



## TESTIMONY OF THE HON. EDWINA “WINNIE” JOHNSON-GRAHAM, VICE CHAIR

Presented to:

THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES

February 26, 2025

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### Summary of Agency/Program and Funding Requests

- 1. Increased Funding for Roads and Transportation Infrastructure*
  - 2. Increased Funding for Tribal Courts*
  - 3. Increased Funding for Tribal Public Safety*
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### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Thank you Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe about our federal funding priorities for Fiscal Year (FY) 2026. We are deeply grateful to the Subcommittee and its leadership for holding these hearings and giving tribal leadership a voice in the federal appropriations process. We also thank the Subcommittee for its efforts to ensure that critically needed resources remain available to tribal governments.

We are a federally recognized tribe with approximately 3,200 enrolled citizens. Southeastern Massachusetts has been our home since time immemorial, and we have reservation land in Barnstable and Bristol Counties. As you may know, our ancestors welcomed the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock and participated in the first Thanksgiving. Our relationship with the new Americans who settled around us is one of the oldest such relationships in the United States, and

one we highly value. As it did in the time of the Pilgrims, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe today continues to work cooperatively with its neighbors, with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and with the federal government.

In FY 2026, we ask that you prioritize funding for roads and transportation infrastructure, tribal courts, and public safety.

## **I. ROADS AND TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING**

Our Tribe has had difficulty engaging in meaningful economic development because our reservation lacks critical basic infrastructure. On our 170-acre Reservation lands near Taunton, Massachusetts, only one road runs through the entire property, leaving much of it inaccessible and undevelopable. We urge that Congress provide sufficient funding to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Road Maintenance Program, so that in turn it can assist our tribal Public Works Department plan, design, construct and maintain roads on our Taunton Reservation.

Further exacerbating our situation is that our Public Works Department is responsible for snow removal and de-icing on many of the routes in our inventory, and of course large winter storms are frequent in our region. The modest funds we have available generally are expended for snow and ice removal during the winter, leaving little remaining for road construction, transportation, and maintenance activities during the rest of the year. We also expend funds to periodically maintain the Tribe's unpaved and earthen roads. Additional funding is needed to pave these roadways to make them safer and more accessible, and to provide transportation services for tribal members. Our Public Works Department assists with transportation requests, including scheduling vehicles, coordinating drivers, and conducting vehicle maintenance. Reliable transportation is particularly needed for tribal youth and elders, who require access to basic goods, services, and support programs. *The Tribe requests that the Subcommittee support at least \$50.1 million in funding for the BIA Road Maintenance Program in FY 2026.*<sup>1</sup> The federal government's investment in tribal transportation will help meet these critical needs, and empower our Tribe to develop our economy so that we can move closer to economic self-sufficiency.

The Tribe is seeking to acquire more land in trust, specifically for economic development and other governmental purposes, but funding constraints limit our ability to improve these parcels. Many of these parcels are currently undeveloped, dilapidated and in dire need of rehabilitation. *Additional federal resources are greatly needed for other critical infrastructure investments.* Relatedly, the Tribe's historic meetinghouse has a serious issue with water infrastructure – there is no access point from the water main within the public roadway to the building. The meetinghouse was constructed in 1684, making it, by many accounts, the oldest Indian church in the country and the oldest church on

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<sup>1</sup> See BIA FY 2025 Budget Justifications and Performance Information at IA-ES-3, available at [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media\\_document/fy2025-508-bia-greenbook.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/fy2025-508-bia-greenbook.pdf).

Cape Cod. This building is an irreplaceable part of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe's history, and no water access poses a significant risk should there be a fire or other emergency.

