



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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IN CASE YOU MISSED IT: Native View: Tribal communities aren't being forgotten by Trump

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By: Tara Katuk Sweeney, U.S. Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs

I am very proud that the U.S. Department of the Interior is delivering for Indian Country on President Donald Trump's promise to all Americans. He promised safe and healthy communities with educational and economic opportunities for the most forgotten Americans.

Indeed, in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the wider Great Lakes region, the Department of the Interior is answering the call to protect our waters for commercial and recreational fishermen and families. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is helping make fish safe to eat, provide safe drinking water, and control and guard against invasive species. In Fiscal Year 2019, the regional director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Midwest Region Branch of Wildlife & Parks supported more than \$15 million in awards to 37 tribal entities.

In 2018, former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke met with the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin to discuss the opioid crisis, and we continue the fight today. When President Trump declared war on the opioid epidemic, Interior answered the call. We formed the DOI Opioid Reduction Task Force, headed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services. This task force has worked hand in hand with tribal leadership, like Oneida Nation Chairman Tehassi Hill, from the beginning. The results have been nothing short of dramatic: literal tons of illegal drugs seized — over \$30 million worth off the streets of tribal communities — and more than 840 arrests. In fact, the number of drug cases opened across all of Indian Country law enforcement is more than 200% higher than in the last year of the previous administration.

Illegal drugs are just one of many challenges testing Native American communities. When told of the tragedy of missing and murdered Native Americans, President Trump issued an executive order to Attorney General William Barr and Interior Secretary David Bernhardt. Operation Lady Justice was developed to implement that order. As an initiative of Operation Lady Justice, the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Justice Services is taking the lead in opening seven "cold cases" offices throughout the country to focus solely on cold cases involving Native Americans. The goal is bringing justice and closure to the families of victims who have gone missing.

Tribal communities also deserve quality educational opportunities for their children, opportunities that long have been out of reach. Under the leadership of President Trump, Interior has been hard at work improving educational opportunities for the nearly 46,000 Native American children who attend our Bureau of Indian Education schools. After years of failure, the BIE has finally developed a reliable assessment program aimed at accurately measuring each student's progress and identifying areas of improvement. This is the foundation Indian schools need to provide American Indian children the tools to succeed.

Tribal communities urgently require schools that are truly centers of learning, not decrepit buildings unacceptable anywhere else in America. The Great American Outdoors Act, championed by President Trump, includes up to \$465 million in guaranteed funding over the next five years to improve American Indian school infrastructure. Additionally, Interior has developed, with the help of forward-thinking tribal leaders, innovative financing opportunities with a simple purpose: allowing tribes to partner with Indian Affairs to build their own schools which help meet their specific tribal and educational needs.

Economic development on reservations starts with the people. As a result, the Department of the Interior supports tribal decision making on tribal lands. We also have delivered on the promise of tribal energy resource agreements, producing regulations that facilitate tribal decision-making, not hinder it. We are also building on the president's promise to cut back on red tape. This is because Interior understands that the tribes themselves should decide the appropriate balance between development and environmental protections.

True leadership means looking behind empty promises and getting things done for all Americans.

President Trump said that his administration would deliver real progress for the forgotten Americans, and we are working with Indian Country to make that a reality.

Tara Katuk Sweeney is the U.S. assistant secretary for Indian Affairs, an Iñupiat member of the Native Village of Barrow in Alaska, and a member of the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope. She serves on the Operation Lady Justice Task Force, which was established by presidential order in November 2019 to support and protect American Indian and Alaska Natives, particularly women and children. She wrote this exclusively for the News Tribune.

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