

Statement of Senator Kent Conrad
Indian Affairs Committee Budget Hearing
Wednesday, February 25, 2004

Mr. Chairman thank you for holding this hearing on the Administration's budget request.

Overall I must say that I am deeply disappointed with the President's budget and his blatant disregard of the federal government's clear trust responsibility to American Indians. This budget fails in every conceivable way to address the growing unmet needs in education, housing and health care.

The President proposes to cut Indian health facilities construction by 56 percent, cut Indian school construction by 19 percent, and cut tribal college funding by 13 percent. These are not the right priorities for our nation.

I want to take a moment to briefly highlight several areas of deep concern for me in this budget.

EDUCATION

United Tribes Technical College

First, I am very concerned that for a third straight year the budget fails to provide funding for United Tribes Technical College. I have to say that I was disturbed by a letter that was sent by Aurene Martin, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, to our local media trying to justify the elimination of the college's funding. That letter was completely disingenuous and full of inaccuracies.

Funding for this college is not a congressional "add-on." UTTC has been funded in budgets dating back to 1981. Only when this Administration took office did this college, its students and faculty come under attack. The funding provided through the BIA for this college is critical to maintain its daily operations. While the BIA believes UTTC's funding through the Department of Education is adequate to meet the college's needs, UTTC cannot keep its doors open without the funding it has received from the BIA.

Six hundred "real" people are impacted by this cut, and it a shame that despite a visit by the Secretary to UTTC in 2002, in which she pledged to support this college, that this budget would again yank the rug out from under these students.

This Administration simply has no justifiable reason for eliminating funding for this college.

Tribal Colleges

I am also disappointed that the Administration has cut tribal college funding by 13 percent. This cut is coming at a time when two new tribal colleges are coming on-line, putting further strain on already limited budgets.

Tribal colleges provide hope and opportunity to thousands who might not otherwise get the chance to achieve a higher education. However, we continue to short change these successful colleges, providing less and less funding. While public institutions receive about \$9,000 per full-time student, tribal colleges receive only about \$4,200 per full-time student. This is shameful.

These colleges cannot meet the needs of Indian country without adequate funding. These students -- and these colleges -- deserve our encouragement and our support.

HOUSING

The President's budget is also very troubling in the area of American Indian housing. Housing is a basic fundamental need. Yet, reservations throughout the country are plagued by a chronic shortage of decent, affordable housing. According to the National American Indian Housing Council, a total of 29 percent of American Indians are homeless and 40 percent live in housing that is overcrowded or physically inadequate.

The President's answer is to cut funding for Indian housing block grants by \$31 million, even though the needs reach \$1 billion.

Additionally, the budget does nothing to address the mold problems that are creeping into homes across Indian Country. Current estimates indicate that it would take \$77 million to just fix the homes that currently have visible mold. Yet the President's budget ignores this clear problem and provides no funding to address it.

HEALTH

Finally, let me say a few words about health care, because the lack of adequate funding in the President's budget is troubling to me.

The President's budget proposes only a 1.5 percent increase overall for Indian health care. It fails to address the increasing health care demands due to population growth and increasing medical costs, which have resulted in ballooning unmet needs. In addition, the 56 percent cut to Indian health facilities construction is outrageous.

In my state of North Dakota, and in many other areas of the country where there are no IHS facilities, or where certain kinds of health services are not available through IHS, tribes rely on contract health care.

However, because of the limited funding available to purchase contract care, a patient must fall within the priority-one category, which means the patient must have a life threatening illness or injury to receive care. This means that people must go without badly-needed health care services, unless their conditions worsen to the point where their lives are threatened, so the cycle of poor health continues.

At present, less than half of the needs in contract health are being met, leaving many without access to the care they need. Not one of us here would do without health care we need, so why are we asking American Indians to do so? The President's response is to only include about a 4 percent increase for contract health care, hardly enough to expand services beyond priority-one patients.

Conclusion

The road to reverse these cuts will be difficult. Yet, if we continue down this road, the gap between needs and funding to meet those needs will continue to enlarge to a point of no return. We simply cannot allow this to happen. We cannot continue to ignore the federal government's trust responsibilities to tribes.

Again, I thank the witnesses for being here today and look forward to the discussion on how we make real progress on these serious challenges in the areas of education, housing, and health care facing Indian country.