

Fort Belknap Indian Community



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Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Tribal Govt.)
Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Elected to administer the affairs of the community and
to represent the Assiniboine and the Gros Ventre
Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)

Testimony of President Jeffrey Stiffarm on behalf of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community

For the Oversight Hearing entitled:
*“Biden’s Border Crisis: Examining the Impacts of International Cartels
Targeting Indian Country”*

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

April 10, 2024

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, Montana Congressman Rosendale, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Jeffrey Stiffarm, President of the Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) Nations of the Fort Belknap Indian Community. I have over 20 years of Law Enforcement experience serving our Indian Communities. I appreciate the opportunity to be invited to this important hearing today which is examining the impacts of Drug Cartels Targeting Indian Country-and specifically the Fort Belknap Indian Community.

The Fort Belknap Reservation is located in north central Montana and is comprised of 652,000 acres (1,014 square miles) almost as large as the State of Rhode Island, and has nearly 7,000 members living on or near our Reservation. Fort Belknap is 40 miles south of the Canadian Border. Fort Belknap Law Enforcement is comprised of 9 Officers to protect and serve our entire reservation 24/7. Similarly, Montana is 147,040 square miles—Montana is slightly larger than Japan. It is the 4th largest State in the United States behind, Texas, Alaska and California. In 2024, it is reported that only 20 DEA Agents cover the entire State of Montana. The cartels know this--so it is easy for them to take over reservations.

These Drug Cartels are specifically targeting Indian Country because of a dangerous combination of rural terrain, history of addiction, under-resourced law enforcement, legal loopholes, sparsely populated communities, and exorbitant profits, and it is devastating Tribal reservations. Profits for these cartels soar the farther they get from the southern border. A fentanyl pill that costs less than \$1.00 Mexico and southern states, can go for over \$100 on our Reservation.

It is repeatedly reported to our Tribal Government that drug cartels are targeting our

Native women and using homes on reservations as safe houses and distribution hubs. They are able to operate with impunity because of complex jurisdictional rules and the fact that Tribal law enforcement agencies, such as our's, have been under-resourced and under-staffed for decades. This problem is also directly connected to the ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) crisis, as communities are reporting more instances of sexual abuse, human trafficking, child abuse and domestic violence. And it creates at least a perception of a Reservations as being a scary place of lawlessness.

This hearing today stresses the importance of the ongoing work Congress has in its important role in combatting drug trafficking in Indian Country. Congress funds Foreign Countries to Protect Themselves: we need Congress to provide funds to our First Nations to Protect Ourselves. Our Own Homeland should be the TOP Priority for Safety. United States Citizens need to feel and be protected throughout the United States. Why should we be afraid in our own Country? As Congress funds billions in federal aid to foreign countries to protect its borders and to kill. Indian Country needs the funding to protect our Borders in order to save Lives. Cartels threaten and kill our people. Yet nothing is ever done about it. Especially by the FBI.

I put the blame on the drug and cartel crisis squarely on the shoulders of the Federal Government. The FBI doesn't do anything on the reservation unless we have a death or serious crime. If that happens then they are only here for a short period collecting evidence! They are reactive--not proactive. The FBI has jurisdiction over non-tribal members, our tribal officers' hands are tied because they only have jurisdiction over tribal members. The government knew that cartels were moving onto the reservations but did nothing. The other government jurisdiction that failed us is the Border Patrol. They know Mexican or other illegal aliens are on reservations but do nothing. Our People get harassed when they cross the Border with sacred objects even though our border-crossing rights are supposed to be protected by the Jay-Treaty, yet the cartel seem to be able to go right through.

Tribal law enforcement is seriously underfunded by the federal government and by BIA. Officers lack equipment and are untrained to handle this crisis and most importantly underfunded. In the 638-contracting process, the federal government offered \$1.2 Million dollars to Fort Belknap to administer our own Law Enforcement in 1997, and 27 years later in 2023 offers \$1.3 Million. Other similar Tribes to Fort Belknap, have been awarded over \$5 million for Law Enforcement Services. Due to this incredible disparity, the Fort Belknap Community has a pending federal lawsuit against the United States government due to its breach of contract and trust responsibilities owed to our People. The United States has trust responsibilities that is not being met in particular FBI and border patrol.

As recent as November 2023, the Not Invisible Act Commission Congressional Report, the Commission reported an estimate of \$1.4 Billion Dollars to adequately fund Public Safety and Justice in Indian Country. Similarly, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) released a report in 2018 finding that:

Federal funding for Native American programs across the government remains grossly inadequate to meet the most basic needs the federal government is obligated to provide. Native American program budgets generally remain a barely perceptible and decreasing percentage of agency budgets. Since 2003, funding for Native American programs has mostly remained flat, and in the few cases where there have been increases, they have barely kept up with inflation or have actually resulted in decreased spending power. In its annual, statutorily required report, the BIA acknowledges that tribal police, courts, and detention facilities are currently funded at a fraction of the estimated need. It is further noted that: despite this recognition, the BIA has never requested funding at levels sufficient to meet these needs. The DOJ, meanwhile, was unable to provide an estimate to the Commission of the need for its programs and services.

Tribal Nations should have the authority to address crime on their lands. Congress must take decisive action to overturn the Oliphant decision and address the sentencing limitations of the Indian Civil Rights Act, so that Tribes have the authority to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes within their jurisdiction and appropriately hold offenders accountable for their crimes. We cannot continue to allow cartels to take advantage of the holes in our justice system. I encourage you to do everything possible to ensure we have the tools and resources we need to keep our communities safe.

We need funding to protect our Homeland, require federal agency coordination and cooperation, tightening of international borders, and lastly we need Congress to fully restore Tribal Criminal Jurisdiction in Indian Country. Congress has several Commission reports that all seem to say the same thing: Fund Indian Country and Effectively Coordinate Federal Resources. See:

- NOVEMBER 1, 2023 NOT ONE MORE FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NOT INVISIBLE ACT COMMISSION
- NOVEMBER 2018, BROKEN PROMISES: CONTINUING FEDERAL SHORTFALL FOR NATIVE AMERICANS, BRIEFING REPORT TO PRESIDENT TRUMP, U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS
- NOVEMBER 2013, A ROAD MAP FOR MAKING NATIVE AMERICA SAFER, INDIAN LAW AND ORDER COMMISSION REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT AND CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

I thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.