Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
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FORT TOTTEN, N.D. – Deputy Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Lawrence S. Roberts reported personally to Spirit Lake tribal members today on efforts the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has taken to-date to address child safety and protection issues on the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota. Roberts represented Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Kevin K. Washburn, whose testimony at a congressional hearing also taking place today precluded his attendance at the community event.

"Addressing child safety and protection issues at Spirit Lake is a top priority for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as I know it is for this entire community," Roberts said. "We have dedicated staff and resources to work on this issue and we will continue to work with the tribe, our federal partners, and all the stakeholders to improve and strengthen child safety. Assistant Secretary Washburn and I are committed to reducing violent crime, sexual assault and domestic violence in Indian Country. Here in Spirit Lake, as elsewhere in Indian Country, protecting children must be our highest priority."

The deputy assistant secretary was joined by Timothy Q. Purdon, U.S. Attorney for the District of North Dakota; Marilyn Kennerson, Administration for Children and Families Regional Program Manager for Child Welfare, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; BIA officials Sue Settles, chief of the Division of Social Services; Darren Cruzan, deputy bureau director of the Office of Justice Services; Weldon Loudermilk Great Plains regional director; Roderick Cavanaugh, Fort Totten Agency superintendent; and bureau regional and agency staff.

Roberts reported on actions BIA has taken since the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe retroceded its 638-contracted social services program to the BIA on October 1, 2012.

Since October 1, the BIA has established a new social services office at the Fort Totten Agency while simultaneously working to provide critical services to Spirit Lake children and families.

Roberts Updates Spirit Lake Community

The BIA has served the Spirit Lake community by:

- Providing child protection, child welfare assistance, case management, emergency assistance, burial assistance, and family and community services, as well as supervising Individual Indian Money (IIM) accounts; • Receiving, reviewing and investigating over 300 reports of alleged child abuse and/or neglect;
- Maintaining and managing current and active case files for 129 children, as well as coordinating services for children and families, making referrals, conducting permanency planning, and supervising visits;
- Ensuring staff is on call after hours and on weekends;
- Participating on Child Protection and Multi-disciplinary Teams and hosting team meetings to review on a regular basis child abuse and neglect cases;
- Working with BIA law enforcement and other federal, tribal, state and local child safety and protection providers;

- Utilizing mobile fingerprinting devices for in-home fingerprinting of adults in foster homes where children in protected care may be placed, as well as monitoring and tracking those individuals; and
- Hiring two additional in-house social services personnel and working to recruit and hire four more.

The level of resources provided by the BIA to Spirit Lake includes rotating nineteen social workers from other BIA agencies to the Fort Totten Agency at various intervals since October 1 to provide support and expertise during the tribal program's transition to Bureau management. Roberts also reported on the BIA Office of Justice Services' (BIA OJS) work with the Fort Totten Agency and federal law enforcement on child safety and protection at Spirit Lake:

- Training Agency social services staff in the use of mobile fingerprinting units and assisting with the fingerprinting of foster parents.
- Investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect at Spirit Lake.
- Continuing to work with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Attorney's Office in North Dakota on all active Spirit Lake cases.
- Holding tribal court tribal advocacy training on June 18-20 in Grand Forks, N.D., for tribal judges, public defenders and prosecutors on cases dealing with sexual assault on children.

Under the leadership of Attorney General Eric Holder, the U.S. Department of Justice launched a Department-wide initiative in 2009 to enhance public safety in Indian County. The U.S. Attorney's Office in North Dakota has made substantial progress in implementing that strategy.

"The North Dakota U.S. Attorney's Office continues to work closely with the FBI and BIA law enforcement to investigate and prosecute crimes that arise on the Spirit Lake Reservation," Roberts Updates Spirit Lake Community Purdon said. "Allegations of crimes committed against children are a priority for us and we will continue to work hard to protect and seek justice for those young victims who are the most vulnerable among us. Residents of the Spirit Lake Reservation can assist the Department of Justice in our efforts by reporting any and all crimes to law enforcement."

Purdon also discussed the implementation of his office's Anti-Violence Strategy for Tribal Communities in North Dakota and its work toward improving public safety at Spirit Lake and across Indian Country in North Dakota. These efforts include:

- Pediatrician-led training in October 2011 on the Spirit Lake Reservation organized by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of North Dakota (USAOND) for tribal first responders on recognizing the signs of head trauma, sexual abuse, neglect, and physical abuse on children;
- Training sessions organized by USAOND and the United States Marshal's Service on the implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) to law enforcement and tribal court professionals from Spirit Lake;
- Conducting monthly Multi-disciplinary Team meetings on the Spirit Lake Reservation which are led by USAOND's Tribal Liaison and which bring together FBI and BIA law enforcement, child protective services, tribal prosecutors, and others to address issues facing child victims of violence at Spirit Lake;
- Hosting the USAOND's annual Tribal Consultation Conference in Bismarck, N.D., to discuss with all of the tribes in North Dakota successful strategies for improving public safety on the reservations; and

- An increase of over 80 percent in the number of federal Indian country criminal cases brought by the USAOND from fiscal year 2009 to fiscal year 2012.

Roberts also announced that the Fort Totten Agency is partnering with various tribal and county programs to hold a child and family wellness fair next month, to promote and increase community awareness about resources and services available to children and families, and a sexual abuse awareness event in April.

“It’s been said that it takes a village to care for a child, and that has certainly been the case at Spirit Lake,” Roberts said. “There is a tremendous level of concern for Spirit Lake’s children and families that is being demonstrated every day by our dedicated law enforcement and social service professionals, our federal, state and local partners, and the Spirit Lake tribal leadership. As we continue our nation-to-nation work with the Spirit Lake Tribe on this matter, we commend the Tribe for the assistance they provide our staff to protect Spirit Lake’s children.”

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