

# First Alaskans Institute

June 21, 2022

The Honorable Brian Schatz  
Chairman, Committee on Indian Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Vice Chairwoman, Committee on Indian Affairs  
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman and Mrs. Vice Chairwoman:

Gunalchéesh, Háw'aa, Tsíná'ęę - Thank You in the Lingít, Xaadaas and Tanacross languages - for considering [S.2907] [H.B.5444], the **Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Policies Act**. Your leadership on this critical national issue supports the moral imperative and responsibility this country has to the Native peoples of this place. We greatly appreciate the wisdom of those involved in this process for the past many decades to get us to this point, and for the bravery of the Boarding School Survivors to be willing to participate in processes that create a space for their truths to be heard and direct action to be taken to address the issues raised through the sharing of their personal stories and those of their Indigenous communities. It takes a great deal of courage and strength to be willing to do this for future generations.

As a statewide Alaska Native non-profit whose vision is *progress for the next 10,000 years...*, we too have been listening deeply and working alongside our communities to better understand how to support the critical social transformation that must occur to right these wrongs perpetuated against Native peoples through our most vulnerable, our precious children. For the past 14 years we have been engaged in deep community work around issues of healing and truth-telling in our communities and, under our people's direction and vision, to address these issues that are also manifest in this bill. We look forward to working with the US Congress to bring this Commission into reality. We also stand ready to support this effort by sharing our own work in this area called Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Alaska (TRHT Alaska) in hopes that lessons we have learned in creating a healing space for the truth to be told can be helpful in the Truth & Healing Commission set-up, recommendations, and outcomes that will flow from it. We also offer edits to the bill itself (see Attachment A) to help strengthen its ability to achieve these goals.

## **WHY THE TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION ON INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS POLICIES ACT NEEDS TO BE IMPLEMENTED**

Establishing this Commission to address the legacy and ongoing impacts of boarding schools for Native peoples creates a pathway for truth, transformation, justice, and deep healing that is critically needed to address the devastating, inter-generational, and ongoing impacts of the Boarding School era. As a country we owe it to ourselves to

## Founding Board

William L. (Iggiagruk) Hensley  
*Inupiaq*

Julie E. Kitka  
*Chugach Eskimo*

Sam Kito, Jr.  
*Tlingit*

Janie Leask  
*Haida-Tsimshian*

Oliver Leavitt  
*Inupiaq*

Albert Kookesh  
*Tlingit*

Byron I. Mallott  
*Tlingit*

Morris Thompson  
*Athabaskan*

## Mission

True to identity, heritage, and values, Alaska Natives are informed and engaged in leading the decisions that shape the future.

606 E Street,  
Suite 200  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

P 907.677.1700

F 907.677.1780

[info@firstalaskans.org](mailto:info@firstalaskans.org)

[firstalaskans.org](http://firstalaskans.org)



know what happened, how our country was formed by these policies, how Native peoples, cultures, communities, and families were almost completely destroyed and our homelands taken from us, and most importantly, how we can rectify, repair, and move forward together as a country whose destiny is intertwined with the well-being of the Native peoples of this place.

A true accounting of the Boarding School era and its ongoing ramifications today is the first step towards healing as a Nation and as Indigenous peoples – past and present. At least 367 boarding schools were operated by the U.S. for over a century, yet we only know the location on record for 38% of these schools, and only a fraction have been analyzed. This Commission is needed to help locate and analyze additional records and ensure that accounts of Indian boarding schools—told by survivors, families, Tribes, community members, and Native organizations, as well as presently unknown and undisclosed records—are preserved. Time is of the essence as we have a limited amount of time to hear directly from survivors and record their stories – at a bare minimum we owe this to them. This Commission is needed to ensure that our children who were forced to attend these schools are not forgotten, that their descendants and the legacy of impact intergenerationally is acknowledged and addressed, that our communities who had their children taken from them and the future of their cultures, languages, community well-being, and homelands severely jeopardized are finally heard, and so that this never happens again. This knowledge and understanding will also help ensure that we can shape better policy with more meaningful and significant supports, and that this destructive era of U.S. Indian policy is acknowledged so that future generations of Americans may understand this dark history and strive to do better for us all.

