Phase II, dismissing important requirements like a legitimate and verifiable user population and changing the isolation standard in order to bypass the fact that a Cherokee Nation Health System facility is nearby to the proposed project.

The Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes last year adopted a resolution that speaks directly this position, calling on Congress "to closely scrutinize IHS funding decisions and requests, ensuring that appropriations are used effectively and in alignment with the health care needs of Tribal Nations." So, we ask the subcommittee to **carefully scrutinize IHS decisions** to ensure agency officials are spending taxpayer dollars wisely and wholly abiding by the law and congressional intent.

Third, I would like to thank the subcommittee for its continued attention to public safety and justice issues in connection with the historic *McGirt* decision. *McGirt* and the subsequent *Hogner* decision that reaffirmed the continued existence of the Cherokee Nation Reservation—and our exclusive jurisdiction over our land—changed the complexion of law enforcement and criminal justice in eastern Oklahoma.

The costs of sustaining the large criminal justice system needed on our reservation are substantial, and so I am exceedingly grateful for the direct resources you have provided to the *McGirt*-impacted tribes through the final FY22, FY23, and FY24 appropriations bills, and the \$130 million the House included for this purpose in its FY25 measure. I ask that you maintain this funding in the final FY25 appropriations bill, and **provide impacted tribes another round of *McGirt*-specific funding again in FY26.**

Finally, we are concerned by the scope and scale of Federal staff cuts and their potential effect on tribes, tribal citizens, and tribally-owned businesses. We urge the subcommittee to communicate with administration on the unique relationship between the Federal government and Native American tribes, and **work to ensure reductions to the Federal workforce do not negatively impact the government's ability to meet vital services and the treaty and trust obligations** owed to Cherokee Nation and our citizens. Bureau of Indian Affairs staff is crucial in that regard, and we worry that the reported 118 layoffs within BIA will have an impact on the agency's ability to carry out its core mission.

I also note how workforce reductions and other executive actions may impact K-12 and higher education. While the administration's goal of improving government efficiency is recognized, appreciated, and laudable, last week's cuts to the Bureau of Indian Education have caused immediate and harmful consequences at Haskell Indian Nations University and other schools in the BIE system.

Federal layoffs resulted in the elimination of 35-40 positions at Haskell, impacting faculty, student services, athletics, operations, and IT. These cuts have affected nearly every aspect of the university's ability to provide quality education and support to its students. With more than a third of the staff terminated, students are now facing the loss of essential instructors, critical academic programs, and vital student services. The absence of these resources threatens not only

academic success of our tribal youth but also student retention and the university's long-term stability. I encourage you to urge the administration to reverse these terminations and ensure that BIE, BIA, IHS, Department of the Interior, and other Federal staff who oversee tribal programs and services are exempt from future reductions.

I similarly fear what may happen to BIE schools, tribally-operated schools, and Native American students if the system proposed within the President's executive order on Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families was implemented. If this proposal moves forward, it will lead to school closures, abandoned students, and the unraveling of the Federal government's trust and treaty obligations.

As you well know, there is extremely little Federal funding available for the education of Native American students, whether within BIE schools or elsewhere. If this limited funding were to follow the student in a voucher-like system, and the President's order encompasses all eligible Native students—not just those who currently attend BIE schools—the per-student funding would become negligible. I urge the subcommittee to **closely monitor the administration's plan for implementing Sec. 7 of this executive order** and oppose any efforts to weaken what is already the lowest-funded education system in the country.

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