

Written Testimony of Bristol Bay Native Association
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Chair Murkowski, Vice Chair Schatz, and Members of the Committee:

The wellbeing of Native children in our region is inseparable from our lands, languages, and ways of life. The challenges facing our children today, from educational gaps to behavioral health crises, did not appear in isolation. They are the direct consequence of government and church-imposed policies and programs that removed children from their families, suppressed language and culture, and left behind deep and lasting damage with no redeeming benefit.

The Way Forward report presents an important opportunity to do more than study these issues; it calls for meaningful, community-driven change. The Commission's recommendations are bold, but they are also practical. They reflect what we know works, programs that are locally led, culturally grounded, and fully supported by the federal government as a true partner.

1. Strengthen Tribal Control & Flexibility

Federal systems have failed Alaska Native communities by imposing one-size-fits-all programs that disregard local realities, cultural values, and Tribal sovereignty. These approaches have too often delivered services that do not meet the actual needs of our children and families, and in some cases, have caused further harm by eroding community authority and trust. Alaska's Tribes and Tribal consortia need direct, flexible funding that allows us to design and deliver programs based on what works in our own communities. We urge Congress to remove unnecessary administrative barriers and implement reforms that empower Tribes with decision-making authority, ensuring that programs truly benefit the people they are intended to serve.

2. Center Cultural & Language Revitalization

In Bristol Bay, the Togiak 'Wellness: A Circle of Life' curriculum provides a working example of this vision. Developed by Yupiit cultural leaders, this program integrates language revitalization, subsistence knowledge, and traditional teachings into early education and family wellness. It demonstrates how cultural grounding can support children's growth academically, emotionally, and spiritually, making culture and language central to child development rather than optional enhancements.

Language and culture are not optional or symbolic add-ons to education or child development; they are the foundation of identity, resilience, and wellbeing for Alaska

Native children. When children learn their Native languages, practice traditional skills, and connect with the land and waters through seasonal, place-based education, they gain a strong sense of belonging and purpose. This cultural grounding improves educational outcomes, strengthens mental health, and fosters community connection. To achieve this, Alaska needs sustained, long-term federal investment in language nests, immersion programs, and culturally embedded education systems that honor subsistence lifeways and traditional knowledge.

3. Address Trauma with Community-Based Solutions

The Togiak “Wellness: A Circle of Life” program also offers a trauma-informed model rooted in Yup’ik lifeways. It incorporates intergenerational mentorship, traditional parenting practices, and community-driven healing to address the lasting impacts of boarding schools, family separations, and systemic harm. Programs like this show how cultural frameworks can restore wellness and resilience.

Generational trauma caused by family separation, government and church-run boarding schools, and punitive welfare systems continues to shape the lives of Alaska Native children today. These were not incidental government missteps; they were deliberate, organized policies aimed at erasing Native identity by breaking family bonds, banning Native languages, criminalizing cultural practices, and replacing Tribal ways of life with imposed systems. Unlike other marginalized populations who faced poverty or neglect, Alaska Natives endured targeted programs designed to dismantle who they were as a people.

The effects of these policies did not end when the programs closed. They were passed down through disrupted family systems, loss of cultural identity, and even biological changes in how stress affects the body. Today, we see the consequences in disproportionately high rates of foster care placement, suicide, substance use, and involvement with juvenile justice systems. These outcomes are not evidence of failure by our people; they are evidence of the deep and ongoing harm caused by federal and church-imposed systems.

Healing cannot come from repeating these harms. It requires investment in trauma-informed, community-led programs that restore family connections, address behavioral health needs, and provide culturally grounded care. We support approaches that prioritize positive youth development and strengthen family connections, and address the root causes of harmful behavior, ensuring young people have the opportunity to learn, grow, and contribute to their communities.

4. Expand Prenatal & Early Childhood Support

The Togiak curriculum also emphasizes prenatal wellness, teaching that nurturing a child's development begins before birth. This perspective underscores the importance of supporting expectant parents with culturally adapted prenatal care and family-centered education.

