Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Acting Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Donald "Del" Laverdure today announced that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has agreed to a request by the Spirit Lake Tribe of the Fort Totten Reservation in North Dakota to assume administrative responsibility for its social services program. The Tribe, by letter dated September 14, 2012, requested to voluntarily retrocede the social services program to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In their letter, the Tribe stated that it had concluded this retrocession "would be in the best interest of the Tribe, its children, and its families, to voluntarily return the program to the Secretary of [the] Interior."

A retrocession means the return to the Secretary of a contracted program, in whole or in part, for any reason, before the expiration of the term of the contract by an Indian tribe or tribal organization either one year from the date of the request, the date the contract expires, or a mutually agreed-upon date. The effective date of the retrocession of the Spirit Lake Social Services Program will be October 1, 2012. The BIA will continue to work with the Tribe until that time to ensure an effective transition of the program from the Tribe to the BIA.

"The decision allowing the BIA to take back the Spirit Lake Tribe's contracted social services program was made after careful consideration of what was best for all concerned, particularly with regard to the health and safety of their children," Laverdure said. "I want to thank the Spirit Lake leadership for working with us over the past months, and for their willingness to recognize this action as an opportunity to rebuild their social services program for the future."

The Tribe reached its decision late last week after a review of the program by the BIA's Great Plains Regional Office (GPRO), located in Aberdeen, S.D., that started on September 10. The review was a follow-up to earlier efforts by the BIA to assist the Tribe in addressing serious deficiencies identified in a detailed corrective action plan issued by the Bureau on April 23, 2012.

The BIA's Office of Indian Services (OIS) has been working with the Tribe since August 2011 to help it improve and strengthen its child safety and program compliance while respecting the Tribe's inherent right of self-governance. The Tribe has administered the social services program under a Public Law 93-638 contract with the BIA since 2001.

On August 24, Laverdure announced that he was sending a "strike team" of senior BIA officials from its Central Office in Washington, D.C., to Spirit Lake to assess and evaluate efforts to improve the program. The decision to deploy senior officials to the region came at the urging of U.S. Senator Kent Conrad.

On August 31, Laverdure announced additional actions BIA officials were taking to aid the Tribe in its efforts to improve child safety and protection on its reservation, including the program review during the week of September 10. That review was to assess the Tribe's progress on the corrective action plan, with the Bureau determining appropriate steps for going forward to help the Tribe safely and successfully operate its social services program.

The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs oversees the BIA, which is headed by a director who is responsible for managing day-to-day operations through four offices – Indian Services, Justice Services, Trust Services and Field Operations – that administer or fund tribally based infrastructure, law enforcement, social services, tribal governance, natural and energy resources and trust management programs for the nation's federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages through 12 regional offices and 85 agencies.

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