

House Advances NCUIH-Endorsed Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Bill

Category: Policy Blog

written by Moira Stuart | June 24, 2022

On June 15, 2022, the House Committee on Natural Resources held a markup to consider a series of bills, including H.R. 5444. Several Members of Congress, such as Senator Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Representative McCollum (D-MN-04), expressed concerns and grievances about the horrific occurrences within boarding schools. Both the Majority and Minority agree that there needs to be a commission, however, four amendments were introduced on subpoena power, the compensation of commission members, the wording around funds, and the possibility for reparations. The only amendment to be accepted was the amendment editing, "such sums as may be necessary". The bill has passed the committee and will be heading to The House floor.

NCUIH Submitted Testimony in Support of the Act

On May 26, 2022, the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) submitted written testimony to the House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States in support of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act ([S. 2907/H.R. 5444](#)), which would create a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies (the Commission).

Background

NCUIH worked with Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) on this landmark legislation to begin the healing process from Indian Boarding School policies and ensure the inclusion of UIOs in the Commission. This ensures that the stories of the 70% of American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) that live in urban areas will be included. NCUIH exists in part because of the historic oppression of the AI/AN population including federal boarding schools that resulted in the growing AI/AN populations in cities.

On September 30, 2021, in recognition of the National Day of Remembrance, Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Congresswoman Sharice Davids (D-KS-3), and Congressman Tom Cole (R-OK-4) introduced the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act.

Tasked with investigating and documenting the Indian boarding school policies and the historical and ongoing trauma that resulted, the Commission provides an environment for Native people to speak about their personal experiences and will provide recommendations to the government. Working in collaboration with other agencies, the Commission would also develop recommendations for the federal government on how to acknowledge the trauma and help Native communities heal.

The federal government funded these boarding schools as recently as the 1960s, specifically to wipe out Indigenous cultures. Children were forcibly removed from their families and experienced horrific emotional, physical, and sexual abuse while in custody of these schools. The Commission not only highlights the government's role in the abuse but will also build on the work of Secretary Debra

Haaland and the Department of the Interior in examining what happened at these schools.

On December 23, 2021, NCUIH submitted [comments](#) to the Department of the Interior regarding the agency's Federal Boarding School Initiative reiterating its ongoing support for the Administration's efforts to address the legacy of boarding school programs, while urging the Administration to use the Initiative to address the public health impact of boarding schools on urban AI/ANs.

- [NCUIH Endorsed Bill Introduced by Sen. Warren, Rep. Davids and Rep. Cole on National Day of Remembrance](#)
- [NCUIH Submits Comments to DOI on Boarding School Initiative and the Lasting Impact on Urban Indian Health](#)

Full Text of Testimony:

National Council of Urban Indian Health -Testimony for House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States in Support of Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools

My name is Francys Crevier, I am Algonquin and the Chief Executive Officer of the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH). On behalf of NCUIH, the national advocate for health care for the over 70% of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) living off-reservation and the 41 Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) that serve these populations, we hereby submit this public witness testimony in support of legislation that would create a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools in the United States. NCUIH exists in part because of the historic oppression of the AI/AN population including federal boarding schools that resulted in the growing AI/AN populations in cities.

Background and Impact of Indian Boarding School Policies on AI/ANs

The federal government funded boarding schools as recently as the 1960s, specifically to wipe out Indigenous cultures. The horrific aim was to "kill the Indian and save the man." The United States Government's Indian boarding school policy authorized the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of Native children, as young as five years old, relocating them from their homes in Tribal communities to one of the 408 Indian Boarding Schools across 30 states^[1]. Between 1819 and 1969, the United States federal government stole Native children from their families to destroy their Indigenous identities, beliefs, and traditional languages to assimilate them into white American culture through federally funded Christian-run schools^[2]. Children were forcibly removed from their families and experienced horrific emotional, physical, and sexual abuse while in the custody of these schools. The Relocation and Termination Era and Federal Indian Boarding Schools are inextricably linked to the urbanization of Native people today and the effects are profound.

Creating a Truth and Healing Commission Remains a Critical Priority for AI/ANs

NCUIH was pleased to work with Senator Elizabeth Warren on her landmark legislation to begin a healing process from Indian Boarding School policies. On September 30, 2021, in recognition of the National Day of Remembrance, Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Congresswoman Sharice Davids (D-KS-3), and Congressman Tom Cole (R-OK-4) Introduced the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act (H.R. 5444/S.2907).

Tasked with investigating and documenting the Indian boarding school policies and the historical and ongoing trauma that resulted, the Commission provides an environment for Native people to speak about their personal experiences and will provide recommendations to the government.

Working in collaboration with other agencies, the Commission would also develop recommendations for the federal government on how to acknowledge the trauma and help Native communities heal. Senator Warren (D-MA) worked alongside NCUIH to promote UIO inclusion in this legislation. NCUIH is grateful for their support and the support of all co-sponsors for this Commission and for promoting the inclusion of UIOs. Their support has ensured that a longtime priority for UIOs may now become a reality.

Inclusion of UIOs in Truth and Healing Commission

NCUIH thanks the committee and the bill's sponsors for including UIOs as one of the options for representation on the Commission. This ensures that the stories of the 70% of AI/ANs that live in cities will be included. Urban Indians are often left behind in legislation regarding AI/ANs and it is a sign of your hard work that urban AI/ANs now receive the inclusion they deserve. We thank you for your support of this inclusion provision.

Urban Indians have faced brutal treatment from the government through their forced removal to federally funded boarding schools. In order to truly heal from this experience, urban Indians must be included in efforts to come to terms with the historical trauma experienced by so many urban AI/ANs. In the future, we request that UIO inclusion be made mandatory in legislation impacting the legacy of these boarding schools. UIOs face the legacy of this historical trauma and the voices of urban AI/ANs must be heard.

Conclusion

In order to address these abuses, the Truth and Healing Commission must be formed. The truth of what happened to these AI/AN children must be acknowledged, witnessed, and validated. The government must take accountability for the horrors it oversaw. This Commission would allow AI/ANs to speak about their experiences at federally-funded boarding schools. This Commission will empower AI/AN voices by allowing them to provide recommendations to the federal government. No longer will AI/AN voices be silenced, rather, through this Commission, they would be uplifted. It is NCUIH's hope that this will usher in a new era where the trust responsibility is better upheld to all Indigenous people, including the over 70% of AI/ANs who reside in urban areas as a result of policies like federal boarding schools.

NCUIH once again thanks this Committee, Senator Warren (D-MA), Congresswoman Sharice Davids (D-KS-3), and Congressman Tom Cole (R-OK-4) for their support of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies. This bill would begin the healing necessary to make amends for past historical injustices. You have the unique opportunity to empower AI/ANs who were subject to the cruelty of these schools. I urge you to take this opportunity to make the changes so desperately needed.

[1] https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf

[2] Ibid.