

**Testimony of White Mountain Apache Tribal Education Department Director  
Derrick W. Leslie for the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on  
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
May 8, 2024**

Da Go Te and Greetings from the White Mountain Apache Tribe from Whiteriver, Arizona. My name is Derrick Leslie, I am of the Red Horizontal People (Dishchiidin) born for the Mesquite People (Iyayy'aiye) and hail from the community of Turkey Creek. I come before you today in my roles as Tribal Education Department Director and as a member of our Tribal Health Board. It is my hope that this brief testimony provides a glimpse of the realities facing my people in the area of Indian Education and Health.

As Tribal Education Director, I oversee the Adult Vocational Training Program, the Adult Education Program, the Office of Higher Education, the Johnson O'Malley Program, and the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, respectively. We were saddened to see the \$1 million cut to the Johnson O'Malley Program under the Bureau of Indian Education's current fiscal year budget. We appreciate the passage of the JOM Modernization Act and are excited about the update to the Student Count. Since JOM funding is based on the 1995 Student Count we anticipate a significant increase to the JOM Student Count but are worried that current funding levels of the JOM Program are not adequate enough to support any increase in the student count. We support any budget increase to the JOM Program based on input from Indian Country through formal Tribal Consultations.

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) has many deficiencies and obstructions in its efforts to educate our students. The need for school replacement on our reservation is one of our highest priorities. The Dishchii'bikoh Community School in Cibeuca and the John F. Kennedy Day School in Cedar Creek are both in need of new schools. They do their best to educate our Apache students within the current BIE system. The Theodore Roosevelt School in Fort Apache was selected in 2016 for the School Replacement Program. While we are elated at this prospect, we know that based on the current process and appropriations we will not get our new school for several years especially since the Education Construction line item was cut this current fiscal year. To this end, we strongly recommend that the BIE create and implement a long-term facilities plan similar to the Department of Defense process in 2009.

The BIE recently ended its series of Listening Sessions concerning the Indian Student Equalization Program (ISEP) and Student Transportation funding formulas. We support the Negotiated Rule-Making activities of ISEP and Student Transportation included in the BIE's FY-25 budget proposal.

I also serve on the Tribal/Interior Budget Council's Education Sub-Committee and in our recent meetings in March of 2024 the BIE was able to provide us with their \$93 million estimate to adequately fund School Resource Officers (SROs) within their school system. This estimate includes funding for the salaries of 412 School Resource Officers for the K-12 and Higher

Education Institutions, both Tribally Controlled and Bureau Operated, within BIE School System. The estimate includes equipment and training for all SROs. With gun violence in schools increasing across the country, Indian Country cannot wait for more assistance to keep our schools and communities safe; therefore we support the budget request for the BIE to fund School Resource Officers.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the work of the Native Advisory Council on Indian Education (NACIE) which was established in 1972. Since its inception NACIE has provided 268 recommendations to improve the state of Indian Education in its Annual Congressional Report. Sadly only 20% of these recommendations have been partially implemented while 0% have been fully implemented. This is simply unacceptable and part of the problem is NACIE is an unfunded Congressional mandate. We support the current budget request for NACIE and challenge all members of Congress to read their Annual Congressional Report and help us improve Indian Education by enacting the recommendations.

In the closing section of my testimony, I will share some of our health priorities with our new hospital being among them. The current existing Whiteriver Indian Hospital was completed in 1979 and is now over 45 years old. It is outdated for expansion to meet the mandatory requirements for medical informatics infrastructure. My Tribe is supportive of the building of a new hospital in our community and last estimates project the total cost of construction to be \$648 million. We ask for your support in appropriating these funds.

We were recently awarded the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI) grant for which we are grateful. This funding was reauthorized through December 31 of this current calendar year. After seeing increases in funding for this important work in our communities we strongly implore its reauthorization so any and all disruptions to this critical work in Indian Country can be avoided.

The White Mountain Apache Tribe appreciates the support of this Subcommittee as we all work together to make Indian Country a better and safer place to work and live.

I thank you for your time and consideration.

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