

Congresswoman Betty McCollum
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State of Indian Nations—Congressional Response
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Thank you. I'm delighted to be here today among those I count as my friends and allies. President Cladoosby and Jackie Pata—you are my valued partners. You and the dedicated staff at NCAI are a tremendous resource for all Members of Congress in our work with tribal leaders.

I want to recognize one of those Members here today: Representative Raul Ruiz, of California. Mr. President—I am honored to be standing here today, reflecting on the message you have just shared with us.

I could not agree with you more that we are in a moment of incredible progress and promise in Indian Country.

When you speak of a new era of self-determination, I hear in that phrase not just a federal policy, but also the right of tribal leaders to guide your nations in a true partnership with our shared American nation. I really do believe that our government-to-government relationship is moving toward that goal. We are making some real progress on the federal side of that partnership.

I am fortunate to serve in two roles where I can do my part to set new standards for partnership with and investment in Indian Country.

As the co-chairs of the Congressional Native American Caucus, my Republican Co-Chair Tom Cole and I are building a broad a base of support in Congress for Indian Country.

My second role is serving as the lead Democratic Member of the House Interior Appropriations Committee. I'm proud to say that my Republican Chairman Ken Calvert and I work very closely together on Native issues.

We have been moving to increase funding for our trust and treaty obligations, building on the groundwork that was laid by our former Chairmen, including Mike Simpson and Jim Moran.

We have worked on a bipartisan basis along with President Obama to substantially increase funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service, even as budget caps have forced flat funding across many federal agencies.

Our investments in the new Tiwahe initiative will strengthen support for Native children and families.

Greater funding for tribal courts will help your nations to build the capacity for the new authority, given under the Violence Against Women Act, to seek justice for victims in your communities.

After more than a decade, we are finally completing the 2004 list of Bureau of Indian Education schools that are in desperate need of replacement.

The fact that thousands of American Indian children are forced to learn in substandard BIE school buildings is unacceptable.

So we are working on a plan to turn all BIE facilities into the safe, modern, and welcoming schools that your children-- and every American child-- deserve.

In a move that supports both tribal self-governance and the federal obligation to provide direct services to tribal nations, BIA and IHS contract support costs are now fully funded and in their own separate accounts.

Contract support costs are key to tribal self-governance, and they will no longer have to compete with funding for health care, education, or other treaty obligations.

These investments are important successes, and they are only possible because your voices as tribal leaders, as members of your nations, and as advocates for your people, help to hold your federal partners accountable.

It is your stories, your testimony, and your tireless advocacy for Indian Country that are the driving force behind all these achievements.

We have made tremendous strides forward, and it is important to celebrate our progress. But we know there is much more that we need to do together. There continues to be health, education, and economic inequalities that the federal government is not adequately addressing. In many instances, current law fails to fully recognize the sovereignty of tribal governments.

Furthermore, you know all too well that there continue to be active attacks on Indian Sovereignty, across issues like hunting and fishing rights, land into trust, and the Indian Child Welfare Act.

And that's why Members of Congress still need to continue to hear from you about tribal issues!

With your energy and commitment--and a focused agenda for the coming year--we can work together to continue to make progress. There are several important steps we can take together to carry the momentum of this moment forward.

First, every Member of Congress needs to be engaged, because we all vote on tribal issues!

We need to make sure all Members of Congress have knowledge of Native issues, and your direct outreach is vitally important.

Now, there are 567 federally recognized tribal nations and 535 Members of Congress. So, this year, adopt a Member! Every tribe, pick one! Share the voices and stories of your people. Educate their staff. And invite them out to visit your nations!

From personal experience, there is just no substitute for visiting a tribal community, hearing directly from Native youth and families, and sitting down with tribal councils.

When I traveled to the Navajo and Hopi Nations with my Republican colleagues, we saw the condition of the schools in Indian Country firsthand. By the end of that trip, we had brainstormed half a dozen new ways to fund BIE schools – because it was clear to us how urgent the needs were.

The more Members of Congress know their constituents, the better they serve them.

The more that Members of Congress know your communities, the better they will serve your communities.

It was a visit by Candidate Obama to the Crow Nation that launched a relationship with Indian Country that has been the strongest and most productive in our nation's history.

Just consider all the achievements under the Obama Administration that started with that visit.

It was President Obama who signed into law:

- The General Welfare Exclusion for Tribal Governments
- The Indian Health Care Improvement Act
- The Tribal Law and Order Act
- The SAVE Native Women provisions in the Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization

That is the power of welcoming elected officials to your communities and educating them on your issues.

The second step we can take is to strengthen the connection and mentorship among women leaders of your nations and women in Congress. I see more strong, Native women taking on leadership roles.

It is very exciting for me to see my sisters standing up and sharing their unique perspectives and leading their communities along with their brothers.

We all know that when women succeed, America succeeds.

Well, we also know that when Native women lead, tribal nations succeed!

Third, we must keep our focus on engaging Native youth and investing in their future. That's why Generation Indigenous is so important. The youth of Indian Country are some of the most inspiring advocates I have met.

When Native students visited our Committee to talk to us about the condition of their schools, it was some of the most powerful testimony we heard. Those students spoke about their peers and their families and their communities with a passion that affected every Member in that room.

Even while facing harsh circumstances in their lives today, these youth also communicated a amazing message of hope for what their lives and their communities could become.

This is the generation that will carry America forward.

So I want to support them to engage their elected officials, both tribally and federally, and ask us the tough questions.

What are we doing to improve the safety of their families and communities?

What is our plan is to create good schools, affordable higher education, and job opportunities for them?

How we are going to help their generation face the challenges of climate change that they will inherit?

Collectively, leaders in Indian Country and Congress must be held accountable and responsible for answering those questions.

Today, I stand here as a Member of Congress, and I am asking you to hold us accountable.

Hold us accountable for honoring your rights as sovereign nations, and for meeting our moral and legal trust obligations. For self-determination to be successful, it must be rooted in respect.

Respect from nation-to-nation; respect from federal officials to elected tribal officials; and respect among neighbors. Respect for your cultures, your values, your traditions, and for your solutions from your communities.

You need a Congress and a President who are committed to the values of respect and partnership as well.

You can count on me to be committed to that goal, because I want this country to be successful, as President Cladoosby said, for not just the next 7 generations, but for the next 70.

If we instill in our children and in our public discourse the values of respect and collaboration, then the state of your nations and our nation, the United States of America, will be strong for generations to come.