Healthy futures for our children begin long before birth. The prenatal period and the first years of life are critical for brain development, emotional wellbeing, and lifelong health. Yet in many Alaska Native communities, expecting mothers and young children face barriers to care, from limited access to prenatal services in remote villages to programs that fail to reflect our cultural values and traditions. To change this, we need sustained investment in culturally adapted prenatal programs that incorporate traditional knowledge, accessible home visiting services that provide families with consistent support in their own communities, and early childhood education systems designed and led by Tribes. These programs must also prioritize early identification of mental and behavioral health needs; especially for infants exposed to substances in utero and provide timely, culturally responsive support for mothers. Currently, because the state typically does not intervene until after a child is born, too many mothers receive little to no prenatal care or behavioral health support, leaving families in crisis from the start. Addressing these gaps early is essential to improving lifelong health and wellbeing for children and strengthening families. These efforts ensure that children grow up healthy, secure in their identity, and ready to thrive in both their cultural and academic worlds.

5. Improve Data Sovereignty & Native-Led Evaluation

Data about our people must be governed by our people. For too long, federal and state agencies have collected information on Alaska Native children and families without Tribal consent, often using it for outside agendas or withholding it from the communities it describes. This has led to decisions made with incomplete or inaccurate information and programs that fail to reflect our realities. The data that does exist on Native children is alarmingly minimal. I asked the head researcher from the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) about this in advance of the Supreme Court ICWA case, and she confirmed that there was simply no meaningful quantitative data available. This is crucial, without reliable, and complete data, we cannot make informed decisions about developing programs best suited to meet the needs of our children and families.

We need a Federal American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian (AI/AN/NH) Data Office that upholds Tribal sovereignty by requiring Tribal consent, co-ownership, and full access to all data involving our communities. Such an office

must also provide funding for Native-led research and evaluation so that program success is measured using culturally relevant standards, not one-size-fits-all federal metrics. When Tribes control their data, they can drive evidence-based solutions that truly serve their children and families.

6. Elevate Native Youth Voice in Program Designs

Our youth are not simply program recipients; they are emerging leaders with valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities in their communities. When young people are given real opportunities to participate in decision-making, they bring forward solutions grounded in their lived experiences and cultural perspectives. To harness this potential, we urge Congress to support the creation of youth advisory councils at both the federal and Tribal levels and to invest in leadership development programs that equip Native youth with the skills, confidence, and platforms to shape policies and programs that impact their lives. Empowering youth in this way builds the next generation of leaders, strengthens the resilience and self-determination of our communities, and projects a positive image of Native youth that is sorely lacking in today's public discourse.

7. Advance Environmental and Health Opportunity

Children's health in Bristol Bay cannot be separated from the health of the environment and the basic infrastructure that supports daily life. For our children to grow and thrive, they need clean drinking water, safe and functional housing, reliable sanitation, and access to the traditional foods that have nourished our people for generations. One example is the "Fish for Kids" program, where local fishermen donate salmon that is processed and packaged by a cannery and then distributed to students, elders, and Head Start participants: providing weekly salmon meals across the region. While this program has declined in scale, it illustrates the cultural, nutritional, and community benefits of integrating traditional foods into federal nutrition programs. We urge Congress to invest in rebuilding and modernizing rural infrastructure, to fund comprehensive environmental health assessments that identify and address threats to child wellbeing, and to expand federal nutrition programs to include and prioritize traditional subsistence foods. These steps are not just about improving health outcomes; they are about preserving cultural connections, supporting self-sufficiency, and ensuring that every child in Bristol Bay grows up in a safe, healthy, and culturally grounded environment.

8. Align Federal Definitions with Tribal Citizenship

Eligibility for programs and services must be determined by Tribes themselves, not by arbitrary federal definitions that fail to reflect the realities of our communities. Too often, federal agencies use narrow enrollment or residency criteria that exclude

children who are recognized as citizens of their Tribal governments, including those of mixed heritage or those living away from their home villages. This exclusion not only denies children access to essential health, education, and welfare programs, it also undermines Tribal sovereignty by disregarding the authority of Tribes to define their own citizenship. We urge Congress to ensure that all federal child-serving programs defer to Tribal definitions of citizenship and eligibility, guaranteeing that no Native child is left out because of restrictive or outdated federal criteria.

