

**Statement of
Bryan T. Newland
Nominee for the Position of
Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs
at the
U.S. Department of the Interior
Before the Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate**

June 9, 2021

Aanii (Hello)! Thank you, Chairman Schatz, Vice-Chairman Murkowski, and members of the Committee. It is an honor to appear before you today as President Biden’s nominee to be the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs at the U.S. Department of the Interior, an important position that serves as a leader for the United States’ trust relationship with Tribal Nations.

And it is a privilege to serve with Secretary Haaland at such an important time for Indian country.

I’m so happy to have my wife Erica Newland here with me. We grew up together on the Bay Mills Indian Reservation, and she has been my partner, strategic advisor, and designated “humbler” every step of the way. Together, we have two incredible children – Graydon and Meredith – who are also here, as are my parents, Gordon and Vicki Newland.

My parents had me at a young age, under difficult circumstances, and worked hard to raise my brother Robert, my sister Holly, and me. They also both had long careers in public service and instilled those values in us. I thank them for that.

Growing up on our reservation, I saw how federal laws and policies affected the lives of everyday Indians. Commercial tribal fishermen exercised treaty-protected fishing rights to feed their families. I lived up the street from Bay Mills Community College – the first tribally-controlled community college in Michigan – which was established soon after Congress enacted the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act.

Our family also lived in tribal housing, supported by federal grants.

My parents were fortunate to each have jobs, which allowed them to get a land-lease to move out of tribal housing and purchase a home. We lived in a single-wide trailer for several years while they waited for the Bureau of Indian Affairs to approve their mortgage. When that mortgage was finally approved, my parents became the first people on the Bay Mills Reservation to have a mortgaged-financed home.

Their experience with the BIA’s time-consuming mortgage-approval process, and the delays that my parents faced as a part of it, would stick with me.

I attended Michigan State University and the Michigan State University College of Law, where I was the first Native student to enroll in the Indigenous Law and Policy Program.

I graduated law school in 2007 and started in private practice. I soon had the opportunity to serve in the Obama administration at the Department of the Interior – in the office of the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs.

There I was lucky to have mentors like Larry Echo Hawk and Del Laverdure. We reformed leasing on Indian lands, putting timelines in place so that other families wouldn't have the same delays my parents faced. Working with this Committee, we saw the bipartisan enactment and implementation of the HEARTH Act, putting Tribes back in control of leasing and home mortgages on tribal lands.

Next, I returned home and used my experience to serve my own Tribe, to teach Indian law to aspiring Native attorneys, and to advocate on behalf of other Tribes.

In 2013, I was elected as Chief Judge of the Bay Mills Tribal Court. In that role, I heard heart-wrenching cases about families in crisis and enforced criminal laws in a deliberate and fair way.

In that position, I worked to help establish the Bay Mills Healing to Wellness Court. That substance-abuse treatment court has helped to reunite families, provide job opportunities and housing to people in need, and maintain our tribal connections to one another.

In 2017, our Tribe elected me to serve as Tribal President and we set about making our Tribal community a better place to live. We were making progress toward this effort when the pandemic struck, and this became an important, life-or-death, focus.

Through our partnership with the Indian Health Service, we established early community surveillance testing for COVID-19. We saw a disproportionately low rate of infection on our Reservation thanks to non-partisan coordination with local, state, and federal officials.

At the same time, we were able to expand our tribal businesses, develop a new health center, and grow jobs and incomes at Bay Mills, important goals for our community.

I know firsthand the connection between public service and the lives of others. When you live with the people you serve, you cannot escape that connection – if you make a mistake, you see it (and, if you don't see it, there's sure to be an auntie or a friend to remind you).

If confirmed, I will bring that perspective with me to the Department of the Interior. We must help Indian country build back better after the pandemic. We must also respond with urgency to the violence against Indigenous women and children. And we must lay the foundation for the next generation of Native children to succeed.

I believe that tribal governments, rather than federal agencies, are best-suited to respond to the challenges their communities face. Our job is to be a collaborative trustee and ensure that Indian country drives our work. With your consent, I will be a leader for these important efforts.

Miigwetch (Thank you) for the opportunity to be here today, and for your service to our country.
I look forward to answering your questions.