

**Testimony Of Honorable Lonna J. Street
Chairperson, Spirit Lake Nation**

Before The Senate Committee On Indian Affairs

**Hearing On “Justice And Safety For Native Children: Examining Title II Of The Draft
Native Children’s Commission Implementation Act.”**

**January 28, 2026 At 2:30 P.M.
Senate Dirksen Office Building, Room 628**

Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, Senator Hoeven and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Bill on **“Justice And Safety For Native Children: Examining Title II Of The Draft Native Children’s Commission Implementation Act.”**

I have the honor to serve as the Chairperson of the Spirit Lake Nation. We are the Mni Waukan Dakota. Mni Waukan, means Spirit Lake, Dakota means Friends or Allies, and we are comprised of the Sisseton, Wahpeton and Yankton Council Fires of the Seven Council Fires of the Great Sioux Nation, Oceti Sakowin. Our original homeland includes Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and we put the Dakota in North and South Dakota. Dakota means Friends, and our 1867 Treaty with the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe acknowledges that we are Allies of the United States of America.

A Snapshot of the Tiwahe Program

Let me say at the beginning, TIWAHE means Family in our Dakota Language. Traditionally TIWAHE is everyone you love and care for. My TIWAHE is my community, my Nation. What the TIWAHE initiative has provided the Spirit Lake Nation is the ability to grow our TIWAHE sacredly in the manner in which we decide is most effective and the way we develop it to meet the family at their needs to survive. In some cases to reunify after they have picked themselves back up from dealing with their own traumas and lived experiences that we encounter. Boarding School affects linger within our communities. The traumas our ancestors faced from warfare, removal and starvation.....

The TIWAHE Initiative has provided the Spirit Lake Nation with the ability to grow our TIWAHE in a sacred and self-determined way—one that reflects our values and allows us to decide what is most effective for our people. We develop our approach to meet families where they are, supporting their basic survival, healing, and, when possible, reunification after they have worked to rise from their own traumas and lived experiences.

The effects of historical trauma remain present within our communities. The boarding school era and, later, the Relocation Act of the 1950s through the 1970s inflicted lasting harm that continues to impact our people socially, emotionally, culturally, and economically. These experiences disrupted family structures, identity, and a sense of belonging.

Through TIWAHE, we have revitalized cultural teachings, strengthened unity among our people, and supported language preservation. These efforts restore identity and foster community belonging—especially for members who often feel isolated in their struggles. TIWAHE is not simply a program; it is a pathway to healing, reconnection, and resilience for our families and our Nation. Our goal has always been to restore our beliefs that we are all related through shared living, and experiences.

When we have the support of our Native Nations in a TIWAHE or family way, the loving and nurturing lifts us up and our young people can have an opportunity for lifetime of success and service to our Dakota Oyate and America.

Treaty Rights and the American Constitution

The American Constitution acknowledges our Indian treaties as among the Supreme Law of the Land. Our 1867 Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe Treaty (which we share with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) guarantees our Spirit Lake Reservation as our permanent home, and we ceded substantial lands including Fargo—our most populous North Dakota city—as part of our treaty agreement.¹ As a condition of statehood, North Dakota agreed to never claim our Indian lands and to always acknowledge congressional jurisdiction in Indian affairs.

In our 1867 Treaty, America promised the Spirit Lake Tribe that our Reservation would serve as our “permanent reservation,” meaning a livable permanent home. America promised to assist Spirit Lake Tribe with:

- An Agent to help the Spirit Lake Tribe with Reservation Self-Governance;
- Self-Determination, including the enactment of tribal “laws for the security of life and property, the advancement of civilization, and the agricultural prosperity of the members of said bands upon the respective reservations;”
- Education and Schools;
- Agriculture;
- Erection of Houses;
- Public Safety; and
- Land and Water Rights.

United States v. Winters, 207 U.S. 564 (1908).

Demographics of the Spirit Lake Nation

By national standards, Spirit Lake Nation is a large tribe with about 8,000 tribal members and 450 square miles of reservation land including Devil’s Lake, North Dakota’s largest natural lake. The Sisseton are the Dakota People who live at fish village. Fishing was important to all

¹ The 1868 Great Sioux Nation Treaty guarantees western South Dakota as the permanent home of the Great Sioux Reservation for the “absolute and undisturbed use and occupation” of the Great Sioux Nation, and affirms our existing Reservation east of the Missouri River.

of our Dakota People, and traditionally, we had a ceremonial feast of fish during the spring fish runs. The Interior Department acknowledged that Devil's Lake was an integral part of our Spirit Lake Reservation and the Federal Government acquired our Lakebed for the Garrison Diversion Project. We now seek the return of our Lakebed for the future of our people, our traditional cultural heritage and for hospitality, the mainstay of our tribal economy.