It is essential that Congress, federal agencies, and all policymakers use accurate and consistent language when referring to the political status of our people. Our people are not merely “members” of Tribes in the way one is a member of a club, church, civic group, or other organization. Our Tribes are sovereign governments, and our people are citizens of those governments, with the inherent rights and responsibilities that come with that citizenship. Americans may hold memberships in many types of organizations, but Tribal citizenship is fundamentally different. Those Americans who are tribally enrolled are dual citizens of both the United States and their Tribal governments. We must lead this conversation with consistent, accurate terminology that reflects our sovereignty and the true status of our people. When Congress or federal agencies use the term “member” instead of “citizen,” it diminishes our political status and undermines the government-to-government relationship promised in law and treaty. I urge Congress to adopt this terminology in all laws, policies, and programs affecting Tribes.

9. Build the Tribal Workforce

Recruiting and retaining qualified professionals in rural Alaska has long been a challenge across education, healthcare, social services, and child welfare. High turnover, limited housing, professional isolation, and lower wages compared to urban areas disrupt continuity of care for children and families. The real solution is to grow our own talent, expanding loan forgiveness and scholarships for Alaska Native students, creating culturally relevant training pathways, and developing in-state programs in critical fields so our people can prepare for careers without leaving Alaska. At BBNA, this vision is taking shape through our new Youth Services Division, which will connect children from early entry into Head Start and 477 programs through middle and high school career exploration, youth employment, and dual-credit internships. By the time they graduate, students will have a clear path to higher education, training funds, and careers in their home communities. This ‘homegrown’ approach builds a stable Tribal workforce, reduces outmigration, and ensures that those caring for our children understand their culture, language, and lived experience.

10. Establish Community-Based Accountability Metrics

Success for programs serving Alaska Native children cannot be defined solely by whether they meet federal compliance requirements or produce standard performance reports. These measures often fail to capture what truly matters to our communities; whether children are thriving in their cultural identities, staying connected to their families, and growing up healthy and resilient.

We need performance metrics that are developed by Tribes, for Tribes, reflecting our values and our definitions of success. This means creating evaluation tools that measure real improvements in children's wellbeing, such as cultural engagement, language acquisition, family stability, and long-term community health, rather than relying only on one-size-fits-all federal benchmarks.

We urge Congress to fund the development and implementation of Tribal-driven performance metrics and provide technical assistance so that Tribes can design and use culturally meaningful measures. When our communities define success, programs are more accountable to the people they serve and more effective in improving the lives of our children.

Closing Statement

In Bristol Bay, the wellbeing of our children is inseparable from our lands, languages, and ways of life. Any legislation must reflect that reality by placing control in the hands of Tribal communities, ensuring flexible funding, prioritizing cultural identity, and addressing trauma with meaningful, community-driven solutions. We support this legislation moving forward in partnership with Tribes, but it must be implemented in ways that work for Alaska's unique Tribal regions.

Thank you for your leadership and for including the voices of Alaska's Tribal communities in this important discussion. I look forward to working with you to make this vision a reality.

Appendix A: Matrix of 29 Recommendations

This appendix provides a breakdown of all twenty-nine recommendations in The Way Forward report with BBNA's analysis, Alaska/Bristol Bay relevance, BBNA comments, and curative actions requested. Each item is ranked (High, Medium, Low) and flagged if it does not align with BBNA's mission or positions.

