

## NATIONAL COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN HOLDS FIRST OFFICIAL MEETING

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*The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children will conduct a comprehensive study of supports for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children*

[Washington, D.C., November 2019] – The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children, established by Congress, held its first official meeting from October 30-November 1, 2019. The bipartisan Commission is the vision of former U.S. Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) and U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), who provided opening remarks along with Tara Sweeney, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Comprised of 11 individuals specializing in juvenile justice, social service programs, Indian education, and mental and physical health, the Commission will conduct a comprehensive study of the programs, grants, and supports available for Native children at government agencies and in Native communities. They will then have three years to issue a report containing recommendations to address the challenges currently facing Native children, with the goal of developing a sustainable system that delivers wrap-around services to Native children.

Native children (including American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children) suffer from health and well-being challenges at a much higher rate than their non-Native peers, often experiencing trauma that impacts their ability to learn, thrive, and become resilient adults. Resources and supports for Native children are currently inappropriate, insufficient, or limited by bureaucracy so that they are ineffective. The Commission has a unique and historic opportunity to fundamentally change the trajectory of Native children for the better. In her opening remarks, Senator Murkowski said to the Commissioners, “The Commission can address education issues and childhood trauma in a more holistic way...Sometimes it doesn’t take a lot of money to give a child support, love, and care.” Former Senator Heitkamp added, “I want the Commission to give us hope that things can change and that we can do better. You are the ‘Hope Commission’...Collect and rely on data and research, and lead with your heart; it will take you where you need to go.”

The Commissioners are excited to take on this charge. Gloria O’Neill, Chair of the Commission and President/CEO of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council in Anchorage, Alaska, stated, “We are looking forward to moving the needle on positive outcomes for Native children. We have a great opportunity as there is great alignment in Congress and our partners in the federal government to get things done.”

Over the next couple of years, the Commission will be holding hearings in and reviewing documentation from tribal communities throughout the country to hear from Native children, their families, tribal leaders, and community members. The Commission will also

hear from respected researchers and experts as they consider their recommendations. The first public hearing of the Commission will be held in Arizona in March 2020.

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. (Co-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 (Lisa) Morris  
Administrator, Christian Alliance for Indian Child Welfare  
North Dakota

Melody Staebner  
Fargo/West Fargo Indian Education Coordinator  
North Dakota

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