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U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Oversight Field Hearing:

*Safeguarding to the Seventh Generation: Protection and Justice for Indian Children and the*

*Implementation of the Native American Children's Safety Act of 2016*

Friday, April 21, 2017 @ 1 pm

Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation

Cankdeska Cikana Community College Amphitheater

**Testimony by Cynthia Lindquist, PhD, President, Cankdeska Cikana Community College** (CCCC), Fort Totten, ND and member, Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe. Thank you to Senator John Hoeven and the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for hosting a field hearing on the Spirit Lake Dakota reservation on the very important topic of child safety and protection. I believe this is the first time a Senate field hearing will be held on the Spirit Lake reservation, and I am grateful that our Senate leader has convened the hearing in Fort Totten, ND.

Dakota people do not have a word for child or kids as they are considered 'sacred little ones' – wakanheza. Human life is sacred, a gift, and the sacred little ones are to be loved, cared for, and cherished. I am ever hopeful that the *Native American Children's Safety Act of 2016* will shed light on, and bring action to the layered, yet related issues to protect our sacred little ones. There is no one solution except for the need for significant infusion of resources – financial and professional – to address the safety and protection of Native children. While I am most hopeful for the potential benefit of the Act, it is also disheartening that such legislation is needed.

**Think Dakota • Live Dakota**

The needs for the Spirit Lake Dakota reservation are significant and documented in a variety of ways by various federal, state, and private organizations. Disparities in social, health, education, and economic factors are reported by the U.S. Census, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Health Service, and many others. The needs for most reservation communities are complex, related to history and historical trauma, and compounded by endemic poverty. This complexity has forced Native people to live a dependency lifestyle that is alien to Dakota life ways of industriousness, ingenuity, compassion, and generosity.

In 2015, CCCC led the coordination of a Comprehensive Community Assessment (CCA) in partnership with the Spirit Lake Tribe. The purpose of the assessment was to describe community characteristics using existing data and to describe current health, education, economic, housing status, and needs of community members through individual interviews. There are three documents for the CCA – the full study/report, an executive summary, and a cultural narrative. These documents may be accessed on the CCCC web site at <http://www.littlehoop.edu/research.html>. The following demographic summary is from the CCA:

*Spirit Lake Nation has 7,256 enrolled members with 2,069 members living on the reservation. Total reservation population is 4,238. The Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, lists 5,002 American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) alone or in combination, living on or near the Spirit Lake Dakota reservation. Virtually the same number of females and males live on the reservation. The median age for all of Spirit Lake reservation is 23.4, younger than the State's median age of 37 or the nation's median age of 37.2. Women have a higher median age (23.5) than men (23.3). The reservation community has approximately 27% of the population under the age of 19. The reservation's 65 and older population comprises 7.1% of the total population, lower than the state (14.5%) and national*

*(13%) percentages. Twenty-nine percent of Spirit Lake reservation residents are married, lower than the state (53.5%) and U.S. (50.2%).*

*According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, 72% of Spirit Lake reservation residents, age 18 and older graduated from high school, as compared to ND at 89% and the U.S. at 85%. Spirit Lake Tribal members earning a bachelor's degree or higher is 7%, compared to ND at 26% or the U.S. at 28%. Sixty-five percent of the Spirit Lake population between 20 and 64 years of age are in the labor force (labor force includes unemployed who were actively searching for employment); 55% of the labor force population is employed, lower than the state (85%) and national levels (78%). The median household income on Spirit Lake reservation in 2006-2010 was \$26,118, much lower than the state (\$46,781) and national (\$51,914) levels. Nearly half (47.8%) of the reservation's residents live below the poverty level, much higher than state ((12.3%) and national (13.8%) levels.*

*The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 57% of Spirit Lake children live in poverty as compared to ND's rate of 14%. The local school systems all have higher rates (78%) of students (mostly Native children) who qualify for reduced and free lunches than the state rate (25%).*

The CCA provides much detail and information on the health, education, economic, and housing status and needs of the Spirit Lake community, as well as a summary on life satisfaction and the most important needs (priorities) for the Spirit Lake Tribe. There were 18 items rated as 'very important' for the needs section of the CCA and at the top of the list is child safety/protection, followed by housing and employment, then health/behavioral health items. It is important to note that all 18 items were rated above a four with five = Very Important. Respondents noted that access to health care services, particularly mental health/social services/substance abuse treatment, along with better quality of services, are important factors influencing outcomes. To improve child safety/protection, respondents

want more community, child and youth activities on the reservation that are planned and coordinated, especially to address youth risk factors for drug/alcohol use. The CCA developed a chart of recommendations, which is organized by needs as identified by the respondents, and includes other studies/reports. The recommendations provide a framework for addressing child safety/protection for the Spirit Lake community.

Health and education go hand in hand. Education is the pathway to address the various issues affecting the protection and safety of children but to pursue education, there must be some semblance of health and well-being. Native people have been taught dependency and various federal policies have had a detrimental impact that contributes to the dependency lifestyle. Poverty and hopelessness limit aspirations and it is a debilitating cycle that is compounded by alcohol and drug abuse. Reinforcement of Dakota life values is core to the work at CCCC and for all tribal colleges. Revitalizing cultural knowledge and Dakota values that are rooted in language is the mission of CCCC. Tribal college research is documenting that Native college students who have a strong cultural identity, are having successful college outcomes.