The traumas experienced by these stolen children and their communities continues to reverberate within our families, cultures, and communities, and disrupt our ability to live our ways of life as diverse Indigenous peoples. For too long, there has been a blanket of silence around boarding schools, without an opportunity for our communities to speak about what we endured. The longer the silence endures, the heavier the weight of these truths and the greater the trauma they inflict in our communities foreclosing opportunity, destroying lives, and creating a cycle of trauma that erodes this country's ability to live up to its promise.

Developing a complete picture of the ongoing impact Indian boarding schools have had on generations of Alaska Native, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian people, is critical to providing a path toward healing for individuals, families and tribal communities that have endured the terrible consequences of Indian boarding school policies and it will also help heal this entire nation. *What is good for Native people is good for all U.S. citizens.* This important work must be supported by all who reside in the United States today, and we encourage you to continue bringing other Senators and Congressmen together to advance this critical endeavor. This work will promote healing within our Indigenous communities and within the US as we begin to unpack the legacy, confront the truth, and transform these historic atrocities into a future our children can not only be safe in but they can finally thrive in once again.

To those ends, we highly support the creation of a Truth & Healing Commission that will help account for 1) the number of children forced to attend these schools; (2) the number of children who were



abused, died, or went missing while at these schools and their locations and burial sites; 3) the number of children who were displaced, disconnected, and removed from their Tribal communities permanently; 4) the long-term intergenerational impacts on the children and the families of children forced to attend Indian boarding schools; 5) the impacts on Native communities, cultures, languages, and homelands (ie the link between colonization, land dispossession, assimilation, and boarding schools to effectuate those policies); and 6) the location of church, other privately held information, and government records needed to complete this analysis. Our country will continue to fall short of its values and ideals without this important work.

**HOW TRHT ALASKA USES A NATIVE-BASED, HEALING PROCESS TO CREATE A SPACE WHERE THE TRUTH CAN BE TOLD, HEALING IS CENTERED, AND ACTIONS TO ADDRESS AND REPAIR HARM ARE AMPLIFIED**

First Alaskans Institute, working alongside our community, guided by Native Leaders, Advisors, and Healers, has been hosting the Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Alaska process, grown out of our communities priorities, designed specifically for Alaska, and supported in partnership with the WK Kellogg Foundation, to bring forward our peoples truths at a statewide level. We invite our Native peoples to come forward and share their truths and lived experiences as well as Alaskan leaders within our state and national governments, faith-based communities, and other entities to commit to working together with the Native community to transform systems of past and current harm. We invite and encourage your participation in our TRHT Alaska endeavor as well.

**About TRHT**

For years, Indigenous communities in Alaska, and across the country, have called for a process that provides for intergenerational healing and permanent systemic and societal transformation. TRHT Alaska is a movement in response to this call and is grounded in Alaska Native knowledge to create space for healing for all of Alaska’s people. Through this movement we are creating a record of our truths as Indigenous peoples, peoples of color, and identity intersections to right the wrongs we experience, and transform our systems so future generations are free to be who they are without harm. It is a pathway forward to healing the relationship with Alaska Native peoples and all others who now call Alaska home towards a more vibrant, dynamic, and strong Alaska.

The TRHT Alaska tribunal was created to make a space for the truth to be told, for wrongs to be righted, and for societal transformation to occur for the long term - by our people, for our people, and for Alaska. It was designed around a simple principle, that when we center Native values in the process and in the way we host these forums, we can ensure our people feel safe, welcome, heard, and that they have the best chance possible for the sharing of their truths to be a healing experience and support their continued healing journeys for themselves and for our collective well-being. These tribunals are designed around critical communities and issues such as Boarding and Residential Schools, Murdered and Missing Indigenous Relatives (also known as MMIW) and public safety, Protecting Our Native Ways Of Life (POWOL), lands, economy, and laws.

These TRHT Tribunals create space for truth, healing, justice, and societal transformation by engaging all participants in solution-making and ownership of actions that they can effectuate. We do not refer to this process as ‘reconciliation’ because we are not trying to restore a relationship that was once good and needs to be ‘reconciled’. We cannot reconcile what we never had, so instead of starting with a false



narrative, we are instead focused on the outcome we are seeking, the healing and transformation of our society. Through this effort, we aim for healing and justice for our peoples, transformation of systems, and to create a place where once again our children are reflected and loved for who they are.