## II. TRIBAL JUDICIAL SYSTEM

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Court provides a judicial forum in which civil and criminal cases involving tribal members and conduct on our Reservation lands can be heard and adjudicated within a judicial process that reflects both tribal traditions and community standards for justice. Our Court's workload has significantly increased over time – in 2024 we had a 75 percent increase in our caseload -- but we have little funding to support the Court. This has led to a backlog in resolving criminal cases and in issuing eviction and protective orders. Funding available from BIA to support tribal courts has been extremely limited. According to a 2024 report from BIA's Office of Justice Services, the estimated unmet need for tribal courts is \$1.44 billion, and an additional 12,618 personnel are needed to adequately serve Indian Country.<sup>2</sup>

Because we continue to struggle to find economic development opportunities, our Tribe must rely on BIA funding for judges, prosecutors, public defenders, jury stipends, guardians ad litem, court officers, clerks, probation officers, and court administrators, as well as other administrative costs that contribute to the operation of our justice system. We need funding to establish a case management system to streamline the process for managing and tracking cases, and to maintain and upgrade our current audio/video system used to record court hearings. BIA's FY 2025 budget justification acknowledges that a funding increase "will help address gaps in limited BIA funding to support tribal court facilities operation and maintenance costs in a manner similar to law enforcement offices, detention centers, and other facilities." Operational costs include services and supplies needed to keep tribal courts operational. BIA acknowledges that these services "are necessary in order to comply with Occupational Safety and Health Act standards and to ensure safe and functional tribal court facilities."

In addition, the Tribe has been working to codify, amend, and review tribal laws, as well as reform our Constitution, to ensure consistency, accuracy, effectiveness, and compliance. This is a significant undertaking that is crucial to ensure that our people are protected by an appropriate legal and judicial system. The systems are also crucial to provide the stability and clarity that we need to attract business development on our Reservation lands. But the development of these systems requires resources that we do not have.

For all of these reasons, we urge that the *Subcommittee support at least \$70.4 million for Tribal Courts in FY 2026.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> BIA, Office of Justice Services, Report to the Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs for Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021 at 1.

<sup>3</sup> See BIA FY 2025 Budget Justifications and Performance Information at IA-ES-4.

### III. PUBLIC SAFETY

Existing federal funding is wholly inadequate to meet the public safety needs of Indian Country. According to BIA's Office of Justice Services, the estimated unmet need for public safety and justice programs in Indian Country is over \$3 billion (programs are funded at under 13 percent of total need).<sup>4</sup> The Tribe has Reservation land in both Barnstable and Bristol Counties, which creates enormous challenges for law enforcement response. Our Tribal Police Department has a severe shortage of staff and at least twelve officers are needed to patrol the geographic areas covered by our Reservation lands.

The Tribe must hire additional officers, but the Tribal Police Department's resources are very limited and it will cost approximately \$600,000 annually to cover salaries and fringe benefits. Because our officers routinely must travel longer distances, funding is also needed to replace older, high mileage police cruisers with more reliable and safer vehicles. In addition, proper supplies and equipment (including uniforms, weapons, and ballistic vests) are necessary to equip officers (and potential new hires) in the performance of basic duties.

The Tribe also needs a dispatch center and permanent base of operations for its Police Department, which currently operates out of a police cruiser, combined with two police substations in Barnstable and Bristol Counties that operate out of modular trailers. The trailers (and cruiser) are not equipped to handle basic law enforcement responsibilities – Tribal Police do not have a secure facility, office space, a detention processing area, or holding cells. There is nowhere to securely store evidence, records, and equipment.

Limited telecommunications capabilities also are a major safety issue. The Tribal Police are unable to communicate with surrounding police departments and other county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, and cannot communicate among our own officers between the Tribe's Reservation locations. The Tribe desperately needs updated technology and interoperable communications equipment (including police radios, a tower, and additional antennas) to improve communications and facilitate better law enforcement response, as well as coordinated provision of fire, law enforcement, and emergency response services. For all of the reasons outlined above, we urge that the *Subcommittee support at least \$651.2 million for Public Safety and Justice operations to improve law enforcement response capabilities.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> BIA, Office of Justice Services, Report to the Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs for Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021 at 1, available at [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media\\_document/2021\\_tloa\\_report\\_final\\_508\\_compliant.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/2021_tloa_report_final_508_compliant.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See BIA FY 2025 Budget Justifications and Performance Information at IA-ES-4.