

Testimony of David Hill
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“Examining 50 years of Indian Self-Determination Assistance Act in Indian Country”
April 4,2025

Good morning Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Leger Fernández, and Members of the House Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs.

Thank you for holding this important field hearing on *“Examining 50 Years of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEA) in Indian Country.”* This conversation is deeply meaningful for the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, as well as for tribal nations across the United States. I appreciate the opportunity to share both the challenges we face and the tremendous progress we’ve made—thanks to ISDEA and the broader policy of self-determination.

The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act marked a turning point in federal Indian policy. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach from Washington, ISDEA recognized that tribes are best positioned to govern and serve our own people. Over the past 50 years, this principle has reshaped Indian Country—strengthening tribal governments, improving quality of life, and creating safer, healthier, and more prosperous communities.

At the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, we see ISDEA as a powerful tool for rebuilding the governing capacity and infrastructure that past federal policies eroded. These tools help us deliver services in a culturally appropriate and locally responsive manner. And they don’t just benefit tribal citizens—they lift entire regions by creating jobs, stabilizing communities, and attracting investment.

ISDEA enabled us to assume control of healthcare services starting in 1978, beginning with the acquisition of our first hospital in Okemah. Today, we operate four hospitals—including a Long-Term Acute Care facility—and nine clinics across our Reservation. In 2023 alone, we provided healthcare to over 230,000 individuals and filled nearly 330,000 prescriptions. Many of our patients are non-tribal community members. Our healthcare system created more than 1,400 jobs—half held by Muscogee citizens—and is a key part of the region’s economy and public health infrastructure.

This success wasn’t achieved with tribal funds alone. It required leveraging IHS resources, federal grants, and third-party revenue. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act, Social Security Act, and Affordable Care Act all help make this possible, working hand-in-hand with ISDEA to build a sustainable tribal healthcare system.

Likewise, our work in economic development shows how tribal self-governance supports regional prosperity. In 2023, the Nation’s government operations generated over \$800 million in expenditures, resulting in a total economic impact of more than \$2 billion. When we include the contributions of our business enterprises, that number climbs past \$3 billion. These are real wages, real services, and real reinvestments into our communities.

As one of the largest landholding tribes in Oklahoma, we manage over 129,000 acres of restricted lands for individual citizens and more than 14,000 acres in trust. Our compacted Realty Department supports everything from surface leasing to oil and gas royalty recovery to estate planning. These services allow families to retain and benefit from their lands, creating generational value while preserving our homeland.

Thanks to reforms such as the 2018 amendments to the Stigler Act, more citizens can keep their allotments intact. These are not abstract achievements—they are real, measurable benefits: rental income for families, business and agricultural use, and protections for sacred sites and natural resources.

We urge Congress to support reforms that make it easier for tribes to take land into trust and to protect sacred places—tools essential to sovereignty, heritage preservation, and economic planning.

638 contracting and compacting is the engine of modern tribal governance. While law enforcement is often the most visible area, it is only one piece of a much broader framework that allows tribes to govern effectively and responsively.

At Muscogee (Creek) Nation, we use 638 authority to operate a wide array of programs that directly serve the needs of our people and contribute to community safety, health, and prosperity:

Emergency Services

Our ambulatory and emergency response services provide critical care across our Reservation, often serving rural areas where state or county capacity is limited. These services are lifesaving—and they are possible because of the flexibility and stability 638 provides.

Education and Youth Services

From early childhood education to higher education scholarships, 638 enables us to support youth in culturally rooted, academically rigorous environments. We also operate language revitalization and cultural preservation programs that instill identity and pride in our young people—key factors in preventing social harms down the line.

Workforce Development

Employment and training programs supported through 638 contracts help tribal citizens gain skills, earn certifications, and launch careers. Our job centers work directly with tribal enterprises and local businesses to match workers to real opportunities. This is especially critical in transitioning citizens from short-term assistance to long-term economic stability.

Housing and Infrastructure

Housing assistance, home repair for elders, and infrastructure planning are all coordinated through our self-governance agreements. These programs strengthen family stability, enable intergenerational living, and increase housing stock across the Reservation.

Elder and Family Services

We operate elder meal programs, wellness checks, and in-home care, ensuring that those who built our Nation are supported with dignity. Our family services programs also provide parenting resources, domestic violence response, and trauma-informed support for children and caregivers.

All of this—emergency response, education, workforce training, housing, and elder care—is possible through 638. These are not side projects. They are the core functions of any government. And they are deeply connected: when citizens are educated, housed, healthy, and employed, communities are safer, more resilient, and more prosperous.

We are proud of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Lighthorse Police Department and the role it plays in our justice system. But even more important than the number of officers or jail beds is our ability to keep people from entering that system in the first place. Through 638, we invest in diversion, prevention, reentry, rehabilitation, and restorative justice—approaches that strengthen, rather than strain, our families and communities.

To build on 50 years of success under ISDEA, we recommend the following:

- **Reform laws governing land-into-trust and sacred site protections** so that all tribes have equitable and efficient access to tools necessary to protect cultural heritage and exercise full territorial sovereignty.
- **Expand 638 contracting authorities into additional federal functions**—including education, housing, infrastructure, and emergency management—so that tribes can tailor programs to meet local needs.
- **Support co-stewardship and co-management agreements** between tribes and federal agencies, ensuring tribal voices shape land and resource decisions.
- **Create clear statutory authority for tribal governments to levy and collect taxes** on activities within our jurisdiction, which is essential to long-term financial independence.

The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act helped usher in an era of tribal resurgence. But this hearing should not be the end of the conversation—it must be the beginning of a new chapter.

The federal government has a trust and treaty obligation to support tribal self-determination. The Muscogee (Creek) Nation—and all tribal nations—are ready to do our part. We are building institutions, investing in people, and doing the hard work of governing. We ask Congress to meet us with bold, decisive legislative action to help us continue that work.

Thank you for your attention and your commitment to tribal nations.