### **Truth**

The true history of Alaska Native peoples is a perspective rarely mentioned or represented in school systems today. This space is designed to accept and uplift the true lived experience of Alaska Native peoples. It is an opportunity to speak about the honest historical and ongoing legacies of institutions, governments and entities involved in harming our peoples. Sharing the legacy of these institutions and systems and how they rose into the positions they have at the expense of Indigenous and peoples of color is a story to share with every Alaskan. Telling the truth of how policies, laws, governments, faith-based entities, educational institutions, media, conservation organizations, resource industries, and other groups have impacted our peoples and our ability to thrive as Indigenous peoples in our own homelands and in our diaspora is vital for justice, for righting wrongs, and for ensuring all Alaskans understand their critical role in reshaping this legacy – to be a part of it and to find ways to evolve forward together. Truth is necessary for justice and justice is necessary for healing and transformation.

### **Racial Healing**

We are deliberately centering healing in all aspects of these tribunals. Healing emerges from telling our stories in safe, uplifting, loving spaces designed for us and by us. Throughout this process, we are focusing on the wellbeing and healing of our peoples from the ongoing intergenerational trauma caused by these systems and policies. We have been working with a group of over 40 Native healers who carry expertise in various forms of healing to include clinical, spiritual, traditional, cultural, religious, and other forms of healing that are not bound by and/or defined by western ideologies of healing. It also incorporates healing pathways that focus on group, individual, and homelands-based processes (such as getting out on the land to harvest or just to be), as well as offering other types of healing that individuals themselves ask for, such as western psychology, therapy, or faith-based processes. These healing modalities are meant to meet our people where they are at. This means that this work continues to center on the guidance of our communities and peoples. The tribunals are designed to try not to retraumatize or cause further harm related to the historic trauma, but to create a pathway for healing and care for every individual participating in these tribunals. For many, being able to talk about these experiences collectively is a healing act in and of itself, while others feel more supported in smaller group or one on one connections. Whatever way works best for our peoples is the way we try to create these spaces and amplify their well-being.

### **Transformation**

We operate with the understanding that Alaska Natives know best what is best for Alaska Natives, and what is good for Alaska Natives is good for all Alaskans. We know that when our communities are in charge of determining their future, everyone benefits. The transformation we seek will center the narratives, lived experiences, and needs of our people in all systems. The transformation of these systems will target the inequity where these injustices began, and are then addressed and remedied by every Alaskan in perpetuity – so it never happens again. Accountability Partners work alongside us to achieve this transformation within their institutions and governments. Our ever-expanding cohort is examining the legacies of their institutions and systems, educating themselves, and sharing these hard truths. What this means is that doing this work is not about having one moment in time and then

‘moving on’, as that is not possible, but rather that doing this work is about transforming ourselves for the better, never to return to what was before. Like a caterpillar to a butterfly, the United States can finally transform into the country we all know it must become to secure its healthy, vibrant future.

## Tribunal Roles

There are several critical roles for each tribunal, which require various pre- and post- meetings and trainings to be fully prepared and debriefed, with actions to move forward with:

- **Truth Providers:** Alaska Native peoples who feel called to speak truth to the harms and challenges we have experienced with external systems that impact our ability to live and thrive as distinct Native peoples and continue our ways of life.
- **Pullers:** Doers and allies who work for, with, and in alignment with Native peoples to advance our Native peoples, protect our Native ways of life, work for racial equity, and fight for social justice. Pullers will be engaged, listening, committed, and will help co-create solutions to make transformation in the institutions, society, and systems that perpetuate inequity and harm to our Native peoples and ways of life.
- **Indigenous Artists:** They will listen and later - if inspired – will create art that meaningfully responds to truths told in the moment or memorialize what our peoples have gone through in order to honor the stories shared through the TRHT Alaska process, so they are not forgotten, ensure history is not repeated, and to create a more equitable and transformed future for our children.
- **Healers:** Healers will aid as we hold space for both our Truth Providers as well as all our participants no matter their role. The Healers serve as a touchstone, as a presence, and as a relationship that folks can tap into, connect with, and build deeper insights with during or following the gathering.
- **Story Guardians:** The Story Guardians are charged with being deeply engaged listeners, the receivers of any truths (testimony) that are shared and offering reflection into the space as a way of reciprocating to our Truth Providers during the process. The presence of the Story Guardians will help Truth Providers feel safe, listened to, validated, and believed. And provide a guidepost for all other participants as well.
- **Accountability Partner:** An Accountability Partner is a representative of an entity whose work, presence, or historical legacy has impacted, continues to impact, or has the capacity to impact the Alaska Native community, and the intention, willingness and commitment to respond to the truths told to work alongside our Native peoples to ensure true healing and transformation towards a better, more equitable, and stronger Alaska. Entities could include an organization, government (in any capacity – elected, appointed, judicial, administrative, legislative, employed, etc.), churches, educational systems, businesses, media, health care, environmental/conservation entities, resource development entities, social groups, or person or groups of people.

