



Statement of

**Lillian Sparks Robinson
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

Before the

**Subcommittee on Indian, Insular and Alaska Native Affairs
Committee on Natural Resources
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Chairman Young, Ranking Member Ruiz, and members of the Subcommittee, it is my honor to testify before this Subcommittee on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on S. 246. I am a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, which is located in South Dakota. I serve as the Commissioner for the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), which is part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), as well as the Chair of the Intra-Departmental Council on Native American Affairs.

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 Commission would conduct a comprehensive study on federal, tribal, and state programs that serve or are intended to serve American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children. Children have always been the most sacred and valuable resource for tribes and AI/AN families, yet they are the most at-risk population in the country, facing significant and persistent disparities in the areas of health, education, and safety.

Protecting children and promoting safe and supportive communities is a top priority of HHS and of ACF. The coordinated research on the full scope of the existing issues and challenges facing AI/AN children and families that would be made possible through the Commission would greatly support Federal, tribal, and state governments in the development and improvement of

appropriate, tailored programs to deliver the most efficient and targeted services to such children and families. We know that the collection, evaluation, and analyses of data are fundamental to a comprehensive assessment of the needs of AI/AN children, and that a comprehensive assessment of those needs is critical to effectively addressing them. The Commission would facilitate such an assessment and help us to establish or improve coordinated service delivery systems for AI/AN children. Importantly, the Commission would also make recommendations on improving data-collection and data-sharing.

The primary goal of the Commission would be to develop recommendations on necessary modifications and improvements to programs that serve AI/AN children at the federal, tribal, and state levels. Those recommendations would integrate the cultural strengths of Native communities in programs to address the unique needs of AI/AN children and are aligned with ACF's existing work to identify and address AI/AN children's needs.

Examples of this type of work that ACF is already conducting include, but are not limited to:

- Proposed amendments to data elements within the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System to provide more comprehensive demographic and case-specific information on AI/AN children in adoption and foster-care systems;
- Expansion of culturally responsive services to AI/AN children and families through ACF's Tribal Home Visiting program supporting the most vulnerable families experiencing multiple challenges, such as poverty and trauma;
- Efforts as part of Generation Indigenous, such as ANA's Native Youth Initiative for Leadership, Empowerment, and Development funding opportunity, to support youth-

driven projects that foster resiliency and build on AI/AN youth's inherent capacities to thrive;

- Funding of the first 14 Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants designed to increase access to high-quality early childhood programs, including those serving homeless children and AI/AN children in foster care, as well as one located in a federally designated Promise Zone (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma);
- Efforts within ACF's Family and Youth Services Bureau to assist with the needs of AI/AN youth, including the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program and the cooperative agreement with the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, which enhances the capacity of tribes, Native Hawaiians, and tribal and Native Hawaiian organizations to respond to domestic violence.
- Convening in March by Linda Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development, of a joint federal-tribal expert workgroup supporting improved social-emotional and behavioral health for young children and families in tribal communities;
- ANA's Native Language Community Coordination demonstration grants supporting community capacity-building to ensure high-quality Native language instruction from early childhood through college and/or career and to improve AI/AN students' academic success, school attendance, and career readiness;
- The development of *A Roadmap for Collaborative and Effective Evaluation in Tribal Communities* by the Children's Bureau in collaboration with tribal experts as a tool to provide a common language for tribal communities and program evaluators to improve evaluation practice; and

- Convening this past November by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation of “The Way Forward Part II: Measurement of Human Service Programs In American Indian and Alaska Native Communities,” which brought together ACF and tribal program staff to discuss evidence and practice-based models in tribal communities, measurement validation for AI/AN children, the need to focus on strength-based approaches and strategies, and gaps in AI/AN data.

In addition, similar to the goals of the Commission, ACF is developing a *Native American Child and Youth Policy Agenda* intended to guide our work to create and implement a vision for thriving Native American children, youth, families, and communities. This *Policy Agenda* also reflects a structure for innovative policymaking to guide stronger and more effective programming that can provide Native American parents, caregivers, leadership, and children and youth the tools they need to thrive.

Examples of policy strategies that ACF will implement include:

- Empowering parents, families, and communities to act as agents of change in education for their AI/AN children in all three areas of education: pre-kindergarten, kindergarten through 12th grade, and post-secondary;
- Encouraging and supporting partnerships within ACF programs and HHS as well as with external partners to develop local education plans with tribal and state agencies that foster improvement in the social competence and emotional health of AI/AN children through Native American strengths-based cultural and linguistic assets, traditional parenting practices, and connections to Native identity;

- Promoting positive climates in educational settings by better engaging Native American children and youth, with their families based on development of the whole child;
- Developing and implementing a research agenda, in collaboration with American Indian tribes, that identifies and addresses data gaps, builds tribal research and evaluation capacities, and disseminates early childhood and development research findings on issues determined to be significant; and
- Supporting programs, services, and practices that keep Native American families together to ensure well-being and connections to American Indian cultures, languages, and practices so that American Indian children and families not only survive but thrive.

We are pleased that a Native Advisory Committee will partner with the Commission because research shows that the policies and programs that are most accepted, are most effective, and have the most legitimacy are those developed by or in partnership with Native communities and that reflect the individual cultural values and practices of such communities.

In closing, I want to share an example of how outcomes can be improved when federal and tribal partners come together. In 1992, Chickaloon Village, a 300-citizen Ahtna Athabascan Indian community located 60 miles northeast of Anchorage, created the *Ya Ne Dah Ah* School in response to growing concern about the quality of education Athabascan youth were receiving in the public school system and to the community's desire to curb the decline of cultural practices. Chickaloon Village focused on whether science and math, as well as culture and language, could be better taught and more readily learned with education under stronger indigenous control. Here, the desire and the drive to not only manage Native schools, but to truly control school

curricula, were powerful. Not only is the *Ya Ne Dah Ah* School reviving the cultural strength and pride of the Village and teaching its children Athabascan values, practices, and traditions, but the students are excelling in the conventional topics of science, math, English, and social studies. In fact, the children's scores on standardized tests are higher than their national counterparts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions.