



United States Senate

Committee on Indian Affairs

Hearing

**Delivering Essential Public Health and Social Services to Native Americans -
Examining Federal Programs serving Native Americans across the Operating
Divisions at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

Written Testimony of
Melissa Charlie
Executive Director, Fairbanks Native Association

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On behalf of the Fairbanks Native Association (FNA), a Native non-profit organization based in Fairbanks, Alaska committed to improving the quality of life for individuals and families by promoting justice, healing, and wellness in our community, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the critical services supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the profound impact these services have on our Alaska Native community.

My name is Melissa Charlie, and I am the Executive Director of FNA. In addition to my role at FNA, I serve on the Advisory Board of the Fairbanks North Star Borough Board of Education. I am Athabascan and Inupiaq, and I am a Tribal member of Minto, Alaska.

FNA was incorporated in 1967 in direct response to the social service needs of Alaska Natives in Fairbanks during a time when Native people were increasingly moving to the area from remote villages and Alaska Native soldiers were returning from military service. Access to basic health and social services was severely limited. Educational outcomes were extremely low, and life expectancy for Alaska Natives was alarmingly short. Because of the work of our early leaders, and thanks to increased investment in education and healthcare, our community has made substantial progress across quality-of-life indicators over the last sixty years.

FNA provides services within the Fairbanks North Star Borough, which has an Alaska Native and American Indian population of approximately 10,000 people. Working with our sister organization, the Tanana Chiefs Conference, our combined efforts serve more than 12,000 Alaska Natives across 42 communities in Interior Alaska.

With support from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, FNA serves our community through three major program areas: early childhood development, behavioral health services, and community services. The work we do at FNA is deeply rewarding. We assist individuals in times of great need—whether they are facing homelessness, substance abuse, mental health challenges, or grief. From the womb to the end of life, FNA is here to serve.

As our late founder, Poldine Carlo, often said:

“There is no greater reward than serving our people.”

—Poldine Carlo, founding member of the Fairbanks Native Association

These programs are essential to addressing the needs of our Native population and strengthening the overall health, safety, and resilience of our community. Continued federal support for these HHS programs is critical to ensure we can meet these needs now and into the future.

Federal Obligations

The federal government's trust obligation to Alaska Natives and American Indians is a legal and moral commitment rooted in treaties, statutes, executive orders, and judicial decisions. It requires the United States to protect tribal lands, assets, resources, and

treaty rights, and to provide certain services, such as healthcare, education, and housing. This obligation stems from the historical relationship between tribes and the federal government, in which tribes ceded large portions of land in exchange for these protections and services. The trust responsibility may seem to be carried out primarily by federal agencies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS), but truly extends across the federal government, and outside of tribal-specific agencies. The trust obligation emphasizes the government's duty to act in the best interest of Tribal Nations and individuals with loyalty, care, and accountability.

FNA is only one of many Alaska Native and American Indian organizations providing services that are made available under the federal government's trust obligation. We work in lockstep with Tanana Chiefs Conference, our sister organization, to provide a large array of prevention and clinical services for the Alaska Native population across the Interior of Alaska. TCC's services either complement those offered by FNA or are provided in collaboration with FNA. Like FNA and many other Native entities, TCC too relies on Federal funding provided under federal trust obligations.

The federal government's trust obligation to Alaska Natives and American Indians involves a complex interplay of legal, financial, and social responsibilities. While progress has been made in certain areas—such as tribal self-determination and economic development—there are still significant challenges, particularly around underfunding, legal complexities, and the need for more meaningful, long-term investments in Native communities. The trust obligation is an ongoing process that requires constant attention, accountability, and respect for tribal sovereignty.

Despite this legal obligation, the federal government often fails to fully fund the programs and services essential to Native communities. This underfunding has led to significant disparities in health, education, and housing outcomes between Native and non-Native populations. Due to underfunding in the IHS, BIA, and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), tribal organizations are relying on other federal funding like SAMHSA, HRSA, CDC and others to help support the provision of essential prevention, behavioral health and clinical services to decrease these disparities. Proposed cuts to many grants, programs and services currently provided through funding from these agencies, are of great concern to all of us and our partner organizations.

The federal government's trust obligation is not one that can be transferred to state governments. Again, it is a legal and moral obligation of the federal government alone, which should be honored in good faith and due diligence.

