



# NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

## TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN, INSULAR, AND ALASKA NATIVE AFFAIRS LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON S. 246 – THE ALYCE SPOTTED BEAR AND WALTER SOBOLOFF COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN

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### TESTIMONY OF: THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS AARON PAYMENT, SECRETARY

May 18, 2016

On behalf of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the oldest, largest, and most representative American Indian and Alaska Native organization serving the broad interests of tribal governments and communities, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of S. 246, the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children.

Formed in 1944 as a response to termination and assimilation policies that threatened the existence of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, NCAI has fought to preserve the treaty rights and sovereign status of tribal governments, while improving the quality of life for Native communities and peoples. A large part of ensuring the future for Native communities is providing the tools and systems of support necessary for Native youth to thrive.

NCAI supports S. 246 as a means to focus on the holistic wellbeing of Native youth by creating a Commission to conduct a comprehensive study on the federal, state, local and tribal programs and serve Native children. The Commission's work will culminate in a report to Congress that makes recommendations for improvements to the current systems and programs in place serving Native youth.

S. 246 brings together the federal, tribal, and youth experts in the areas of juvenile justice, social work, education, and mental, physical, and behavioral health to make specific recommendations that can be utilized by Congress in setting legislative and funding priorities that can improve the delivery of services to tribal communities for the wellbeing of their youth.

The issues impacting Native youth in Indian Country are both long-standing and complex. There are many factors that must be considered when evaluating the issues facing Native youth such as high rates of poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and the historic underfunding of tribal programs. The statistics that face our communities, and especially our youth, demonstrate the need for creation of the Commission on Native Children.

Poverty. Native youth face crushing poverty. The poverty rate for American Indian and Alaska Native youth on reservations is 47.1 percent as compared with 36.3 percent for all American Indian and Alaska Native children under the age of 18 and 21.6 percent for all races.

Health Related Issues. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Native youth 15 to 24 – 2.5 times higher than the national rate. And the obesity rates

among Native youth are higher than any other group with nearly four in ten Native children categorized as overweight or obese.

Education. The educational attainment for Native youth lags behind the general population with an average graduation rate of 68 percent compared to the national average of 81 percent. At Bureau of Indian Education schools that rate falls to 53 percent.

Exposure to Violence. American Indian and Alaska Native children suffer exposure to violence at rates higher than any other race in the United States. Because of this, Native children experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the same rate as veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with 22 percent of Native youth exhibiting PTSD, three times the national rate.

Foster Care. Indian children are overrepresented in foster care at 2.1 times the general population.

These statistics are daunting; our Native youth are worth the investment in their future. It is incumbent on all of us, at every level, federal, state, local and tribal, to provide the resources necessary for our Native youth to succeed.

While tribal and federal governments have sought solutions to the complex issues facing Native youth, a comprehensive and holistic approach is required to make long lasting and meaningful changes to current programs. The delivery of programs to youth in tribal communities must be examined, streamlined and modernized while taking into account the role of traditional and culture in formulating programs that meet the needs of the tribal youth of today.

S. 246 achieves those goals by ensuring participation across federal agencies such as the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Education. NCAI also appreciates the inclusion of a Native Advisory Committee to serve as an advisory body to the Commission, as well as a Native Children Subcommittee to bring the youth perspective to the discussion. Being able to draw on the grassroots experiences of Native youth and tribal leaders from different geographical regions will provide the Commission with the input and data needed ensure thoughtful and practical recommendations to Congress.

In addition to the Native Advisory Committee, NCAI recommends that the Commission hold meetings throughout Indian Country to learn about the strengths and challenges that tribal leaders face in implementing current federal programs.

Too often we hear that tribes face bureaucratic hurdles and that programs are segmented across agencies who don't communicate with each other. Indian Country has long asked the federal government to break down the barriers that exist among agencies so that tribes can better design and implement programs for youth in their tribal communities.

Another important component of S. 246 is examination of state programs and funding streams. States and tribes are typically in competition for the same funding, coupled with the jurisdictional overlaps make it difficult for tribes to provide the needed protections and services for their youth. NCAI fully supports an examination of the programs provided by states that should be accessible by tribal youth and an indication of the level of direct funding that reaches tribes from federal funding granted to states. NCAI members, along with budget advisory committees at the Department of the Interior and Health and Human Services have sought increased or direct funding

for a number of programs related to: juvenile justice and victim services; suicide prevention; behavioral health; child welfare; and job training.

By looking at the full scope of programs and needs for Native youth in Indian Country, the Commission will be able provide decision makers with the information needed to develop more cohesive and streamlined programs and policies that can achieve the greatest impacts on Native youth.

The Commission will take into account the work that has been done previously to examine needs in specific areas. For example, the Attorney General's Advisory Committee on American Indian/Alaska Native Children Exposed to Violence issued a report in November 2014 that contains critical recommendations for ensuring the safety and security of Native youth while incorporating traditional ceremonies and culture into the healing process.

In addition, the Department of the Interior launched the Tiwahe Initiative in 2014. This Initiative is a pilot program that brings together resources to address family welfare and poverty issues, education, economic development, incarceration and natural resource preservation. This multi-pronged approach to support Native youth and families is a trend that must continue to achieve significant results.

In the private sector, Native organizations have also come together to address issues facing Native youth. In 2008, NCAI, the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the National Indian Education Association and the National Indian Health Board came together to develop the Native Children's Agenda. This Agenda was developed to make recommendations across the government on ways to create healthy, safe, and stable tribal communities.

In 2015, our organizations moved forward with a youth-specific agenda called the First Kids 1<sup>st</sup> initiative. As part of this effort we updated the recommendations in the Native Children's Agenda and launched an initiative intended to bring focus and support to the needs of native youth. In creating this agenda, our organizations intend to inform policymakers while acknowledging that any long-standing change will happen in Native families and communities, but will also be dependent on policies and funding at the local, state and federal level.

What all of these recent initiatives and studies around Native youth programs acknowledge is the current system is not working. The historic approach of fragmented programs and services is not enough to treat the whole person. Until our youth are whole, our tribal communities cannot be whole.

This is why NCAI fully supports S. 246, the Native American Children's Safety Act. This Act is a first step toward providing information to all of the stakeholders who must be brought together to empower Native youth.