



THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN CALLS ON THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS TO CONSIDER NATIVE CHILDREN IN THE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 23, 2020

CONTACT: asbwsnc@gmail.com

The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children underscores the importance of supports for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children during the COVID-19 crisis

[Washington, D.C., April 2020] – The 11-member Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children, established by Congress, has been tasked with conducting a comprehensive study of the programs, grants, and supports available for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children at government agencies and in Native communities. We will then issue a report to Congress and the President containing recommendations to address the challenges facing Native children, with the goal of developing a sustainable system that delivers effective, culturally appropriate, meaningful wrap-around services to Native children. The bipartisan Commission is the vision of former U.S. Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) and U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK).

As the first national Commission dedicated solely to promoting the health and well-being of Native children, it is our responsibility to lift up the issues faced by Native children and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to recognize that the incredible health, well-being, and economic threats posed by COVID-19 come in the context of existing resource limitations and challenges in Native communities. Despite the fact that the U.S. government has a trust responsibility to provide for the education, health and safety of Native children, resources and support for Native children are currently inappropriate, insufficient, or limited by bureaucracy so that they are ineffective, even in the absence of the current crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a “perfect storm” of health and economic crises that has the potential to make things much worse for Native children and their communities, whether rural, reservation, or urban. Because of existing health disparities and poor community infrastructure (such as low quality or overcrowded housing), Native people are at greater risk of hospitalization and even death during the outbreak. Our Native elders, who are so essential to the lives of Native children, are particularly vulnerable. The economic impacts of the crisis will also hit Native communities especially hard, given the reliance of many tribal communities on the hospitality industry as a major source of revenue to pay for services for their members. Our children will ultimately suffer.

Given these facts, the Commission believes that it is critical that the Trump Administration and Congress consider the health and well-being of Native children in upcoming legislative and administrative actions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responses could include additional funding for the Indian Health Services, greater investments in the economies and infrastructure of Native communities, more resources for early childhood, education, and child welfare programs, and greater flexibilities for Native communities to make their own decisions about the allocation of resources and services to meet the needs of their children.

We are grateful for the provisions in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act that provide critical resources to tribal communities but this is only a first step. Native communities have so many strengths to build upon as they react to and recover from this unfolding situation.

With every crisis comes an opportunity. We have an opportunity now to fundamentally improve the way we support Native children and communities, rather than risking the well-being of another generation of Native children and youth. As a Commission, we are committed to being a voice for Native children, and stand ready to serve as a resource as Congress and the Administration consider future actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commissioners of the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children are:

Gloria O'Neill (Chair)
President/CEO, Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc.
Alaska

Tami DeCoteau, Ph.D. (Vice Chair)
DeCoteau Trauma-Informed Care & Practice, PLLC
North Dakota

Carlyle Begay
Former State Senator
Arizona

Dolores Subia BigFoot, Ph.D.
Director, Indian Country Child Trauma Center
Oklahoma

Jesse Delmar
Director, Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety
Arizona

Anita Fineday
Managing Director, Indian Child Welfare Program, Casey Family Programs
Minnesota

Don Atqaqsaq Gray
Board Member, Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation
Alaska

Leander R. McDonald, Ph. D.
President, United Tribes Technical College

North Dakota

Elizabeth Morris
Administrator, Christian Alliance for Indian Child Welfare
North Dakota

Melody Staebner
Fargo/West Fargo Indian Education Coordinator
North Dakota

###