Tribal Head Start and Early Childhood

At FNA, one of the major services we provide is our Tribal Head Start Program. FNA's Head Start program promotes cultural identity of Alaska Native and American Indian families, while equipping all enrolled children with the educational, physical, and social skills and tools for a great head start towards school readiness. Students receive health screening for vision, dental, hearing, physical and cognitive development – an important

early intervention to ensure any additional services are prioritized. Head Start works with families to connect with partnering community agencies for additional resources that they may need to succeed.

While many of these services are key lifelines that Head Start programs provide children nationwide, there are a few key differences between Tribal Head Start and other Head Start programs. The main difference lies in who administers them and the communities they are designed to serve.

Tribal Head Start programs are administered directly by tribal governments or tribal organizations. Our programs incorporate Native culture, language, and traditions into the curriculum and daily operations. We design our programs to support the cultural preservation and educational success of our children.

In short, Tribal Head Start is tailored for Native communities, while general Head Start serves the broader population of low-income families.

Our Head Start and Early Head Start programs are a strong example of how Alaska Native culture is thoughtfully woven into early childhood education. Our children are introduced to our Native languages throughout these programs through songs, simple phrases, and greetings. Elders and cultural bearers are regularly invited to share traditional stories, legends, and oral histories, passing down intergenerational knowledge.

FNA's program goes beyond education—it builds identity, pride, and connection to Native heritage from an early age, while meeting all federal Head Start standards. This is also true for Head Start programs in rural Alaska, including the Tanana Chiefs Conference regionwide programs, and other Tribal Head Start programs nationwide.

Other Critical HHS Programs

In addition to Head Start, FNA operates many other critical programs to fill gaps in services typically provided by state government for non-Tribal communities. These programs address the needs of our Native communities by providing the programs the federal government owes under trust and treaty obligations. Many of our services are funded under HHS outside of the Indian Health Service.

One program that has been considered for elimination by the Administration is the *Community Services Block Grant*. This grant, which FNA receives under the set-aside for Tribes and Tribal Organizations, provides services that remove obstacles to the achievement of self-sufficiency for low-income individuals, families, Elders, and homeless community members. By providing services that support self-sufficiency and that address emergency assistance needs, youth development, and health and nutrition, the program enhances the lives of low-income individuals with services that meet their needs and empower them with the resources, knowledge, and skills needed to achieve self-sufficiency. We urge Congress to protect this program for tribes. Unlike

states, our communities do not have the tax revenue to pick up the services otherwise provided by the federal government.

Title VI funding through the Older Americans Act provides critical nutrition and supportive services for elders and caregivers, with 362 enrolled in the program. Through the congregate meals program, FNA serves approximately 800 hot lunches monthly on weekdays and provides group programming and information about a range of health, safety, and nutrition topics relevant to the population. This has been an area identified as a critical need in the Fairbanks North Star Borough, as an FNA survey of local elders in 2022 found that for 57.3% of respondents it was often or sometimes true that they could not afford to eat balanced meals. Additionally, three out of the five most common chronic conditions in the population are closely linked with nutrition: high blood pressure, diabetes, and osteoporosis. With more than one in five elders reporting that they eat alone most of the time, the congregate meal program also serves a critical function in helping to reduce isolation and promote social connection among this vulnerable population. Title VI funding also supports caregivers by connecting them to information and community resources and providing training, specialized support, and supplemental services. Given that current levels of programming are not able to meet the full degree of need for elder nutrition and support services, the funding that is provided under Title VI remains a critical resource for supporting the health of elders in the community.

We also receive funds from the *Family Violence Prevention and Services program*, which supports the prevention of and response to incidents of domestic violence, dating violence, family violence and their dependents. supports the prevention of and immediate response to incidents of domestic violence, dating violence, family violence by providing emergency shelter, supplies, and services to adult victims and their non-abusing dependents. Domestic and/or family violence continues to be an area of high need among FNA's service population, with 58.8% of consumers receiving victim services through FNA Community Services department reporting domestic and/or family violence in 2024. In Interior Alaska, where housing is limited and the cost of living is high, Family Violence Prevention and Services funding is especially critical in providing immediate access to temporary housing and resources that allow victims and their children to escape violent situations and meet their basic needs, a first step to achieving stability, security, and self-sufficiency.

Our *Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program*, which FNA has operated since 2010, except in fiscal years 2015-2017 when funding was not available, uses the evidence-based Parents as Teachers (PAT) model to provide American Indian and Alaska Native children and families services that address their critical maternal and child health, development, early learning, family support, and child abuse and neglect prevention needs. Serving 30 expectant families and families with young children aged birth to kindergarten entry, the Tribal Home Visiting Program is a critical link in the continuum of early childhood education and family wellness that coordinates with other existing resources like AIAN Head Start to support healthy, happy, and successful children and families. As one of only a few providers offering

services in the home for pregnant women and/or families with children younger than 5 years of age to the over 6,000 children ages 0-5 in the Fairbanks North Star Borough¹, the Tribal Home Visiting Program provides critical support for these children and families whose needs would otherwise go unmet.

