

Fort Belknap Indian Community



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Fort Belknap Indian Community
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to represent the Assiniboine and the Gros Ventre
Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)

FORT BELKNAP INDIAN COMMUNITY

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON JUSTICE AND SAFETY FOR NATIVE CHILDREN: EXAMINING TITLE II OF THE DRAFT NATIVE CHILDREN'S COMMISSION IMPLEMENTATION ACT

JANUARY 26, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, and Members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, the Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC) appreciates this opportunity to testify in support of legislation that would strengthen and improve programs needed to support Native children. Nothing is more important to FBIC than our children. FBIC strongly supports the proposed "Native Children's Commission Implementation Act of 2025" and, in particular, Title II of the Act.

Title II of the Act is entitled "Justice for Children, Youth, and Families." This Title addresses important law enforcement and justice issues, as well as the vital Tiwahe Program. Under Title II the Act would make the Tiwahe Initiative permanent, providing the certainty our community needs to promote family-centered, holistic wellness. While we strongly support these provisions, much more is needed.

The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is home to approximately 10,000 Nakoda and Aaniiih tribal members, with 4,200 residing on our lands. Our reservation is remote, located 35 miles from the Canadian border, and encompasses four distinct communities: the Agency, Hays, Lodgepole, and Dodson. Like many other large land-based tribes, we ceded vast lands and resources in exchange for the support and protection of the United States. Our reservation was established through a series of treaties beginning in 1855, as well as Congressional Acts, Executive Orders, and the 1888 Agreement and Act of Congress. Within our borders, we serve four distinct communities: the Agency, Hays, Lodgepole, and Dodson.

CULTURE IS THE FOUNDATION OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Our culture and traditions are the lifeblood of these communities. We have successfully incorporated our traditional ways into all aspects of the Tiwahe programming. This flexibility allows us to meet our community members' needs through a lens that resonates with them, which we believe is the cornerstone of any successful program. As our families learn to be self-sufficient,

they benefit from achieving a positive sense of identity and a renewed pride in being Aaniiih or Nakoda people.

Family Wellness Program

Our Family Wellness Program, developed under these Tiwahe philosophies, places our families at the heart of service delivery. It is a practice-informed initiative dedicated to strengthening the resilience and health of our youth and families by meeting them exactly where they are. Through culturally grounded activities, individualized case management, and life-skills education, we promote long-term wellness and community connection. In practice, this means we conduct home visits and customize care plans to address immediate needs while building the stability required for independence.

We work closely with each client to remove barriers, such as lack of transportation, unemployment, or limited education, and we are currently building our capacity to ensure staff are available even in our most remote areas. We host various family-strengthening events throughout the year to promote healthy living, sobriety, and suicide prevention. Furthermore, Tiwahe allows us to collaborate with other programs to offer driver's license study classes in all our communities. These classes help participants gain the confidence and legal standing necessary for employment, resulting in a high success rate for safe drivers in our community.

The healing experience of simply listening to and encouraging one another is an underlying factor in our success. When our people connect with their identity, they find a stepping stone to self-sufficiency. This impact is best described by one of our clients, who shared:

"I would like to start off by giving gratitude and appreciation to the program/staff, especially my caseworkers as they believed in me, gave me the nudge I needed to pick myself back up from being lost with little to no hope. I truly believe in this program, I have always wanted to learn about my culture, our elders and history.....When I first came to the program I was addicted. I had no stability whatsoever, no help or guidance, homeless, living life from day to day, everyone in my life had no hope for me and doubted my every move. [At Tiwahe] I was asked to make a care plan, set some goals and I had no idea what I was going to do. With the help of my case manager, I have managed to slowly start trying to stand on my own feet. I was so dependent on others, I couldn't even hold onto my I.D. This program has provided a lot of tools to start becoming responsible.

They helped me get a birth certificate, my own tribal ID, they helped me apply for jobs in our community but due to the limited job opportunities and my own personal issues it is a struggle. I applied for housing within the program and managed to get my own very first apartment with their help. I enrolled in the driver's license class because it was on my care plan, to be honest I doubted myself but with my encouraging case managers, I passed with flying colors.

Sometimes I need help with basic necessities like food, hygiene, etc. and they provide that. Tiwahe Family Strengthening has guided me and helped to become closer to my creator, helped me to learn about who I am physically, emotionally and spiritually, I have found myself again. I have learned about my roots throughout this program. I do believe that this program has a lot to do with our staff as well, I have grown to have a true connection with my case managers and my cultural guides. It has been a long journey for me and I would have never thought I would be here today sober, happy, responsible, finally living life and enjoying motherhood. I have courage and purpose today and I am forever thankful for my support system and this program."

Youth Leadership and Suicide Prevention

Our youth are our greatest natural resource and our future. We believe that strong, connected youth build a strong community. The Tiwahe Youth Wellness Task Force was created as a youth-led leadership group for students in seventh through twelfth grade across our three school districts. The focus is on wellness, leadership, culture strength, and suicide prevention while uplifting their peers and community. The youth meet and generate ideas, plan and implement activities throughout their communities. This task force focused heavily on suicide prevention during a time when our community faced a series of tragedies. By breaking the stigma around mental health and teaching students to recognize warning signs, our youth are creating a new generation of community leadership.

