



NICWA

National Indian Child Welfare Association
Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

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May 9, 2025

The Honorable Jason Smith
House Ways and Means Committee
1139 Longworth HOB
Washington D.C. 20515

RE: Preserving Critical Services to Native Children and Families in Budget Reconciliation

Dear Chairman Smith:

I am writing to you today to express our concern about reports that the Ways and Means Committee is planning to eliminate the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) and make significant cuts to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funding. Funding from these federal programs provide basic support that Native families need to increase self-sufficiency, and sometimes, provide lifesaving services to Native children and their families. These funds reach Native families on tribal lands and off-reservation areas where states and counties provide many of the services to this population.

The National Indian Child Welfare Association is the leading national organization that advocates for the well-being of Native children and families in the area of human services. We are actively engaged in educating members of Congress to the needs of this population and promoting bi-partisan solutions to the challenges that Native children and families experience in reaching their full potential. Our most recent effort was working with members of the Ways and Means Committee to reauthorize and improve Title IV-B of the Social Security Act for Native children that was approved through an overwhelming bi-partisan vote last year (Supporting America's Children and Families Act – P.L. 118-258).

National Indian Child Welfare Association

5100 S Macadam Ave, Ste 300 | Portland, OR 97239

PH: (503) 222-4044 • WEB: www.nicwa.org



The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Program contains four purposes related to increasing self-sufficiency of families, including helping families to meet their basic needs and have children cared for in their own home or the home of a relative. TANF programs, whether operated by tribal nations or by state or county agencies, often see Native families prior to the development of more serious problems, like child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, or juvenile delinquency, providing an opportunity to intervene early to avoid more serious involvement in child welfare or juvenile justice systems.

In Alaska, the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes child welfare program coordinated with the tribal TANF program to implement a new risk assessment tool to assess TANF families for child maltreatment risk. This allowed at risk families to be identified much earlier and have opportunities to receive services that kept them out of the child welfare system and allowed them to keep their children at home safely. In California, tribal TANF programs have prioritized the need to reach young people earlier to develop job skills and healthy lifestyle choices, so they don't become the next generation of public assistance recipients. Their focus on promoting connection to tribal values that promote family and tribal connectedness, self-sufficiency, and collective responsibility have been very successful in preparing young people to pursue their self-sufficiency plans and secure gainful, long-term employment, avoiding the need for public assistance in the future. Each of these tribal programs have pushed beyond conventional TANF program models that focus almost entirely on job training and education to models that connect families and young people to preventive services that meet basic needs and address long-term barriers to self-sufficiency. Reduced funding for either of these programs could lead to fewer staff and fewer services, negating some of the success each program has had in reaching families earlier and developing self-sufficiency. It could also result in additional



burdens for the state as tribal TANF programs are pushed to the edge and have to refer more families to state programs where the outcomes are generally poorer for Native families.

While tribal nations are not eligible to directly receive SSBG funding, a number of states pass through a portion of their federal funds to tribal nations in their state. The Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community in Arizona uses their pass-through SSBG funds from the state to fill gaps in child welfare funding from the federal government and tribal contributions. The SSBG funding was central in their ability to reduce the number of children in foster care from a high of 420 to their current number of 82 children in care. This was a sustained 10-year effort to reach their goals of reducing trauma to children placement in foster care and increasing the capacity of child welfare families to parent their children safely at home and stay out of the child welfare system. The SSBG funding supports a variety of services, including prevention services, relative care, independent living for youth aging out of foster care, and treatment services to address behavioral health concerns. If funding were eliminated, the state would likely discontinue passing through funds to tribal nations and tribes would be forced to reduce or eliminate a number of services, while turning more of their children over to state care where Native children have poor outcomes and are disproportionately represented in the state foster care system.

In South Dakota, the Oglala Sioux Nation uses a good portion of their SSBG funds provided by the state to support their elder's meal program that provides regular meals to many of their low-income elders. This supplemental program helps elders maintain healthy diets and have opportunities for social contact on a large land base that is very remote and without public transportation. A number of these elders are also helping to provide care to younger children who cannot live with their parents but benefit from elder contact that helps them develop connection to their tribal and family values and develop healthy



lifestyle choices. The Shoshone-Bannock Tribes in Idaho uses their SSBG funds to pay for a child welfare caseworker that helps coordinate services for tribal children in foster care and help with the purchase of clothing for these children. Tribal funding in Eastern Idaho is very tight where there are limited opportunities for economic development, so losing this funding would likely require the tribe to ask the state to be responsible for the administration and casework of the cases their SSBG-funded caseworker was managing. Eliminating SSBG funding would likely result in the state terminating funding of the tribal elders meal program, which would negatively impact elder health and their capacity to participate in mentoring and caring for tribal children and youth.

Eliminating or reducing funding in critical safety-net programs like SSBG or TANF has clear implications for tribal nations and their communities, while also pushing increasing numbers of their families to state programs and increasing state costs and administrative burdens. While we understand the need to address priorities of this Administration and Congress, reducing core federal program funding that help tribal families, children, and the elderly address barriers to self-sufficiency and be protected from health and safety risks will only increase costs for tribal and state governments and increase suffering to our most vulnerable citizens. We respectfully request you join us in opposing cuts to SSBG and TANF to help us continue and expand the good work that is happening because of these funds to improve the well-being of Native children and families.

Sincerely,

David E. Simmons
Director of Government Affairs and Advocacy