FNA's *Domestic Violence Prevention program* provides primary and secondary domestic and sexual violence, trafficking, and abuse prevention programming for youth and adults. The DVP grant funds support community outreach and awareness events and evidence-based prevention programming for youth, in collaboration with the local school district. The DVP program facilitates coordinated community response to domestic violence prevention and intervention by emphasizing active collaboration between FNA's Community Services Department and the Fairbanks Police Department, the Alaska State Troopers, the District Attorney's Office, a local domestic violence shelter, and other service providers. Without access to this program, the community would lose important opportunities to learn about and connect with services through the many well-attended outreach and prevention events and activities it supports, and elementary and secondary aged youth throughout the Fairbanks North Star Borough would miss out on opportunities to build important life skills and trusting relationships that develop resilience and set them up for healthy and fulfilling lives. Through comprehensive prevention and skill-building programming, education and awareness activities, and community outreach events, the DVP grant reaches more than 600 youth and more than 1,200 adults annually.

Through its youth and adult services divisions, FNA's Behavioral Health Services (BHS) Department provides residential and outpatient, evidence-based prevention, intervention, and treatment services for more than 1,200 people annually through *18 population-specific programs funded by grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, Administration for Children and Families, and Indian Health Service*. Although multiple programs are intentionally designed to meet the needs of AIAN community members by integrating cultural values and practices with evidence-based mental and behavioral health strategies, many BHS programs provide community-wide services for anyone who needs them. These lifesaving and life-changing programs include projects funded by 19 active grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, including a one one-time Health Resources and Services Administration Community Project Funding/Congressionally Directed Spending grant for construction/renovation of the BHS Women's and Children's residential treatment facility.

FNA's Women's & Children's Center is a residential substance use disorder and mental health treatment facility for pregnant women and women with children ages 0-7 years old. Serving the entire state, it is a four- to six-month program providing individual and group treatment sessions. The primary outcomes of the program are that mothers learn how to interact with their children in a substance-free lifestyle, and that children who have suffered through traumatic incidences related to an environment of alcohol and drug abuse receive mental health services to ensure a healthy lifestyle for the entire

¹ U.S. Census Bureau and State of Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

family. With Community Project Funding/Congressionally Directed Spending funds administered through the Health Resources and Services Administration, FNA will be able to make much-needed updates to the residential facility so that this unique program can continue to meet the needs of the mothers and children who participate from across the state of Alaska every year.

Conclusion

The services provided by FNA are essential in promoting the independence and self-sufficiency of our community. Guided by our traditional values, we remain committed to serving our people in a respectful and meaningful way.

But, like other Alaska Native and American Indian tribes and organizations, FNA's ability to do this important work relies on the Federal government to uphold its trust responsibility. Adequate and consistent funding is essential to ensure that these critical services continue, as is a stable grant administration support infrastructure. Proposed and already executed DHHS restructuring actions such as closing and consolidating offices, dismissing federal program officers and grant managers, and/or converting existing direct grant programs into block grants administered by states, have very real impacts on tribes' and tribal organizations' abilities to implement federally funded programs and services and in turn, on the individuals, families, and communities we serve. For a person who is experiencing an acute mental health crisis, grappling with addiction, trapped in a violent living situation, or struggling to keep a family fed and sheltered, a temporary lapse in availability of funds or a delay in processing a federally required grant approval action can mean life or death.

The loss of any FNA programs funded by DHHS would significantly harm both our community and the clients we serve. Since the pandemic, youth and social services have struggled to fully recover, and staffing continues to be a major challenge. Even if programs were cut, the underlying needs would persist. Gaps in victim services, behavioral health care, education for children, and family support would place additional strain on already limited community resources in Fairbanks.

FNA has operated these programs in good faith, relying in part on the federal government's trust responsibility to support essential services. These programs are vital to the well-being of families and the health of our community.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the important and rewarding work that FNA is doing with Health and Human Services funding. We believe it is reflective of the work that is being done across the nation by tribes and tribal organizations. This work is critical to meet the needs of families, children and communities.

I also want to thank the Alaska delegation, particularly Senator Murkowski, for their continued support of and advocacy for our work.

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