

MAY 16, 2018

Udall Presses Bureau of Indian Education Director on School Safety

Also applauds committee passage of the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act to prevent the illegal sale of tribal cultural items

WASHINGTON — Today, U.S. Senator Tom Udall, vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, pressed Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Director Tony Dearman about the BIE's shortcomings in proactively addressing school violence and emergency preparedness, at an oversight hearing entitled "Protecting the Next Generation: Safety and Security at BIE Schools."

"Recent events have, once again, led to a national dialogue on school safety. It's crucial that schools in Indian Country be part of this important conversation," said Udall in his opening remarks. "The Santa Fe Indian School student body and the student-led Braves and Lady Braves Against School Violence group is taking on very important work. Let me just say to those students that I am moved by your tenacity and your advocacy. And that I hope today's hearing amplifies your work and that of all Native students – whether

they attend BIE schools or non-BIE schools; and whether they are in K-12 or college.”

Indian Country has experienced several incidents of school violence over the last two decades, including a 2005 school shooting on the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota, a 2014 school shooting near the Tulalip Reservation in Washington, and a 2017 school shooting near the Navajo Nation in Aztec, New Mexico. Since the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, BIE officials have noted an uptick in threats of violence at BIE-operated and tribal schools, estimating at least 20 such threats have been reported so far this year.

In recent years, the Department of the Interior’s Office of the Inspector General (DOI-OIG) uncovered startling gaps in school security at BIE schools. DOI-OIG [found](#) that only 4 of the 16 BIE schools surveyed had emergency plans for shootings, bomb threats, hostage situations, or other mass violence events. Most recently, DOI-OIG [reported](#) that BIE personnel criminal background check systems are inadequate, leaving students at risk.

Udall helped [secure increased funding](#) for BIE school infrastructure in the latest budget appropriations bill and is a co-sponsor of the [STOP School Violence Act](#) – legislation passed as part of the FY2018 omnibus appropriations package that invests in early intervention and prevention programs to stop school violence before it happens — including providing key resources to strengthen school safety in Native communities.

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Prior to the oversight hearing, the committee passed the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act, a bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) and cosponsored by Udall to curb the theft, illegal possession, sale, transfer, and export of tribal cultural items.

“The STOP Act would provide tribes with the tools they need to prohibit the export of illegally obtained sacred objects, and increase penalties for stealing and illegally trafficking tribal cultural patrimony.... My hope is that -- by passing this legislation -- we will close loopholes in current law that unfortunately result in the trafficking and sale of items of cultural patrimony in international markets,” Udall said. “I would like to thank Senator Heinrich, my colleague from New Mexico, and Governor Kurt Riley of Acoma Pueblo, for their advocacy to protect Native American cultures and traditions with this bill.”

“The STOP Act has received widespread, bipartisan support and continues to demonstrate growing momentum. Today’s vote is a critical step in passing the STOP Act into law to safeguard sacred Native American items,” said Heinrich. “We all recognize the incredible beauty of American Indian art--from the remnants of ancient wonders that we can explore and admire in places like Chaco Canyon and the Gila Cliff Dwellings to the traditional and modern art masterpieces created by Native artists to this day. But we can also recognize a clear difference between supporting tribal artists or collecting artifacts ethically and legally as opposed to dealing or exporting items that tribes have identified as essential and sacred pieces of their cultural heritage. I want to thank Chairman Hoeven and Vice Chairman Udall for holding a vote on the STOP Act and will continue working with my colleagues and tribal communities to ensure we build on this momentum so we can help repatriate stolen culturally significant items back to their rightful owners.”

Tribal cultural items have immense historical, traditional, and spiritual importance. It is illegal under federal law to own or sell tribal cultural patrimony domestically, but federal law does not explicitly prohibit exportation abroad. The absence of an explicit export ban significantly hinders the efforts of tribes to curb the theft and transfer of tribal cultural items internationally. The STOP Act would explicitly prohibit exportation of cultural items, increase penalties under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and establish a tribal working group dedicated to preventing future mishandling of cultural items.

The full text of Udall's oversight hearing opening statement as prepared for delivery is below.

Thank you, Chairman Hoeven, for working with me to hold this oversight hearing today. Recent events have, once again, led to a national dialogue on school safety. It's crucial that schools in Indian Country be part of this important conversation.

Thank you to our two tribal witnesses for joining us today.

Throughout her career, Cecilia Fire Thunder has been and continues to be a great advocate for Native women and Native education. Thank you for making the journey here today.

I want to extend a special welcome to Gary Lujan from the Santa Fe Indian School. Mr. Lujan is a member of the Taos Pueblo who has dedicated years

working as a Pueblo education advocate and on behalf of the S-F-I-S community.

Thank you and the SFIS Board of Trustees for working with me and my staff to highlight school safety issues in Indian Country.

In March, students around the nation took part in the “March for Our Lives.” These students stood up and demanded “Never Again!” – and they keep standing up for their right to attend safe, welcoming schools.

I was proud to join the March in Santa Fe with students from across Northern New Mexico, including from SFIS.

I heard many young leaders talk about the need for reform and resources. These brave students made very clear what’s needed. So, now, I’m doing my part to carry that message here to Washington. And, to use that message to inform my work.

On this committee, we know all too well that Native students often have to fight for the same educational opportunities that many communities take for granted.

That’s why I worked to make sure BIE schools were a part of the STOP School Violence Act passed earlier this year. And why I’m interested in hearing from our witnesses today about what other federal agencies could do to help BIE improve school preparedness.

Mr. Lujan, I understand that some SFIS students may be watching this hearing in their Government and Social Studies classes today – including your son.

The SFIS student body and the student-led “Braves and Lady Braves Against School Violence” group is taking on very important work.

Let me just say to those students that I am moved by your tenacity and your advocacy. And that I hope today’s hearing amplifies your work and that of all Native students – whether they attend BIE schools or non-BIE schools; and whether they are in K-12 or college.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for working with me to hold this hearing. Hopefully, today’s discussion will do even more to elevate the voices of Native communities in the Senate’s work to address school violence.