Soaring Eagle Juvenile Justice Program

Our development also includes the Soaring Eagle Juvenile Justice Program (SEJJ), which is a vital component of our Tiwahe Initiative. Originally established in 2017 as the Recidivism Reduction Initiative (RRI) through the Office of Justice Services, the program was born out of a desperate need to support our youth. Before its inception, our options were limited to tribal youth court grants, which addressed substance abuse but offered very little long-term support to help our young people heal.

We chose the name "Soaring Eagle" based on the shared vision of our youth and our Elders' Council. While we initially focused specifically on substance abuse offenses, we quickly realized that we needed to address all types of offenses to help our young adults before they entered the adult system and faced much harsher consequences. Our mission is to reduce recidivism, including drug possession, truancy, and criminal contempt, by addressing the underlying anger, grief, and abandonment that often lead to offending.

Our approach has been extremely successful. Currently, our six-month rate of recidivism is 34% for 2025, with a four-year average of 36%, which remains well below national levels. This success is built on a foundation of collaboration. SEJJ has established a youth court that works hand-in-hand with chemical and behavioral health services, social services, law enforcement, and public schools. We maintain a positive rapport with Montana Juvenile Probation Officers and detention facilities, and we utilize tools like the Global

Assessment of Individual Needs (GAIN-SS) to ensure our intervention services are tailored to the unique needs of each participant.

A key component of this success is the deep involvement of our Elders. Since January 2017, we have been honored to have respected Elders share their knowledge of language, holistic healing, traditional foods, and ceremonies. These ten-week classes run year-round, fostering a sense of trust and respect that bridges the gap between generations. By maintaining this cultural and traditional knowledge, we are helping our youth reclaim their identity as Aaniiih and Nakoda people.

We believe in the power of positive reinforcement. SEJJ provides incentives such as school clothing and supplies, along with culturally based family activities and field trips with our Elders. These efforts have yielded remarkable results: our truancy list has been reduced by half, and parents are becoming more conscious of the importance of school attendance. By providing a supportive environment, we are helping youth who come from broken homes or are experiencing homelessness to overcome their struggles and find self-love.

Whether a participant is in our program for a short journey or a long journey, we strive for their continuous growth. We are working 100% for these families to increase their cultural connection, improve their grades, and strengthen their family relationships. Our model has proven that when Native youth are confident in their identity, they have the opportunity to enjoy a happy, successful future.

Transportation and Growth

Finally, we have applied this same successful Tiwahe model of identifying a need and taking immediate action to address our transportation crisis. Because of our extreme remoteness, we created a transport system that serves as a vital lifeline, connecting tribal members to healthcare, education, and employment. In just one year, our transports have increased from 60 to over 100 per month.

Tiwahe Transit now provides rides for daily medical needs, cultural camps, and even field trips to harvest medicinal herbs. By being proactive and responding quickly, we have ensured that our families can finally reach essential services that were once entirely inaccessible. Moving forward, we intend to further expand our transportation and wellness programs, streamlining our processes and designing tools that continue to reflect our Aaniiih and Nakoda traditions while telling a more meaningful story of change through the data we collect.

ADDITIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT NEEDS

FBIC maintains that the safety of our children is linked to the integrity of our justice systems. As the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission report, *The Way Forward*, correctly identifies, we cannot protect our youth without first eradicating the violent crime and drug trafficking that permeate their daily environments. FBIC requests that Title II

of the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act provide additional, dedicated resources for the law enforcement issues directly impacting our children.

Our Reservation is currently facing a coordinated assault from transnational drug cartels that exploit our vast and rugged geography. These criminal elements have introduced a plague of drug trafficking, violent crime, and human trafficking that threatens the very fabric of our families. This crisis is especially devastating on a reservation like ours, where the unemployment rate hovers around thirty percent and opportunities for advancement are scarce. Because we are rural and remote, agriculture remains our primary economic asset. Without resource-rich assets like oil and gas, or income-producing enterprises like casinos, our youth are left with few paths forward. The lack of opportunity causes many to turn to dangerous drugs and high-risk lifestyles that promise a quick return but deliver only destruction.

This is an intensely personal issue for FBIC. This is not a distant policy concern; we all have family members, friends, and neighbors who are suffering. Many of us deal with the reality of drug abuse within our own homes, knowing that wherever addiction takes place, abuse and violent crime can follow at any moment.

Despite the severity of this crisis, the Federal government, through the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is failing in its trust responsibility to protect our people. Our law enforcement capabilities are dangerously overextended, leaving our community vulnerable. We are forced to operate with a total of only seven patrol officers. In practice, this means roughly two officers per shift are responsible for patrolling a land area the size of a small state. This lack of presence allows cartel members to blend into our communities and generate massive profits while we lack the personnel and expertise to root them out.

We urge this Committee to ensure this legislation includes provisions to dramatically increase law enforcement staffing and specialized resources. Securing our community is more than a matter of general policing; it is an essential step in fulfilling the Federal government's duty to provide the safe, secure, and stable environments that Native children deserve. We must use every legislative opportunity to ensure our homes are no longer havens for crime, but sanctuaries for our children.

CONCLUSION

The Fort Belknap Indian Community strongly supports this legislation so that we can continue to enhance the welfare and rights of Native children. We need to continue improving access to education and healthcare tailored to our unique needs while addressing historical disparities. This Act encourages the continued collaboration between tribal and federal governments to ensure our children's needs are prioritized in policymaking. We are proof of the success of these initiatives, particularly through our Soaring Eagle Juvenile Justice Program. Thank you for your time and for supporting the future of our children.