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*For the Love of Native People*  
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Testimony of Esther Lucero, MPP  
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Chairwoman Leger Fernandez, and members of the House Committee on Natural Resources – Subcommittee for Indigenous People, my name is Esther Lucero. I am Diné, of Latino descent, and third generation in my family living outside of our reservation, I strongly identify as an urban Indian. I proudly serve as the President & Chief Executive Officer of the Seattle Indian Health Board (SIHB), one of 41 Urban Indian Organizations (UIO) nationwide. I have had the privilege of serving SIHB for six years and I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony today in support of H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

SIHB is an Indian Health Service (IHS)-designated UIO and a HRSA 330 Federally Qualified Health Center, which serves nearly 5,000 American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people living in the Greater Seattle Area in Washington state. Nationwide, UIOs operate 74 health facilities in 22 states and offer services to over 5.4 million AI/AN people in select urban areas. As a culturally attuned service provider, we offer direct medical, dental, traditional health, behavioral health services, and a variety of social support services for Elders, gender-based violence, youth development, and homelessness. As part of the Indian healthcare system, we honor our responsibilities to work with our Tribal partners to serve all Tribal people, wherever they may reside.

We are also home to a Tribal public health authority, Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), 1 of 12 Tribal Epidemiology Centers (TEC) in the country and the only TEC with a national purview- serving both rural and urban AI/AN populations. For over 20 years, UIHI has managed public health information systems, managed disease prevention and control programs, communicated vital health information and resources, responded to public health emergencies, and coordinated these activities with other public health authorities and UIO's nationwide. As part of their critical work, UIHI recently released the first-of-its kind *COVID-19 Data Dashboard*<sup>1</sup> and *Community Health Profiles*<sup>1</sup> on AI/AN across the country, providing viable data to service providers, public health agencies, Tribes, and UIOs.

**Effects of Indian Boarding Schools on American Indian and Alaska Native Populations**  
The Indian boarding school policies authorized the forced removal of AI/AN children from their families. At its peak, the federal government operated 408 Indian boarding schools across 37 states,<sup>2</sup> of which 73 remain open today across 30 states. H.R. 5444

<sup>1</sup> Urban Indian Health Institute. (2022). Community Health Profiles. [www.uihi.org/urban-indian-health/data-dashboard/](http://www.uihi.org/urban-indian-health/data-dashboard/)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Interior. (2022). Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigate Report. Retrieved from: [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)

can further develop recommendations for the Federal government to acknowledge and retribute the historical and intergenerational harm caused by Indian boarding school policies.

The Department of Interior (DOI), recently released a report titled *Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report*, which found 53 burial sites for children across the nation. However, the DOI has yet to investigate each boarding school for additional burial sites. The DOI report also found federal Indian boarding schools implemented identity-alteration methodologies to assimilate AI/AN children by renaming children from Indian to English names, cutting the children's hair, discouraging them from engaging in their cultural practices, and requiring some children to perform military drills. Some Federal Indian boarding schools also implemented manual labor for AI/AN children as part of school curricula including fertilizing, lumbering, brickmaking, garment-making, and working on the railroad system.

For many AI/AN children, boarding schools were the first time they left their families. Many survivors discuss long-term feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness. Boarding schools were also a legacy for sexual violence, physical violence, and spiritual violence. Due to acts of violence experienced, some survivors of abuse have participated in risky behaviors to numb their pain including suicide and chemical dependency. The severe trauma AI/AN children experienced has impacted their biological systems<sup>3</sup> and introduced epigenetic alterations that can be transferred to future generations as part of epigenetic inheritance.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of Indian boarding schools have had an inter-generational impact on the health, substance use, education, and wellbeing of AI/AN people. Today, AI/AN people are disproportionately represented in poor behavioral health outcomes, including mental health, substance use, and suicide.<sup>5</sup> In 2020, the overdose death rate for AI/ANs was higher than any racial or ethnic group of 42.5 per 100,000, respectively.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, 17.9% of AI/AN families experienced poverty compared to 6.2% of the general population.<sup>7</sup> For education, AI/AN people experience some of the lowest higher education rates among any racial or ethnic group resulting in AI/AN people experiencing higher rates of unemployment and job-related disability status.<sup>8</sup>

H.R. 5444 can provide aid in healing the trauma caused by Indian boarding schools. The intergenerational impact of Federal Indian boarding schools must be healed through suicide-prevention, anger-management, Native sponsored substance use treatment,

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Sotero, A conceptual model of historical trauma: implications for public health practice and research, 1 J. Health Dispar. Res. Pract 93 (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Yehuda et al., Holocaust exposure induced intergenerational effects on FKBP5 methylation, 80 Biol. Psychiatry 372 (2016); Zaneta Thayer et al., Biological memories of past environments: epigenetic pathways to health disparities, 6 Epigenetics 798 (2011).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – Office of Minority Health. (2021). Mental and Behavioral Health – American Indians/Alaska Natives. Retrieved from: <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlID=39>

<sup>6</sup> CDC. (2021). Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999-2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db428.htm>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census. (2019). American Indian and Alaska Native – Selected Population Profile in the United States. Retrieved from:

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S0201&t=006%20-%20American%20Indian%20and%20Alaska%20Native%20alone%3A009%20-%20American%20Indian%20and%20Alaska%20Native%20alone%20or%20in%20combination%20with%20one%20or%20more%20other%20races%3AEducation%3AIncome%20and%20Poverty&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census. (2019). American Indian and Alaska Native – Selected Population Profile in the United States. Retrieved from:

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S0201&t=006%20-%20American%20Indian%20and%20Alaska%20Native%20alone%3A009%20-%20American%20Indian%20and%20Alaska%20Native%20alone%20or%20in%20combination%20with%20one%20or%20more%20other%20races%3AEducation>

counseling, and other forms of healing services.

### **Develop Culturally Responsive Healing Processes**

As an urban Native, I recognize the generations and cultural knowledge lost to policies of the Indian boarding schools. At SIHB, we operate an Elders program for our relatives, many of whom have been affected by boarding schools. To support their healing, SIHB provides wrap around services including a drop-in day center, medical appointments, case management, and access to Traditional health services.

The SIHB recently implemented a Traditional Indian Medicine Reimbursement pilot that integrates our Traditional Practitioners with our medical and social services team. Our Elders are able to benefit from our holistic care that integrates Traditional health to address the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of our relatives. Access to Traditional health services can restore well-being and mental health for relatives suffering from historical trauma of Indian boarding schools.

Ensuing the revelation of multiple burial sites at boarding schools, UIHI hosted *Healing Hearts: A Conversation on Boarding School Healing*<sup>9</sup> that allowed space for an Indian boarding school survivor to share his story of abuse, suffering and healing. While these conversations are difficult, they illuminate the impact of trauma and harmful legacy of Indian boarding schools. H.R. 5444 provides an opportunity to hold the Federal government accountable and bring justice to our survivors and loved ones.

As Indigenous people, we recognize Federal Indian boarding schools functioned as a sanctioned program meant to eradicate the AI/AN population. The federal government must take accountability for past misconduct against our people by providing restitution and reparations for our generations lost, our survivors healing, and intergeneration's affected by Indian boarding schools. The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies must be passed to better understand the attempted termination of Indigenous people and the ongoing effects of historical and intergenerational trauma caused by Indian boarding schools.

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<sup>9</sup> Urban Indian Health Institute. (2021). *Healing Hearts: A Conversation on Boarding School Healing with Bill Hall and Abigail Echo-Hawk*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65-PoT06thw>