

Questions from Rep. Grijalva for Deborah Parker, Chief Executive Officer, National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition

Q: As someone who worked previously on truth and healing efforts in Canada, do you have any recommendations for how the federal government should address its role in the creation and implementation of Indian boarding schools?

A: Yes. The Congress must pass H.R. 5444 and establish the Truth and Healing Commission that addresses boarding schools in the United States. Based in part on Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, H.R. 5444 reflects lessons learned, both positive and negative, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. The primary difference is that the Commission in Canada did not have the power to subpoena documents and compel testimony. The U.S. must have this authority to properly carry out its mission.

In 2007, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in Canadian began implementation. One of the elements of the agreement was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to facilitate reconciliation among former students, their families, their communities, and others across the Canadian government including Health Canada and other key governmental support networks.

The Government of Canada provided financial support the TRC's work. The TRC spent over six years travelling to all parts of Canada and heard from more than 6,500 witnesses, including generational survivors. The TRC also hosted seven national events across Canada to engage the Canadian public, educate people about the history and legacy of the residential school system, and respectfully share the experiences of former students and their families. The TRC then created a record of the impacts and harm caused by the residential school system. As part of this process, the Government of Canada provided over five million records to the TRC. Records are still requested and needed by many First Nations and their families.

At the end of their six year agreement, the TRC presented the executive summary of the findings contained in its multi-volume final report, including 94 "calls to action" to further help heal a country divided. The TRC also released its 6-volume final report.

To date, the government of Canada and First Nations members continue to work on their relationship. We believe there are many lessons the United States can learn from the TRC process initiated by the Canadians government and First Nations.

Q: After decades of inaction, we are proud of U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland's efforts to jumpstart the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. What other efforts would the Coalition like to see alongside this initiative?

A: Many Native people from across the United States suffer from a variety of physical abuse, sexual abuse, mental health problems, and other hardships associated with loss of language and culture. Many of those problems are a direct result of federal policies that existed for 150 years that were intended to wipe out Native identity and culture. Many people carrying out these genocidal policies treated Native children as less than human and inflicted severely abused them. Congress has much work to do to assist tribal communities with preserving Native languages and cultures. It was much work to do in providing

resources to address mental health problems in tribal communities. It has much work to do to give tribal governments more resources to protect women and children in tribal communities that are suffering from the residual impacts of these hardships.

Q: How would the passage of H.R. 5444 aid these efforts?

A: The Trust and Healing Commission established by H.R. 5444 would give boarding school survivors an opportunity to share their stories. From our work, we know that so many of them suffered serious trauma while students at boarding schools, and they need healing from these experiences. We also need experts to provide focused work on ways to overcome the problems created by federal boarding school policies that can help our communities heal and move forward.

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Q: Can you describe how involved the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition and survivors of boarding schools were in the compilation of the Department of Interior report that was released 5/11/22? Do you expect a similar level of engagement with NABS if the commission in H.R. 5444 is enacted?

A: NABS was actively involved in exchanging information about boarding schools with the Department of the Interior. NABS was founded over ten years ago with the mission of researching information that was and is relevant to the Department of the Interior's Report and ongoing work. On December 7, 2021, NABS and the Department of Interior entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) so both parties that the Department could share information and keep it confidential, and Interior officials could freely ask questions of NABS throughout preparation of the report.

NABS had no role in drafting the Report. Boarding schools survivors did not communicate with Interior through NABS. Because of NABS' expertise in this area, NABS expects to be centrally involved in the Truth and Healing Commission if H.R. 5444 is enacted into law.

Q: It is my understanding that federal boarding school policies, along with other oppressive federal policies, contributed to the growth of urban AI/AN populations in U.S. cities. Can you discuss more about the impact of these federal policies on the growth of the urban AI/AN population and the need to partner with urban Native communities to help heal from the effects of the intergenerational trauma caused by boarding school policies?

A: Federal boarding school policies began as a way for the federal government to obtain control over Tribal land. To achieve this end, federal law and policy makers established policies focused on destroying Native American and Alaskan Native ("NA/AN") culture. Policy makers hoped that when Native children were assimilated into the dominant culture, they would no longer feel a connection to their reservations, which in turn would push them toward urban areas. Many children became disconnected from their home tribal communities. This successful ideology was centered on making the need for reservations obsolete. The effects can be seen today through the nearly 70 percent of NA/AN individuals who live in urban areas. It is paramount to work with urban Native communities on how to heal from intergenerational trauma as they can best articulate their needs.