As a part of the healing work and path we are on, we ask those interested in being Accountability Partners to make the following commitments:

- Participate in our Accountability Partner preparatory session to ensure you are informed and ready to hear our peoples’ truths.
- Examine the political and racial legacy of your institution and commit yourself to examining and sharing this story.
- Lift up truths, share hidden or untold stories, and dismantle false narratives that are critical to transforming inequitable systems within Alaska that negatively impact all Alaskans.



- Participate fully during truth-telling spaces by bearing witness to the stories shared.
- Commit your time and resources to work proactively with our communities to advance desired policy and narrative outcomes.

This work is ongoing and its purpose is to continue to provide pathways for healing for our peoples, and for systems of harm to be healed and transformed as well. To date, we have 151 recordings from our Tribunals and Summits, mostly from our Truth Providers, Story Guardians and Healers. We use an informed consent process that is also built on healing and equity methodologies – that once participants share their truths, they have time to reflect and view their recording in order to decide if they are comfortable sharing the full recording, some of the recording, or none of the recording, and once they decide they can then provide their consent as they desire to give it. This acknowledges and amplifies their power over their truths and supports their decision-making. Each recording, as authorized by the informed consent process, will be held in an online repository as a living history of our truths. Our communities can access the knowledge and wisdom of these truths in a variety of formats, ranging from research, writings, curricula development, media, and other communication/artistic expressions. They will guide the narrative change needed to inform policy makers, leaders, decision makers, healers and health practitioners, educators, and more from now and into the future. A short documentary film is also being made to help tell the story of this work, so future generations can access and learn from it for the challenges they will face.

We will continue to work with our healers and advisors on our collective healing journey and grow our people's access to healing pathways grounded in our ways of knowing and being. We continue to expand our cohort of Accountability Partners who are examining the legacies of their institutions and systems, educating themselves and their colleagues, and sharing these truths towards the goal of co-creating a future legacy we can all be part of and our children proud of. The Accountability Partners are key participants who do not have an authoritarian or hierarchical role in the process, but rather stand beside and hold up those sharing their truths, bear witness, and do their own hard work to better understand these legacies and transform them.

This TRHT Alaska model, co-created by a visionary group of Alaskans and centering Alaska Native values in the process, has been sought by many folks around the country and world. Aboriginal people in Australia, First Nations in Canada, Sami (Norway), and other BIPOC communities from the contiguous U.S. have reached out to learn more about this Indigenous process as they work on their own. We will continue to share the model and are committed to evolving it as needed to meet the vision of our Native peoples – to create a space where the truth can be told, wrongs can be righted, and societal transformation is achieved. We welcome members of this committee to join us in this critical work and/or reach out to learn more for potential application for this Truth & Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools.

#### **STRENGTHENING THE TRUTH & HEALING COMMISSION ON INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS POLICIES ACT**

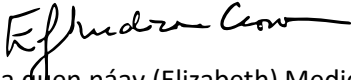
Please find attached a redline version of the bill with our suggested amendments to help ensure the law that is passed is the strongest and most impactful it can be, while still holding true to the original intent of the bill. We understand this is a continuing process and look forward to further opportunity to comment and make further suggestions. We also want to ensure that Alaska, having a unique history,

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and complex governance due to the various way's colonization has occurred in our homelands, can be fully engaged and represented in this process.

Gunalchéesh, Háw'aa, Tsíná'ęę- We thank you again for considering this bill to establish a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Policies. We stand ready to lend our support for this critical work. Please do not hesitate to call or email with any follow-up questions or comments.

Respectfully,



La qwen náay (Elizabeth) Medicine Crow (Haida/Tlingit)  
President/CEO



Wááhlaal Gíidaak (Barbara) Blake (Haida/Tlingit/Ahtna)  
Director, Alaska Native Policy Center

*Attachment A*