

**House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples
Legislative Hearing—*Parity for Tribal Law Enforcement Act*
September 14, 2022**

Thank you, Ranking Member Obernolte, Chairwoman Leger Fernandez, and Members of the Subcommittee for allowing me to be here today to talk about this important legislation.

Central Washington is home to many dedicated law enforcement officers who are well-immersed and respected within their communities.

However, just like in many other rural communities across the country, our officers are overworked and underpaid due to the recent upticks in violent crime, gang activity, and a surge of illegal drugs like fentanyl.

At the same time, Central Washington's native communities are, unfortunately, the epicenter of our state's missing and murdered indigenous women crisis.

Perhaps one of the greatest demonstrations of the close relationships between our tribal and non-tribal communities are our law enforcement partnerships. Crime knows no boundaries, and it is clear to me and to my constituents that our law enforcement community operates together to protect our interests and maintain public safety for *all* of Central Washington.

In meeting with the tribes and law enforcement officers I represent, I have heard a resounding message: We need more resources, we need more help, and we need more qualified officers.

To address those needs, I introduced the *Parity for Tribal Law Enforcement Act*:

First, this bill makes tribal communities safer by reducing administrative barriers for tribal law enforcement officers to enforce federal law.

Most tribal law enforcement officers are currently operating under self-determination contracts with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These officers are currently required to meet training requirements, pass a background investigation, and possess nearly the same qualifications as a state or local law enforcement officer in order to enforce federal law.

Currently, officers under these contracts have to enter Special Law Enforcement Commissions, or SLECs, in order to enforce federal law. Many tribes, including the Colville tribe in my district, already have SLECs in place and enforce federal law.

These SLECs can be extra hurdle for tribes in Washington and across the country who are already strained in their budgets and lacking qualified officers to fill spots.

This bill aims to eliminate these burdens by clarifying that tribal law enforcement officers have the same authority to enforce federal criminal laws as non-tribal federal officers, provided they meet the same training, background, and other requirements.

Second, the bill increases officer retention and recruitment efforts by providing tribal law enforcement agencies with the option to access federal pension and retirement benefits.

During my meetings with tribal partners, one of the most immediate challenges they face with law enforcement is losing their law enforcement officers to other local law enforcement agencies.

In fact, I heard from one county sheriff that he actively recruits tribal law enforcement because of the quality of the tribal trained officers and their relationships within the tribal community.

He is often successful in hiring them because he can offer a more competitive package of benefits that the tribal officers cannot access.

All of the tribes that I've spoken to have told me that providing these benefits will help them attract and retain officers.

While there is a cost associated with providing these benefits to officers, based on the data available for our review, we have reason to believe the cost will be very minimal.

Regardless, the bill would significantly reduce the overall cost of recruiting new tribal law enforcement officers and increase public safety by keeping a higher number of good, qualified officers—who have appropriate training—on tribal lands.

Many tribal law enforcement officers already enforce federal law as part of their regular duties. Providing federal benefits to these tribal officers is simply treating them fairly and in parity with their fellow officers who they work with often on a daily basis.

This bill benefits the entire law enforcement community and the safety of *all* our communities, both tribal and non-tribal, by increasing the amount of ground our law enforcement officers are able to cover, which is a significant challenge in the rural areas of Central Washington that I represent.

Finally, enabling our tribal communities with the ability to better recruit and retain qualified law enforcement officers is a step in preventing and investigating devastating cases of missing and murdered indigenous women.

I am proud this bill has the support of several Washington State Tribes, some of whom are here today to talk about how this important legislation would improve their public safety efforts.

It is long past time that we make these necessary changes and support each and every member of our law enforcement community.

I look forward to working with tribal communities across the country to raise awareness to these issues and improve public safety.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak about my important legislation, and I urge the Committee to pass it as soon as possible.

I yield back.