Even with all of our SLT efforts to promote tribal economic development, Benson County, North Dakota on our Spirit Lake Reservation has a persistently high poverty rate of 27.2% of residents, mostly tribal members, compared with the 12.5% poverty rate nationally. We suffer poor health status and reduced life expectancy, only 65 years among Native Americans nationally and 47 years for our Dakota men and 56 years for our Dakota women. Among Native Americans, the homicide rate is 4x higher than among non-Hispanic whites, according to CDC.

Our statistics are always worse than the Native American national average. Poor infrastructure, unemployment, social and economic dislocation are major factors in this increased mortality.

Traditional Dakota Philosophy: Life is Sacred, Honor the Creator

In our belief, the Creator gave the breath of life to the first woman and first man, and with the breath of life, the freedom to dream and a sacred duty to protect Grandmother Earth. In our way, our children are *Wakanyaja*, the Creator's sacred gift of life.

Today, we are on a mission from the Creator—to provide safe homes and to protect our children from harm and violence. As Sitting Bull said, If we can all put our hearts and minds into our work, we can join hands to provide a better life our children. Together, we can work to protect all of our women, children and men from violence, and redirect ourselves to the Creator's teaching that we have within us the Center of the Universe and our sacred spirit. We respect every member of our family, our Nation, North Dakota and America. We are here to help one other, to lift up our relatives, to serve Grandmother Earth and honor the Creator.

The Tiwahe Program

In Dakota language, Tiwahe (ti-wah-hay) means family in Dakota. The Tiwahe Program is a community fostered initiative that affords Indigenous leadership the opportunity to provide culturally appropriate community support for Native families by integrating tribal practices, cultural norms, values and traditions into social service programs.

Tiwahe is grounded in Tribal values and principles, which guide the goals and objectives of a coordinated service delivery model among agencies and justice systems in a manner that:

- Creates alternatives to incarceration via solution-focused sentencing,
- Increases access to family and social services,
- Improves links to appropriate prevention,
- Provides intervention and treatment opportunities,
- Improves case management services, and

- Improves the overall partnerships among local, tribal, county, state, and federal providers to improve access to services for tribal children, youth, and families.

The Tiwahe Program provides for integration of Job Placement and Training, Social Services, Housing, Pathways to Wellness, ICWA, Tribal and Wellness Courts.

At Spirit Lake Nation, Tiwahe Initiative symbolizes how we are connected to all living things and one's personal responsibility is to protect family, community, and mother nature. There is no asset more precious to tribes than the health, safety, and well-being of its children, youth, and families. The Tiwahe Initiative seeks to show the importance of service coordination between programs within tribal communities so that critical services more effectively and efficiently reach Native families.

The key objectives are to create a more effective and efficient coordinated service delivery model that includes improved screening, improved access to family and social services, create alternatives to incarceration through solution-focused sentencing options, improved links to appropriate prevention, intervention, and treatment opportunities, improved case management services, and finally improved overall partnerships between local, tribal, county, state, and federal providers to improve overall access to services for tribal children, youth, and families.

The Tiwahe program effectively brings together Federal and tribal programs to provide better support for families, improves employment opportunities for economically challenged workers, improves social service support, and reduces the need for foster care by keeping families intact.

The purpose of the Tiwahe Program is to extend comprehensive support services to Native children and families in need of assistance through employment, housing, drug courts, rehabilitation, education opportunity, and cultural traditions. At Spirit Lake Nation, we embrace our Dakota traditions, culture and language. And, as we fashion "Tiwahe"—Native family type programs, we are kind to our children, and we work to fashion tribal programs that support safe homes, strong families, and healthy children.

Drug abuse and violence are shocking reality for Native America. Native Americans did not use opioids traditionally. Native Peoples suffer the highest rates of fatal drug overdoses and homicide. Embrace of Native cultural identity for our children nurtures success now and for the future. Our children are the future of our Native Nations. With the revival of traditional cultural activities and values, we must embrace all of our children as the Creator's sacred gift of life and work to nurture strong native cultural identities.

Tiwahe nurtures success for our children, families, and Native nations through Indian Self-Governance. As Tiwahe nurtures the children, our children will bring new life to our Self-Governance. Traditional values and Self-Governance embodied in Tiwahe hold the promise of sustainable community wellness. As Dakota Strive to Be Good Relatives, we extend our love and caring for future generations. Empowered by our traditional values, our new generations offer us hope for the future.

