

TESTIMONY
OF
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SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY-INDIAN AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN, INSULAR AND ALASKA NATIVE AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
S. 246, THE “ALYCE SPOTTED BEAR AND WALTER SOBOLIEFF COMMISSION ON NATIVE
CHILDREN ACT”

MAY 18, 2018

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Ruiz, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Cheryl Andrews-Maltais. I am the Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs, at the Department of the Interior (Department). Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 246, the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission Act.” Children are a most sacred responsibility for Tribes and Indian families and tribal preservation depends on protection and support of Indian families and children.

As members of this Subcommittee are aware, Native American children are the most at-risk population in the United States, and are in that vulnerable position because many Indian communities face high rates of poverty, substance abuse, suicide, and violent crime, leading to serious and persistent child abuse and neglect issues. Child maltreatment often leads to disrupted extended family support networks and broken families when children are placed outside the community. Solutions lie in addressing the interrelated problems of poverty, violence, and substance abuse faced by many communities to help improve the lives of, and opportunities for, Indian families. This requires tribally-initiated coordination of social service programs; steps to maintain family cohesiveness; preparation of family wage earners for work opportunities; and rehabilitative alternatives to incarceration for family members with substance abuse issues.

The Administration supports S. 246, which would establish the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children. However, we would note that the bill may benefit from certain corrections. We would be happy to work with you and your staff and other agencies on those corrections. For example, we understand that the Department of Justice (DOJ) has provided technical assistance on similar legislation.

The Department has been working on initiatives that are complementary to the goals of S. 246. For example, the Department worked with the Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Department of Justice on updates to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Child Protection Handbook (Handbook), which is used by social workers, health care providers, law enforcement, courts, and educators in Indian

Country. This Handbook provides guidance on indicators of child abuse, reporting requirements, and the assembly and function of child protection teams in Indian Country.

Supporting Indian families and ensuring public safety are top priorities for the President and tribal leaders. Under the President's Generation Indigenous Initiative, the Administration is focused on addressing barriers to success for Native youth and families. As part of the Administration's commitment to protect and promote the development of prosperous tribal communities, BIA will continue to expand the Tiwahe Initiative. The Initiative is a five year demonstration program launched in 2014 to address barriers to success faced by Native youth by leveraging BIA programs in concert with other Federal programs supporting family and community stability and cultural awareness. Four Tiwahe pilot tribal sites were selected in 2015, including the Spirit Lake Tribe, Red Lake Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and Association of Village Council Presidents. Two more sites will be selected in 2016.

As part of the Tiwahe Initiative, the BIA Division of Human Services will create a Center for Excellence to provide opportunities for learning, cross-training, and information sharing for tribes in the areas of leadership, best practices, research, support, and training. Additionally, the Center for Excellence will allow Tiwahe tribes the opportunity to train other tribes and tribal organizations on a comprehensive approach for a coordinated service delivery model. Tiwahe tribes will also be able to share best practices and lessons learned from implementation of the Tiwahe Initiative.

The Department is seeking program budget increases to support Tiwahe objectives, such as social services programs to provide culturally-appropriate services with the goal of empowering individuals and families through health promotion, family stability, and strengthening tribal communities as a whole. The President's budget also includes increases for ICWA programs that work with social services programs and the courts to keep Indian children in need of foster care in Indian communities where possible. With these increases, BIA also plans to add five more tribal pilot sites.

These activities and budget request increases are important pieces of overall Administration efforts to address Indian child welfare issues, but S. 246 goes beyond these efforts. This bill recognizes the need for a more collaborative and holistic approach across the federal government and the private sector to better define the issues and make recommendations for meaningful and lasting solutions. The bill includes a plan for measurable outcomes, better data, and implementation of best practices. It also includes Tribal youth voices that need to be heard.

We are happy to work with members of the Subcommittee on this bill as it moves forward. This concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.