Recommendation #	Problem Identified	Alaska/Bristol Bay Relevance	BBNA Comment	Curative Action Requested	Priority (H/M/L)
1	ICWA enforcement gaps	ICWA is often undermined in Alaska due to state noncompliance and lack of Tribal court capacity.	Agree – strengthen ICWA education in the professional workforce, enforcement with federal oversight and fund Tribal courts.	Establish federal ICWA compliance monitors and fund Tribal legal infrastructure.	High
2	Kinship care barriers	Licensing standards in Alaska are incompatible with village kinship care, resulting in children placed outside their communities.	Agree – support waivers and funding for village-based placements; and enhance Tribes' resources and capacity to license and support families independent of the state - one of our biggest issues is that if a Tribe takes jurisdiction they will not have the same resources to provide a stipend to the	Codify flexible licensing standards for kinship care in Alaska. / Establish a dedicated federal funding stream for kinship care that enables grandparents and other relatives to receive support without requiring state foster care designation or imposing child support obligations on parents unable to pay.	High

			relative placement that the state would. Caring for children is expensive. That one issue is a bottleneck for many others in this arena.	This would help children remain in safe, stable, and culturally connected family homes.	
3	Foster care trauma	High rates of foster placement outside Native families continue to cause trauma.	Agree – prioritize Tribal foster homes and provide recruitment/training support.	Authorize Tribes to directly support and compensate foster parents within their jurisdiction, reducing reliance on state systems that often create unnecessary stress and barriers. Tribal administration would promote respectful engagement, improve retention of foster families, and ensure culturally appropriate care for children.	High
4	Juvenile justice overreach	Alaska Native youth are overrepresented in	Modify – Support community-led, culturally grounded approaches that strengthen family and Tribal	Fund Tribal youth diversion programs and require cultural	High

		punitive juvenile systems.	connections, address the root causes of harmful behavior, and keep youth engaged in their culture and community rather than disconnected through distant or punitive systems.	competency in state systems.	
5	Early childhood access gaps	Limited access to early childhood programs in remote communities.	Agree – expand culturally adapted early learning and home visiting.	Secure resources and staffing to implement a Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program at the Tribal level, filling a critical gap in early childhood services. This program would provide home-based support to families from pregnancy through early childhood, strengthening child development outcomes and family well-being while ensuring culturally appropriate delivery.	High

6	Prenatal care disparities	Native women in Alaska face higher maternal health risks and limited prenatal care access.	Agree – expand maternal health programs with cultural integration.	Fund prenatal outreach and culturally competent care providers in villages.	High
7	Substance use impact on families	Generational trauma drives substance abuse and family instability.	Agree – invest in culturally informed treatment. Also use cutting edge high quality treatment options - as was noted above there is considerable new research coming out about intergenerational trauma and early childhood trauma's impacts on brain development - we have to include this knowledge in any of our attempts at treatment to ensure we are treating root causes of use and not just symptoms.	Support integrated behavioral health and family healing programs.	High
8	School attendance barriers	Geography and transportation issues cause	Agree – combine DOT and education funding for rural attendance solutions.	Develop village-based school transportation solutions with Tribal	Medium

		chronic absenteeism in Alaska.		involvement, while recognizing that transportation alone does not ensure attendance. Implement complementary strategies such as attendance recognition programs to incentivize and support parents whose children maintain strong school attendance.	
9	Cultural curriculum absence	Schools lack integration of Native languages and cultural lifeways.	Agree – embed cultural education in school systems.	Mandate culturally relevant curriculum and fund immersion language nests, ensuring language and cultural education are prioritized alongside academic requirements. Reduce the overemphasis on standardized test preparation that pushes language instruction aside. Support Tribal-led initiatives, such as BBNA’s pending	High

				language revitalization grant, which would provide teacher training and printed and auditory materials for students from Pre-K through 12th grade.	
10	Teacher recruitment challenges	Rural Alaska struggles to retain qualified teachers.	Agree – create incentives for Native educators.	Provide scholarships, loan forgiveness, and rural pay differentials.	High
11	Mental health provider shortages	Few providers are available for trauma-informed care in rural Alaska.	Agree – expand workforce development.	Fund training for local Native mental health professionals.	High
12	Data invisibility	AI/AN/NH populations are undercounted due to federal data practices.	Agree – enforce Tribal control of data.	Create a Federal AI/AN/NH Data Office with co-ownership agreements.	High
13	Cross-agency fragmentation	Multiple federal agencies create	Agree – expand 477 plans and consolidate funding.	Mandate cross-agency collaboration and expand 477 authority.	High