TIWAHE allows for healing by returning our Dakota People to our traditional values of WoDakota, a loving, nurturing family and community. Bringing the recovering person back to the sacred circle provides an opportunity for a return to the person's sense of self, sense of true family and community, and we find that our people rejoin the community as a respected person of his or her community and family and the success is found in a restored balance in sober life. Prayer circles, cultural ceremonies are important to restoring the cultural identity, family and community connections.

The Spotted Bear Sobeloff Native Children's Commission

Alyce Spotted Bear was the leader of the MHA Nation of North Dakota, an educator and Native cultural and language advocate, so we honor her memory as a renowned North Dakota tribal leader. The Children's Commission study was intended to gather on-the-ground real life input from Tribal Government leaders to form the basis for several recommendations by the Commission. The Commission recommended:

- Addressing the need for trauma care and culturally informed prevention/intervention strategies for Native children in the juvenile justice system because Native children are overrepresented in the system due to economic and social support network disparities.
- Integrating Native history, culture and languages into education to strengthen positive community attachment, cultural identity and a sense of purpose and pride in our Native youth.
- Recognizing the historical trauma that continues to injure our Native youth today, ensuring culturally competent physical, mental and behavioral health programs for our young people.

These recommendations are intended to promote Native youth wellness at home in our tribal and reservation communities. Ms. Gloria Oneill, Chairwoman of the Native Children's Commission said, "For too long, in spite of their resilience and rich heritage, the life experiences of Native children have been disproportionately marred by poverty, child abuse, domestic violence, crime, and substance abuse; it is our job, as Commissioners, to do all we can to change those circumstances for our youngest and most vulnerable Native people."

At Spirit Lake Nation, we wholeheartedly endorse these recommendations and seek to secure the resources necessary to implement them on a broad basis.

[Give Examples of the Need].

The "Native Children's Commission Implementation Act."

Title II of the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act would establish a Tribal Juvenile Justice Advisory Commission within the Office of Juvenile Justice at the U.S. Department of Justice. Because of the unique nature of Federal criminal jurisdiction in Indian country under the Major Crimes Act and Indian Country Crimes Act, Native children are very

overrepresented in the Federal juvenile justice system and there is an urgent need to fund tribal juvenile justice systems to help Native youth avoid incarceration in the Federal system, which can expose first time offenders to drug dealers and other serious offenders from outside Indian country.

In this light, it is critically important to fully fund and expand the Tiwahe program across Indian country to reduce foster care placements that can lead to family disintegration and Native youth involvement in the Federal juvenile justice system. The Tiwahe program has been shown to be a successful way to provide comprehensive services to support healthy family homes for Native youth who would otherwise be very challenged by the break-up of family homes.

Homeland Security

Events in Minnesota, our traditional home, require a statement about our status as dual citizens of the Spirit Lake Nation and America. Dakota People have prior rights in America, and America needs permission from our Native Nations to be in our land. Per the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty with the Sioux Nation, America sought permission from our Tribes for settlers to cross our lands, and we reserved our original tribal rights, including our own right to cross over and hunt and fish on our neighbors' land.

The Spirit Lake Nation endorses the FY 26 Appropriations requirement for education of Department of Homeland Security ICE Agents to receive consultation and collaboration training to work with Indian tribes, including education on our Tribal Government right to issue Tribal I.D.s. Federal law mandates DHS to acknowledge our Dakota People's dual citizenship as Spirit Lake Tribal Citizens and American citizens. Our treaty says that when we become American citizens, we retain our treaty rights. Our most important treaty right is self-government: our original sovereign right to make our own laws and be ruled by them, to self-govern our Dakota People and preserve our reservation as our home.

As the American People with the highest rate of military service, our Native American service in the Armed Services mandates respect from the United States, its Departments and Agencies. Accordingly, the Spirit Lake Nation calls upon Congress to establish a Department of Interior (DOI) Bureau of Indian Affairs program to support Tribal Government I.D.s as Real I.D.s in cooperation with DHS under Public Law 102-477, and to engage in Self-Governance Compacts with Indian tribes under Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act and the Tribal Self-Governance Act, to manage immigration issues on Indian reservations and tribal lands and to issue Tribal Government Real I.D.s with recognition by DOI and DHS for Federal and Tribal Government purposes. In addition, acting through DOI, DHS and the Department of Justice, Congress should fund Tribal Government Law Enforcement Training, Staffing, Equipment and Facilities and promote public safety by Tribal Government Law Enforcement under Indian sovereignty within our reservation and lands.

