Introduction
Winds of Change: Protecting our Nations and People into the Future

This fiscal year (FY) 2020 Indian Country Budget Request outlines federal programs and services that honor the federal trust responsibility, as well as many programs that are critical components of strong tribal economies and public safety systems. The programs highlighted in this document meet the federal treaty and trust obligations as identified by experts with national and regional tribal organizations and through FY 2020 budget formulation consultations between tribal leaders and federal agencies.

Tribal nations are resilient and provide services to around two million people; however, we cannot continue to provide for our communities without our federal partners upholding their obligations. The often partisan debates affecting the federal appropriations process have an outsized impact on the daily lives of American Indian and Alaska Native people who already face underfunding of health care, education, and backlogs in physical infrastructure – all of which fall under the federal trust responsibility. Heading into the FY 2020 appropriations cycle, the United States and tribal nations face many challenges. Some are ongoing but no less dire, such as climate change, which will affect the fate of our grandchildren and future generations. Other challenges flow from the increased partisanship that led to the longest government shutdown to date, which poses a direct threat to the welfare of tribal nations and their citizens. With a new Congress, we hope for a period where we can begin to overcome division and fear to meet the grave challenges before us.

ENDURING PROMISES

Our tribal nations seek only those things promised to us and our citizens by the U.S. Constitution and the solemn treaties and agreements reached between our tribal nations and the United States. When tribal nations agreed to accept smaller land bases, the federal government promised to safeguard our right to govern ourselves, and to enable tribal governments to deliver essential services and provide them adequate resources to do so effectively.

While the United States has yet to fully live up to the promises it has made to tribal nations,12 tribal leaders are pursuing goals for their citizens similar to those of U.S. national policy makers: building strong and prosperous nations through economic growth and the efficient provision of necessary public services. Economic diversity characterizes modern Indian Country, but a common factor cited by tribal leaders as hindering tribal economic development is the need for adequate federal funds
for essential governmental services, such as public safety, housing, education, and workforce development. Economic development also faces hurdles in Indian Country due to insufficient infrastructure, including roads, housing, water, sewer systems, and broadband. Tribal leaders and citizens have known this for decades. Recently, the United States Commission on Civil Rights made similar observations. In its 2018 report, the Commission found that:

*Due at least in part to the failure of the federal government to adequately address the wellbeing of Native Americans over the last two centuries, Native Americans continue to rank near the bottom of all Americans in terms of health, education, and employment.*

The report also states:

*The broken treaties have left many reservations without adequate access to clean water, plumbing, electricity, internet, cellular service, roads, public transportation, housing, hospitals, and schools.*

While prosperity in the minds of many Americans may evoke a version of the American Dream based solely on building personal financial wealth, prosperity for most Native people centers on the preservation and practice of Native cultures and languages, active participation in sacred clan and kinship systems, and close stewardship of tribal homelands. Despite several eras of hostile federal policies towards tribes and severe underfunding, tribal nations are proving successful in their efforts to build sustainable tribal economies and rebuild tribal communities in accordance with their cultural values. If the United States lived up to its commitments to support Indian Country in the ways that it has promised, tribal nations and governments could do so much more.

**OVERCOMING DAMAGING GRIDLOCK**

Budgeting and appropriating require bipartisanship, which is vital to achieving all of our most ambitious and important goals. NCAI has carried a bipartisan message for the past 75 years to the federal government on behalf of Indian Country. Tribes are nations with an inherent right to govern themselves as they see fit, and the entire federal government has a solemn obligation to uphold that right in the many ways that our treaties and other agreements prescribe. It is not one political party’s responsibility to uphold – it is America’s responsibility. When gridlock shuts down the government, however, it represents a gross dereliction of the federal government’s duty to fulfill its treaty and trust obligations to tribal nations.

In the first month of 2019, America’s longstanding, legally-mandated obligations to tribal nations were interrupted by the longest partial government shutdown of the modern budgeting era. Agencies that provide critical government services to our nations were caught up in unrelated politics over funding for a southern border wall and the welfare of our tribal citizens hung in the balance. Tribal communities rely on federal funding to administer key tribal government services, health care facilities, public safety, housing access, nutrition and food distribution programs, and social services, and the shutdown caused widespread destabilization of these programs, as well as generating fear and anxiety among our tribal citizens. For tribal leaders, it is simply not an option to stop serving our citizens.

In Indian Country, because of the large role public administration jobs play in tribal communities and economies – coupled with below average household wealth – shutdowns disproportionately hurt Native families. A single salary may support an extended Native family, with missed paychecks sending harmful ripples throughout the tribal nation and surrounding communities. The uncertainty of federal shutdowns also compounds the challenges tribal nations face attracting and retaining professionals to work in health care and other skilled professions that are critical to fulfilling the federal government’s treaty and trust promises to tribal nations.

**FIRST/americans facing disproportionate impacts of climate change**

While political stalemates underscore the need for changes toward improved bipartisanship, Native peoples are also facing unique risks to individual and community health due to climate change. As place-based peoples, climate change has a distinct impact on the social, cultural, and spiritual health of tribal nations. Tribal lands, waters, and natural resources or not only
culturally significant, but are also critical to tribal economies. Tribal cultures and economies have evolved and adapted to local seasonal environmental changes, however, climate change is increasingly affecting tribal livelihoods and economies.

Many tribal nations and the industries important to them are near coasts and flood plains, making them susceptible to extreme weather. A large number of tribal economies rely heavily on natural resources, which are also sensitive to climate change. Indian Country already faces poor housing conditions, health care, infrastructure, economies, and underdeveloped natural resources. The effects from climate change threaten to make each of these conditions worse. Due to unmet infrastructure and deferred maintenance needs, tribes are at risk from more frequent or intense floods, wildfires, and droughts, in addition to higher sea levels and storm surges. Infrastructure that is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change include housing, sanitation, power, transportation, and telecommunications. Overall tribal nations must contend with impacts on the quality and quantity of water on tribal lands, negative health consequences, damaged infrastructure, forced relocation, and adverse effects on economic development.

Native peoples have a long history of adaptation to climate change, including planning, assessment, research, governance, youth engagement, and cultural continuity. The impacts of global climate change are already being felt in Indian Country and are projected to intensify in the future. The severity of future impacts will depend largely on actions taken now to adapt to the changes that will occur. As the pace of ecological change accelerates, all of our elected leaders must work together to address the severity of future impacts.

CONCLUSION

Heading into the FY 2020 budget cycle, the political, fiscal, and physical environment faces much turbulence. Confronting so much instability, tribal leaders are working to protect our nations and peoples now and into the future. We invite our federal partners to work in a bipartisan way to meet the nation-to-nation treaty and trust obligations funded in the federal budget. This NCAI FY 2020 Budget Request offers recommendations for ways the federal government – partnering with tribal nations – should meet the educational needs of Indian youth; provide adequate healthcare via the Indian Health Service, for both direct and self-governance tribes; ensure responsible resource development for the future; provide safe and secure tribal communities; and supply the long-term investments in tribal public infrastructure and services required to ensure every American Indian and Alaska Native enjoys a decent quality of life and has an opportunity to thrive.