		silos in service delivery.			
14	Youth exclusion from decisions	Native youth are rarely engaged in shaping programs.	Agree – elevate youth voice in design.	Establish youth advisory councils at federal and Tribal levels.	Medium
15	Nutrition and food insecurity	Rural Alaska faces high rates of child food insecurity.	Agree – integrate traditional foods into nutrition programs.	Expand subsistence-based food distribution in schools, early childhood programs, and health systems to improve nutrition and preserve cultural food traditions. Support programs modeled after “Fish for Kids,” where locally harvested fish is donated, processed, packaged, and distributed to provide regular salmon meals to students, elders, and Head Start participants. Encourage replication of this model in other regions and address regulatory barriers that	High

				limit the inclusion of moose, berries, and other traditional foods in meals for vulnerable populations.	
16	Infrastructure decay	Unsafe water, housing, and sanitation threaten child health.	Agree – prioritize rural infrastructure investment.	Fund water, sanitation, and safe housing projects in villages.	High
17	Funding inflexibility	Restrictive federal funding limits local solutions.	Agree – increase block grants and local discretion.	Provide Tribes with direct, flexible funding streams.	High
18	Performance metrics misaligned	Success measured by federal compliance, not community outcomes.	Agree – create Tribal-defined metrics.	Develop co-created evaluation frameworks that prioritize community wellbeing.	Medium
19	Boarding school legacy trauma	Historic boarding schools continue to impact families.	Agree – fund community healing initiatives.	Support intergenerational trauma healing programs.	High
20	State-Tribal conflicts	State policies often conflict with Tribal sovereignty.	Agree – increase federal-Tribal direct relationships.	Require consultation and provide federal override mechanisms.	High

21	Child welfare caseworker turnover	High turnover reduces continuity of care in Office of Children's Services and Tribal programs.	Agree – stabilize workforce with competitive wages.	Provide dedicated funding for the recruitment and long-term retention of child welfare case workers in rural communities to ensure stability and consistency in services. Prioritize placing case workers within the communities they serve to build trust and relationships with families and children. Reduce turnover by offering competitive wages, housing support, and workload management, recognizing that frequent staff changes, such as multiple case leads within a short period, undermine the ability to effectively support and protect children.	Medium
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22	Limited rural court access	Families in remote communities lack access to courts.	Agree – expand Tribal court authority.	Invest in virtual court systems and expand Tribal jurisdiction.	Medium
23	Special education inequities	Native students under-identified or misidentified in special ed.	Agree – enhance culturally competent evaluation.	Fund culturally adapted special education programs.	Medium
24	Lack of youth recreation programs	Few safe recreational spaces for youth in villages.	Add – fund afterschool and youth development programs.	Provide grants for Tribal youth centers and activity programs, ensuring they are locally driven and culturally relevant. Support partnerships between Tribes and organizations to strengthen and expand existing programs, as seen in the collaboration to enhance recreational opportunities for youth in the community.	High
25	Insufficient disaster preparedness	Rural communities are unprepared for	Add – integrate child-focused emergency planning.	Fund Tribal emergency preparedness and shelters.	High

		climate-driven emergencies.			
26	Digital divide	Limited broadband access impedes education and services.	Agree – expand broadband for villages.	Invest in rural internet infrastructure and devices for students.	High
27	Lack of cross-generational programming	Disconnect between elders and youth erodes cultural continuity.	Add – fund intergenerational mentorship programs.	Support elder-youth cultural exchange initiatives.	Medium
28	Complex grant reporting burdens	Excessive reporting requirements strain small Tribal organizations.	Agree – simplify reporting.	Streamline reporting requirements and provide admin support.	Medium
29	Underrepresentation in research	Alaska Native children rarely included in national studies.	Agree – fund Alaska-specific research.	Create dedicated research initiatives with Tribal consent.	Medium

Appendix B

Analysis of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act of 2025 (S.761) in Relation to BBNA's Mission

This appendix provides an in-depth analysis of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act of 2025 (S.761) and its alignment with the Bristol Bay Native Association's (BBNA) mission. It assesses opportunities for BBNA engagement, curative actions, and potential advocacy strategies to ensure the legislation serves the interests of the Tribes in the Bristol Bay region.

