

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
OVERSIGHT HEARING
“EXAMINING FEDERAL FACILITIES IN INDIAN COUNTRY”**

JUNE 17, 2021

Good afternoon Chairwoman Leger Fernandez, Ranking Member Young, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am honored to be with you.

Today Native people are weathering the perfect storm. We are one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, against a backdrop of social, economic and health disparities and amidst racial turmoil and political unrest. Thanks to Congress, help has been on the way. Historic amounts of resources are coming to Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and American Indians to put us on a path to recovery. Thanks to President Joe Biden’s executive orders, the federal government must begin to face its deep rooted systematic racist policies in order to strive towards a more perfect union of racial and economic equality.

As we have learned how fight COVID-19 and are getting vaccinations into arms, there is one thing that we have always known - the inherent sovereignty of the Winnebago Tribe is the key to the survival of the Winnebago people. We know the needs our people and the best ways to meet those needs. We can respond quickly, make decisions, and have the powers of self-governance to meet the specific needs of our community.

The Winnebagos make our home on a reservation along the hills and banks of the Missouri River in Northeastern Nebraska and Northwestern Iowa. We have over 5,000 tribal members and tribal enterprises that employ thousands of employees in Nebraska and Iowa and around the world.

Though treaties, the supreme law of the land, the United States promised the Winnebagos a physician and medical care for our people. We never forgot that promise and fought for a new hospital when the Indian Health Service was considering turning the existing hospital into a clinic. The IHS’s operation of the hospital became life threatening and the Winnebago people suffered loss of life. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services terminated the hospital’s Medicare and Medicaid certification. We then fought to assume management of the hospital. Today, the Twelve Clans Unity Hospital is a state-of-the-art hospital that serves 10,000 tribal citizens of our tribe and surrounding tribes. Twelve Clans is in the process of completing CMS certification which is now within reach.

We have begun to turn our sights on the best way to keep our people safe and secure. The Winnebago Tribe, Santee Sioux Nation and Omaha Tribe are served by the Bureau of Indian Affairs Winnebago Agency. The Winnebago Police Department has two officers funded by the BIA and two officers funded by the Winnebago Tribe which falls under the Great Plains Justice Services.

The department estimates that it is understaffed 85 percent of the time, often with only one officer available for community response. The chief of police and Lieutenant are BIA-funded and cover weekday shifts from 7 am to 7 pm. After 7 pm, the two Tribally funded officers cover the evening and night shifts. On weekends, there is only one officer on duty and one officer on call for all shifts.

The Winnebago Reservation lacks a jail and BIA Law Enforcement has a contract with Thurston County which is a 40-mile round-trip. The county retains the right to refuse prisoners and has limited capacity. For this reason, the next nearest holding facilities are in Wagner, South Dakota, 272 miles round-trip, and Lower Brule, South Dakota, 538 miles round-trip. Transporting takes five to twelve hours leaving one officer for patrol and response on the reservation.

In order to more adequately provide for the peace and security of our people, the Tribe is considering the establishment of its own public safety system. We need reliable law enforcement response and a local facility. We will undergo our own internal process to determine what is best for the Tribe and how to move forward.

As we emerge from this perfect storm, sovereign tribal nations, that predate the United States, must overcome the pandemic, health disparities, economic inequalities and decades-long underfunding. Through our inherent powers of self-governance, we must make bold decisions and provide for the well-being of our people. This sacred responsibility is why we take these governance decisions so seriously. Our survival depends on it.

Thank you for your time and listening to the Winnebago People.