



# **TURTLE MOUNTAIN BAND OF CHIPPEWA INDIANS**

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Dear Chairman Schatz and Vice Chairwomen Murkowski:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony at today's hearing entitled, "Fentanyl in Native Communities: Native Perspectives on Addressing the Growing Crisis." I am Jamie Azure; I am an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and Chairman of the Tribe. Its great to be with you today.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, nationwide over 150 people die every day from overdoses related to synthetic opioids like fentanyl. In 2020 alone, there were over 56,000 people who died of a Fentanyl overdose. This threat is real all over the United States and in my home state of North Dakota.

According to recent statistics from the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services, there also been a significant increase in overdose deaths. The fentanyl and opioid overdose death rate has steadily increased from 2019 where 1 individual per 10,000 died of an opioid or fentanyl overdose to 2022 where 2 per 10,000 in North Dakota pass away. On average 2 North Dakotans die each week from opioid and fentanyl overdoses with the highest percentages of those deaths coming from Native Americans. That's right, in North Dakota, home of five tribes, Native Americans die at a rate of almost 9 individuals per 10,000. More alarming and closer our home

of Benson Country, North Dakota has seen the one of the largest increases of fentanyl and opioid deaths in the State at almost 2 times higher than the States average. And those numbers continue to tick upward as we end 2023.

Within the Turtle Mountain Reservation we also have seen family members perish at the hands of this deadly poison. In response, we have set up several drug task forces that work with state and local authorities to stop this drug trafficking before it reaches out communities.

For example, last year the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians authorized its own tribal Division of Drug Enforcement, (“DDE”), with tribal resources. We hired a director, who along with the Law and Policy Department, formulated policy and procedures to get the DDE operational. We hired some experienced staff and became effective in March of 2023. Today we have four staff on this team.

Prior to this we had to rely on BIA-OJS’s Drug Unit’s agents. At one point we relied on one agent, among five North Dakota reservations. As you can imagine, this was ineffective. This was far too large of an area to assign to one Drug Agent.

Since March of 2023 we have had four major fentanyl drug busts. The DDE stoppes a large quantity of drugs from reaching our people. We utilized tribal intelligence and were able to intercept large shipments before they were on the streets of the Community. Please understand that these shipments are coming mostly from the Detroit metropolitan areas, and sometimes as

far as Las Vegas. In intercepting these shipments, we coordinated with State and Federal partners for arrests coming off Amtrack in Rugby, North Dakota.

Please note that all these drug shipments are from non-Indians delivering to the reservation. We have also learned through our law enforcement efforts, that these drug dealers often move into our HUD units with promises of wealth from drugs proceeds for our vulnerable populations. These individuals have significantly disrupted the lives of our children resulting in foster parents when the parents are arrested. Also, note that these drug dealers also use social media platforms such as Facebook, Tic Toc, Instagram, Snapchat, and more.

Because of the effectiveness of our DDE, the drug dealers are complaining about loss of profits and reduction of supply. I am hopeful that we can continue and develop effective partnerships with state and federal agencies but let me be clear the BIA Office of Justice Services must step up do their job.

As the Committee has been made aware, we have been strapped with limited BIA law enforcement resources. For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Law Enforcement continues to shift away resources from Turtle Mountain. In fact, BIA Law Enforcement recently shifted away our Chief of Police to work elsewhere. These decisions have made Turtle Mountain members less safe. Can you imagine if a major city such as Detroit or Chicago law enforcement were suddenly transferred someplace else? What kind of message would that send? I want to take a moment to thank Senator Hoeven for looking into this important matter for us. Hopefully

you Senator can get answers from the Department of Interior before any more tribal members are victims of crime and drug overdose.

I also want to take a moment and offer my continued support for the following:

- 1) S. 465- BADGES sponsored by Senator Cortez Masto and Senator Hoeven. This bill will help expedite background checks for BIA Law Enforcement so they can get hired more expeditiously. Part of the problem of hiring law enforcement is how long it takes to go through the background process. It should not take 9-12 months for this.
  
- 2) Advance BIA Law Enforcement Training Center at Camp Grafton, North Dakota. This training center is the only BIA law enforcement training center located in the Great Plains region. This training helps those communities that cannot send their police officers all the way to New Mexico and allows for specialized investigation classes occur such as drug interdiction classes.
  
- 3) Keeping the Drug Elimination Program in the Native American Housing Assistance and Self Determination Act ( NAHASDA) which is currently in the Senate version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This program will allow my community to utilize housing dollars to provide drug treatment services, rehabilitation, education, and relapse prevention in a cultural manner.

Again, I want to thank you for allowing me to speak to this important subject and I look forward to answering your questions.