Matrix Analysis: Bill vs. BBNA Mission

Bill Component	Description	Alignment with BBNA's Mission	Curative Actions / Recommendations
Purpose & Establishment	Establishes a Truth and Healing Commission to investigate boarding school policies, their histories, and effects.	Strong alignment – Supports BBNA's focus on cultural preservation, advocacy, and truth-telling for Tribal communities.	Advocate for regional representation (e.g., nomination of Bristol Bay survivors or experts) to ensure local histories are included.
Investigation & Documentation	Commission to conduct a comprehensive review of records, research, and testimony on boarding school impacts.	Strong alignment – Advances BBNA's mission to preserve culture and validate historical experiences of Tribal members.	Support and facilitate oral history collection from Bristol Bay survivors and descendants.
Advisory Committees	Creates Native American Truth and Healing Advisory Committee and Federal &	Strong alignment – Provides a platform for BBNA to	Seek membership or nominating authority for

	Religious Advisory Committee.	influence national policy and advocacy.	BBNA representatives on advisory committees.
Trauma-Informed Convenings	Requires safe, trauma-informed, culturally appropriate meetings for survivors and communities.	Strong alignment – Consistent with BBNA’s role in promoting community wellness and trauma recovery.	Coordinate with regional health providers to offer on-site trauma-informed care at convenings in Alaska.
Burial Management & Repatriation	Coordinates with Tribes to locate, identify, and repatriate remains of children buried at boarding schools.	Strong alignment – Upholds cultural and spiritual restoration priorities.	Engage in co-stewardship agreements to manage repatriation processes for Bristol Bay families.
Federal Recommendations	Commission to recommend policy changes, memorialization, and educational initiatives.	Strong alignment – Creates a pathway for BBNA to advocate for policies reflecting Tribal sovereignty and healing.	Develop policy recommendations for inclusion in the final report, focusing on Alaska-specific needs and reparative measures.
Funding	Allocates \$90M for Commission operations.	Moderate alignment – Funds do not directly support Tribes but can lead to resources for healing initiatives.	Advocate for funding streams to support Tribal-led healing programs resulting from the Commission’s findings.

Key Observations

- Direct Support for BBNA’s Mission: This Act advances cultural preservation, community healing, and truth-telling, which are central to BBNA’s role as a Tribal consortium.
- Opportunities for Influence: BBNA can actively participate through testimony, advisory roles, and policy development.

- Need for Alaska-Specific Advocacy: Ensuring that the Commission reflects Alaska Native experiences and historical contexts is essential.

Recommended Curative Actions

1. Nominate Bristol Bay Representatives: Advocate for survivors, descendants, and cultural experts from Bristol Bay to serve on the Commission or advisory bodies.
2. Document Regional Histories: Launch a regional project to collect oral histories and archival materials related to boarding schools in Bristol Bay.
3. Develop Policy Proposals: Prepare and submit recommendations to influence the Commission's final report, focusing on reparative justice, cultural revitalization, and sustained healing programs.
4. Coordinate Health & Wellness Support: Partner with Tribal health organizations to ensure trauma-informed care is available during Commission convenings in Alaska.
5. Advocate for Co-Stewardship: Pursue agreements ensuring Tribal leadership in managing repatriation and memorialization of boarding school burial sites.

Conclusion

The Truth and Healing Commission Act strongly aligns with BBNA's mission to strengthen Tribal governance, preserve culture, and support community healing. Strategic engagement will ensure that the voices of Bristol Bay's Tribes are represented in this national effort and that meaningful reparative actions are taken