The Spirit Lake Nation has Suffered Extreme Violence

The homicide rate among Native Americans is 4x the rate among non-Hispanic whites. This year, we have already had 5 murders at Spirit Lake Nation. That is far too many.

Savannah LaFontaine Greywind was our Spirit Lake Nation Tribal Member, and she grew up at Spirit Lake. She moved to Fargo to study nursing and serve as Community Nursing Assistant, and she continued to return home, ride horses, and enjoy the natural beauty of our land. We honor Savannah's memory, and we hold her close in our hearts with our annual Spirit Lake Nation Savannah Greywind Day in her honor. A young pregnant mom, her disappearance and murder devastated our Nation, the Fargo Community and the whole state of North Dakota.

Before Kelly Armstrong was elected Governor, he was a Congressman, and he stood up to support the passage of Savannah's Act. In his service as Governor, I have to commend Kelly Armstrong. Spirit Lake went to see Governor Armstrong in February and he said that he would help us get more BIA Law Enforcement and would coordinate on public safety challenges. Just ten days later, we had a multiple victim shooting, and as I was considering how to best respond, Governor Armstrong called to say how can I help? I said, we need a helicopter and he sent one right away. By doing so, he helped us catch the shooter without more violence, so Governor Armstrong helped us save lives. That's the type of cooperation we need to face these emergencies. And, I truly thank Governor Armstrong.

We also thank Chairperson Murkowski, Senator Heitkamp and Senator Hoeven for the passage of Savannah's Act as well. Savannah's Act is intended to improve the response to the Crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. Shockingly, 84% of Indigenous women are victimized by violent crime during their lifetimes, and Indigenous women suffer a murder rate 10x higher than the national average. Savannah's Act provides better information about Missing Indigenous Women, highlight best practices for searches, and better coordination among Federal, state, and tribal law enforcement to find Missing and Murdered Native Americans.

Tragically, at Spirit Lake, we continue to suffer Murdered and Missing Indigenous People including Gemini Posey, our 21 year-old Tribal Member who has been missing since January 2024, and her brother-in-law, Isaac Hunt, who went missing in March 2024 and whose remains were recently found. Shortly thereafter, Gemini Posey's spouse, who is also Isaac's brother, was charged in their murders. Last December, the Spirit Lake Nation was informed another of our young Missing Tribal Members was discovered on the San Carlos Apache Reservation in Arizona. These murdered and missing Indigenous persons cases demonstrate the need to continue to work hard to join hands across jurisdictional lines to protect our Indigenous women, children and men.

Today, we would like to consider model law enforcement cooperation agreements with our neighbors. So, when we have a Missing Person, we'd like to call upon our U.S. Attorney to take a leadership role in coordinating search and rescue efforts. It is especially important to have our cooperative law enforcement and public safety emergency response protocols in place now because we need to request help from our whole system of law enforcement partners, Federal-state-and-tribal when a Missing Person is reported because in the first 72 hours after the person is missing, we have our best chance for a rescue. We want a rescue because we want to save lives.

Increased Funding is Needed for Law Enforcement

We request a significant increase in funding for the Office of Justice Services at the Department of the Interior. In our view, the OJS budget should be increased from the \$580 Million dedicated in FY 2026. To \$950 Million to provide for improved law enforcement coverage of Indian reservations under Federal and Tribal criminal law enforcement and public safety jurisdictions.

And, we are calling upon Congress for help. From Spirit Lake and our sister Great Plains nations and tribes, we would like to call for enactment of an Indian Country Violent Crime Fighting Act with the Secretary of the Interior and the U.S. Attorney General as co-chairs with Tribal Leaders—Basically codifying President Trump’s Lady Justice Task Force.

To back that up, we need Major DOJ Block Grants, 638 Indian Self-Determination Contracts and Self-Governance Compacts, and joint BIA—DOJ funding for Annual Tribal Master Law Enforcement Plans. So, we have our work cut out for us.

Conclusion

The Tiwahe Program and the other important reforms of the **The “Native Children’s Commission Implementation Act”** are essential to save this generation of Native Youth. The economic and social challenges facing Indian families coupled with the historical trauma that generations of Native Americans have suffered puts our Native youth, the future of Indian country in jeopardy. Enactment of the “Native Children’s Commission Implementation Act” is essential for Native youth, Native families and Native Nations.