Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk today praised President Obama's signing of legislation that will strengthen tribal law enforcement on American Indian reservations. Secretary Salazar, Interior Deputy Secretary David Hayes, Assistant Secretary Echo Hawk, and Interior Solicitor Hilary Tompkins joined the President at a White House signing ceremony.

"By providing greater law enforcement resources for Indian Country, this measure will help combat violence and lawlessness and ensure that more crimes are prosecuted on reservations," Secretary Salazar said. "This legislation reflects the continuing commitment of President Obama to work closely with tribal leaders to improve safety in Indian communities and to tackle the years of neglect of law enforcement needs."

The Secretary also commended Sen. Byron L. Dorgan for his leadership in shepherding this legislation through the Senate, and Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin for her efforts in the House of Representatives. Dorgan (D-ND) is chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and sponsor of the Tribal Law and Order Act. Sandlin (D-SD) introduced the House version of the bill.

"The federal government has a distinct legal, trust and treaty obligation to provide public safety in tribal communities," said Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk. "The Tribal Law and Order Act helps allow both the Executive Branch and the Congress to better address the public safety challenges that confront tribal communities. This Act will improve our ability here at Indian Affairs to work with Indian tribes to investigate and prosecute crime impacting tribal communities, and authorizes resources for tribes to fight crime more effectively."

American Indians and Alaska Natives suffer violent crime at far greater rates than other Americans, according to congressional and Department of Justice statistics. Some tribes have experienced rates of violent crime twice, four times and at times more than 10 times the national average. In addition, Native American communities are faced with an increase of youth gangs engaged in the drug trade.

The Tribal Law and Order Act, which Congress passed last week, strengthens law enforcement in Indian Country by authorizing the appointment of Special Assistant US Attorneys to prosecute crimes in tribal communities in federal court; providing tribal courts tougher sentencing powers; and allowing some tribal police officers to enforce federal laws on Indian lands. The Act increases recruitment and retention efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and tribal law officers and works to prevent drug trafficking and reduce alcohol and drug addiction in tribal communities.

The law also requires federal investigators and prosecutors to maintain information on cases that occur on Indian lands that are closed or declined for prosecution in federal court and share that information with tribal justice officials. In addition, the bill requires the Secretary of Interior to establish the Indian Law Enforcement Foundation, a federally chartered corporation, to accept and administer donations to support public safety and assist the Bureau of Indian Affairs and tribes in activities supporting public safety.

Secretary Salazar has been strongly focused on addressing critically neglected law enforcement needs on tribal lands. An Interior Department senior-level working group has achieved a number of successes, including implementation in 2010 of a targeted, intense community policing pilot program on four reservations that is anticipated to reduce violent crime by more than 5 percent on each of those reservations by year-end 2011.

The group also guided the development of a fully revamped recruiting process for Bureau of Indian Affairs law officers that increased by 500 percent the number of applicants for those positions, and the hiring of more than 70 new officers in the first half of 2010 – the largest hiring increase in BIA's history.

In addition the working group oversaw the development and implementation of an expedited bridge officer training program for State-certified police officers to become BIA officers, shaving 14 weeks off deployment time; and a partnership effort with Attorney General Eric Holder to streamline Interior-Department of Justice tribal law enforcement budgets and programs to best serve tribal law enforcement needs, including full coordination on the location of detention centers on Indian lands.
