

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

August 13, 2021

Elizabeth A. Fowler
Acting Director
Indian Health Service
Department of Health and Human Services
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Acting Director Fowler:

We write to commend the recent announcement by Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland regarding the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative at the Department of the Interior,¹ and to request that the Indian Health Service (IHS) collaborate with relevant agencies, including other components of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) at Interior, to ensure that culturally appropriate supports are in place for those who might experience trauma resulting from the revelations that emerge during this initiative. Our request was suggested, and is supported, by the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) and the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), which serves all 574 federally recognized tribal nations.

The Indian Boarding School Policies were created and implemented by the federal government as brutal tools to terminate cultural, family, and Native identity in favor of assimilating American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children into non-Native culture.² The policies were carried out to eradicate the cultures of Indigenous peoples in the United States by stripping children of their Native identities, beliefs, practices, knowledge, and languages. Under these policies, Native children, as young as three years old, were forcibly removed from their family homes and placed in boarding schools. The legacy of these policies continues to impact Native communities through intergenerational trauma, grief over the loss of children who never returned, cycles of violence and abuse, disappearance, health disparities, substance abuse, premature deaths, despair, and additional undocumented psychological trauma.³ Native cultures, languages, and traditions were dealt a severe and lasting blow because of these

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Secretary Haaland Announces Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” press release, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-haaland-announces-federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>.

² U.S. Department of the Interior, “Memo from Secretary Haaland Regarding the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” memo, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/secint-memo-esb46-01914-federal-indian-boarding-school-truth-initiative-2021-06-22-final508-1.pdf>.

³ Washington Post, “Opinion: Deb Haaland: My Grandparents were Stolen from Their Families as Children. We Must Learn about this History,” June 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/11/deb-haaland-indigenous-boarding-schools/>.

policies, with some tribal nations no longer having any native speakers of their languages.⁴ Secretary Haaland’s announcement of Interior’s Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative is a long-overdue and crucial step as the federal government begins to acknowledge and address the harms created by these policies.

As Secretary Haaland stated, the Department will undertake an investigation of the lasting effects of the federal government’s policies. The Department will work to “identify boarding school facilities and sites; the location of known and possible student burial sites located at or near school facilities; and the identities and Tribal affiliations of children interred at such locations.”⁵ As then-Interior Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Bryan Newland stated, during this investigation Interior “will engage in Tribal consultation on how best to use this information, protect burial sites, and respect families and communities.”⁶ We strongly commend these first steps and commitments to engaging in meaningful tribal consultation, and to respecting families and communities who have been affected by these policies.

We urge IHS to consider potential protections for those experiencing trauma from the Indian Boarding School Policies and the revelations that will continue to emerge during the course of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. NABS and NIHB have emphasized to us that as Interior’s investigation progresses, it will inevitably shed light on extremely troubling episodes in our nation’s history. This revisiting and exploration of the boarding school era could be traumatic for survivors, their families, and their communities. Canada’s recent experience is informative: there, investigations uncovered hundreds of unmarked graves and children’s remains at the sites of former residential schools,⁷ with more discoveries expected in the coming months⁸—revelations that have led to a resurgence of trauma for Indigenous communities.⁹ When she announced Interior’s initiative, Secretary Haaland rightly noted that “this process will be painful,”¹⁰ but full understanding of these policies and their “impacts on communities today

⁴ Politico, “‘Race against time’: Pandemic propels fight to save Native American languages,” Benjamin Din, April 13, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/13/pandemic-native-american-languages-481081>. Administration for Native Americans, “Preserving Native Languages: No Time to Waste,” Lillian Sparks, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ana/preserving-native-languages-article>.

⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Memo from Secretary Haaland Regarding the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” memo, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/secint-memo-esb46-01914-federal-indian-boarding-school-truth-initiative-2021-06-22-final508-1.pdf>.

⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Secretary Haaland Announces Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” press release, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-haaland-announces-federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>.

⁷ Reuters, “Factbox: Unmarked graves found at Canadian former residential school sites,” Anna Mehler Paperny, July 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/unmarked-graves-found-canadian-former-residential-school-sites-2021-07-06/>.

⁸ CNN, “More than 700 unmarked graves found at a former residential school in Canada, officials say,” Paula Newton and Nicole Chavez, June 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/24/americas/canada-unmarked-graves-discovered/index.html>.

⁹ New York Times, “With Discovery of Unmarked Graves, Canada’s Indigenous Seek Reckoning,” Ian Austen, June 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/world/canada/indigenous-residential-schools-grave.html>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Secretary Haaland Announces Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” press release, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-haaland-announces-federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>.

cannot occur without acknowledging that painful history.”¹¹ We are confident that IHS is equipped to consider ways to prevent inflicting or worsening existing intergenerational trauma. To strengthen those efforts, we urge you also to collaborate and coordinate with other relevant agencies (including the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Interior, and the Administration for Native Americans and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at HHS), and with tribal nations on ways to mitigate further harm for survivors, their families, and other community members.

In particular, we encourage your agency to take steps, similar to those taken in Canada, for those who experience trauma tied to similar practices in that country.¹² One step taken in Canada that has been recommended by NABS and NIHB is the creation of a hotline for survivors and families in the United States. A culturally competent hotline, as well as other mental and spiritual supports developed in collaboration with tribal nations and other relevant organizations, will provide a valuable resource to those who are experiencing a resurgence of trauma tied to Indian Boarding Schools. We urge you to consider working with both tribal and non-federal entities to provide these services.

The Indian Boarding School era is a stain in America’s history, and it is long overdue that we begin to formally investigate the past wrongs and ongoing harms of these policies. We therefore strongly commend the Biden Administration’s courage and commitment to investigating the harms imposed on Native communities by the federal government, and we look forward to working together to address the resulting painful intergenerational reverberations in Native communities today.

Sincerely,



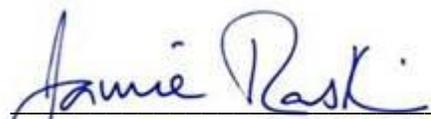
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Sharice L. Davids
Member of Congress



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



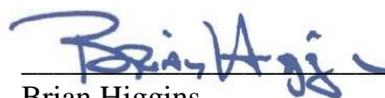
Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Memo from Secretary Haaland Regarding the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” memo, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/secint-memo-esb46-01914-federal-indian-boarding-school-truth-initiative-2021-06-22-final508-1.pdf>.

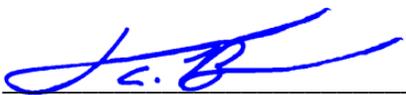
¹² Government of Canada, “Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program,” last modified on February 17, 2020, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1581971225188/1581971250953>.



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Brian Higgins
Member of Congress



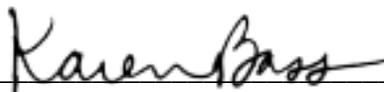
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Karen Bass
Member of Congress



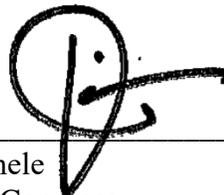
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



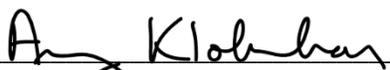
Raúl Grijalva
Member of Congress



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Kaiuli'i Kahele
Member of Congress



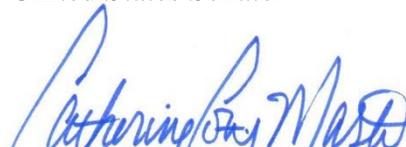
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
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