

**TESTIMONY OF DANA BUCKLES, COUNCILMAN  
ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX TRIBES OF THE FORT PECK RESERVATION TO  
THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND RELATED AGENCIES  
ON THE IHS and BIA FY 2026 BUDGET**

**February 25, 2025**

I am Dana Buckles, Councilman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation. I would like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to present testimony concerning FY 2026 appropriations for the Indian Health Service (IHS) and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The Fort Peck Reservation is in northeast Montana, forty miles west of the North Dakota border and fifty miles south of the Canadian border, with the Missouri River defining its southern border. The Reservation encompasses over two million acres of land. We have approximately 13,000 enrolled tribal members, with approximately 7,600 tribal members living on the Reservation. We have a total Reservation population of approximately 12,000 people.

**A. ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX RURAL WATER SYSTEM \$4,965,000 FOR FY 2026**

As a matter of courtesy to the Subcommittee, I am testifying also on behalf of the Assiniboine Sioux Rural Water Supply System (ASRWSS). ASRWSS is the tribally chartered entity charged with the planning, design, construction, operation, maintenance and replacement (OMR) of the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System, which is the part of the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. This Project was authorized by Congress in P.L. 106-382. This law requires the Bureau of Indian Affairs to pay 100% of the OM&R of this Project. For FY 2026 the Project requires \$4,965,000—a \$460,000 increase over our expected FY 2025 funding levels—in OM&R funding.

The most basic of governmental functions is the delivery of clean, safe, and reliable drinking water. We are honored to provide water and service in northeastern Montana to an area of 7,750 square miles connected by 3,200 miles of pipeline when completed in 2026. The Project provides drinking water to an area larger than New Jersey and just smaller than Massachusetts.

We thank the Subcommittee and the Bureau of Indian Affairs for complying with the law and fully funding of OM&R costs. The Project's OM&R needs continue to increase due to inflation. Thus, for FY 2026 an additional \$460,000 is requested to reach the \$4.965 million needed in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Construction account.

**B. INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE FUNDING**

While the funding for the Indian Health Service for the current year is far from certain, we remain hopeful that this Subcommittee will remain committed to the funding it proposed of \$6.025 billion for the Indian Health Service for FY 2025. Within this amount the Subcommittee proposed \$140 million for IHS Mental Health needs across Indian country, the Fort Peck Tribe Service Unit receives approximately \$132,205 (about 1/10 of one percent). For the IHS Alcohol and Substance Abuse Program the Subcommittee proposed \$282 million. This a significant increase over FY

2024. While we hope this will result in an increase in funding for the Fort Peck Tribes, right now we receive only \$1.77 million. This is not enough.

At Fort Peck, we have the Spotted Bull Recovery Resource Center (SBRRRC) that serves as the Tribal SUD program. We provide best practices, evidence-based and culturally appropriate prevention, intervention and treatment services primarily related to substance misuse, complemented by mental health services to patients who present with SUD needs. We provide services according to the American Society of Addiction Medication (ASAM) levels of care.

Our program offers four levels of care: Level 0.5 (Prevention and Education); Level 1.0 (Outpatient); Level 2.1 (Intensive Outpatient); and Level 3.1 (Day Treatment). We make referrals to higher levels of care involving primary residential inpatient treatment programs that we do not offer on the Fort Peck Reservation. I wish it were otherwise. We urge the Subcommittee to devote additional appropriations to IHS mental health and substance misuse programs so that outpatient and inpatient treatment services can be greatly expanded and made widely available on our Reservation and across Indian country. We urge the Subcommittee to consider more than a 1.7% increase (\$4.4 million) in FY 2025 for the IHS Dental Health Program budget of \$248 million and more than a 1% increase (\$1.2 million) in FY 2025 for the IHS Public Health Nursing Program.

### **C. BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS FUNDING**

**Law Enforcement** - One of the main symptoms of the fentanyl crisis on the Fort Peck Reservation has been a corresponding rise in crime on the Reservation. We have seen an increase in crime across the board, but especially in property crime and violent crime—including sexual and other violent assaults, kidnapping and homicide. Crimes at Fort Peck are being committed by and against every demographic within our community.

The Fort Peck Tribes have provided law enforcement and correctional services on our Reservation since 1996 under an Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act contract. We were of the first Tribes in the Country to have cross-deputization agreements with the State, and the Cities and Counties on our Reservation.

BIA law enforcement must be fully funded so that tribes like ours can attract, hire and retain more law enforcement personnel to live and work in our community. We are losing tribal police due to burnout and the higher salaries and better benefits that surrounding state and county law enforcement programs can offer. We must do better by our first responders. I ask this Subcommittee to increase tribal public safety needs in the FY 2026 budget.

**Tribal Court Funding** - Similarly, BIA must increase funding for tribal justice systems. As Congress has known for years based on thorough, bipartisan study, the most effective law enforcement is locally determined and administered, and thus reflective of local values—in Indian country this means tribally determined and administered and reflective of tribal values. At Fort Peck, we have always known that strong tribal government is the best way to keep our community safe. It is for that reason that, for more than fifty years now, the Fort Peck Tribes have had an independent judicial system, including an appellate court. Our tribal court system includes law-trained judges, law-trained prosecutors and public defenders, probation officers and experienced and court reporters. Our tribal code is published and publicly available. We are also one of a small

number of tribal court systems exercising expanded jurisdiction and enhanced sentencing under VAWA and the Tribal Law and Order Act.

This kind of work requires additional resources to attract, hire and retain skilled professionals and provide high-level services to all the individuals and families in the system. That is why I ask Congress to significantly increase funding for tribal courts in the FY 2026 budget.

**Housing** - It is important that sufficient BIA funding be dedicated to addressing the social conditions on the Reservation that are interrelated with many of the problems we see with the mental health and drug crisis, the Reservation crime rate and health disparities within our community—and one such area for this is housing. We have a significant shortage of housing at Fort Peck. In many cases, we have multiple families living in a single home. There is overcrowding. This means that exposure to illness and unhealthy behaviors is unavoidable for many people, especially children. The BIA Housing Improvement Program (HIP) is a critical tool in addressing this crisis. It provides assistance to the neediest in our community. We urge the Subcommittee to continue this important funding. Further, we understand, however, that the Tiwahe Initiative Program provides greater flexibility regarding Tiwahe HIP funding than the BIA HIP Program. We urge the Subcommittee to increase the Tiwahe Initiative Program to benefit more Tribes and trust Tribes to wisely use Tiwahe Initiative funds to address unmet housing and interim housing needs of our members.

**Social Services & ICWA Funding** – Our Social Service Program needs have only grown over the last year, particularly in light of the mental health and substance misuse issues I have highlighted. These issues have hit young adults, many of whom are parents, particularly hard and are thus exacerbating the stress put on our already thinly stretched social services providers and programs. Our families need additional wraparound and preventive social services support so that their children do not enter the foster care system. And for those children who do enter the system, we must have greater funding to recruit and retain licensed foster care homes on the Reservation. We would ask the Subcommittee to increase funding for all BIA Social Services Programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.