I strongly believe that there is an abundance of data and reports regarding the social, education, and economic disparities, as well as on child abuse, neglect, death, or suicides on American Indians that informs the implementation of the *Native American Children's Safety Act of 2016*. We need coordinated resource development for tribal-specific response, such as the Spirit Lake Comprehensive Community Assessment. Resources, including support, for training and education of tribal members to become the professionals needed for social services, addiction counseling, culturally based family services, lawyers, doctors, teachers, child care providers, and so on, must be a priority goal. Resources for family homes and facilities to provide the services, and built for North Dakota weather and geography, must be a

priority goal. Stronger networking of federal agencies, state programs, tribal programs, and private organizations must be encouraged so services are integrated and available where the people reside.

Families need help that is not punitive and that encourages and supports them in a good way, utilizing incremental steps. Head Start is a wonderful model that does what it can toward helping families and supporting the development of their children. CCCC has administered the Spirit Lake Head Start program since January 2014 and currently serves approximately 140 children, ages infant to 5 years old. CCCC Head Start has a prenatal component wherein, we track down the pregnant woman and help to get her into services. The baby is guaranteed a slot in the Head Start program with the mother's cooperation. As we counsel the pregnant women, there are a myriad of problems she is trying to address and generally, the mothers are very young and lack support or knowledge of what to do or how/who to reach out to. The CCCC Head Start prenatal nurse usually does this counseling in her car, as the young mother-to-be is staying somewhere that is not 'her' home and she is afraid of consequences for talking to a nurse.

CCCC Head Start is a mandated reporter for suspected child abuse or neglect. Since January 2017, our program has filed sixteen, SFN 960s to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Child Protection Services (CPS) in Fort Totten, ND that I am aware of – that is an average of one per week! Our issue is that the Head Start staff (usually a Family Services Advocate/FSA, but sometimes the nurses) do not hear back on the filed 960, so we do not know if it has been received, that a review/investigation will be conducted, and most importantly is the child or children safe and being cared for in a good way. In comparison, on occasion the Head Start staff file a 960 with Ramsey County and per the staff, "...within an hour of sending in the 960, the Ramsey County Child Protection Services (CPS) has called to verify receipt of the report, ask questions, and to acknowledge that they are following up." We only want assurances that the child or children are being protected and in a safe environment.

The CCCC Head Start program has made significant progress in the three years we have managed it, including securing funding to build a center that is centrally located on the reservation and desperately needed for the community. This is a collaboration between the Spirit Lake Tribe and the College, with CCCC securing two USDA Community Facilities loans for \$7.6 million for the construction, plus \$900,000 from the Office of Head Start. The Spirit Lake Tribe is making the payments for the loans which started in March 2017. The new Head Start Center is 42,000 square feet, brick, with 19 classrooms to serve 185 children. It will have a nurse's station, commercial kitchen, heated bus garage, office/reception area, and a multi-purpose room for parent/teacher training. The center is for the children and families of Spirit Lake and will open in the fall 2017. We are grateful for the USDA loans, but it is frustrating that loans had to be utilized, as the Spirit Lake Dakota reservation is a designated Promise and Strike Force Zone (extreme poverty, high unemployment, and limited economic development). I have requested consideration to have the loans waived, decreased, or minimized due to extreme economic hardship.

Another component for Indian Head Start programs is the need for credentialed teachers, social workers, nurses, and administrators who are tribal members. CCCC utilizes Department of Education, Title III grant program resources for professional development of faculty and staff, including Head Start employees, and we have six tribal members working on bachelor's degrees in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and another four in social work. To meet Head Start standards, we project a need for 25 teachers with bachelor's degrees in ECE for the new Head Start Center.

The tribal colleges and universities system (TCUs), via the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), has requested the restoration of the funding for the TCU/Head Start Partnership program, that helped TCUs build capacity in early childhood education by providing scholarships and stipends for Indian Head Start teachers and teacher assistants in TCU ECE programs. AIHEC has requested



\$8 million be designated for the TCU/Head Start Partnership program, as authorized in PL 110-134, so TCUs can provide high-quality, culturally-appropriate training for teachers and staff in the Indian Head Start programs.

Training and recruitment of individuals and families to become foster parents is another important priority for the Spirit Lake community, and an essential component toward the safety and protection of children. Multi-disciplinary teams led by social services, are necessary to nurture collaboration, wrap-around services, and to provide advocacy for healthy families. The training and development of tribal people is essential toward facilitating change and improving home and family life.

The United Nations articulates that education is a fundamental human right:

*Education is recognized as both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights and fundamental freedoms, the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized peoples can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain a means to participate fully in their communities. Education is increasingly recognized as one of the best long-term financial investments that States can make.*

(United Nations. (2009) *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.un.org/esa/socev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP/en/SOWIP\\_web.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP/en/SOWIP_web.pdf) )

The protection of, and justice for, Indian children in the implementation of the *Native American Children's Safety Act of 2016* must be rooted in educational opportunities that are funded adequately. Those opportunities must be available at the local/tribal level and culturally relevant. Education for parents/families to understand the dynamics of life and doing a better job toward the development and well-being of their children. Education for the professional development of tribal members to staff social services, to be the teachers, nurses, or doctors. This is the work of Cankdeska Cikana Community College and all the TCUs.

We look forward to working together to protect and provide safe environments for all sacred little ones...wakanheza. Thank you (pidamaya) for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Mitakuye oyasin...all my relations (we are all related.)



Cynthia Lindquist, PhD, President, CCCC

Ta'Sunka Wicahpi Win...Star Horse Woman

Member, Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe