



April 25, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, DC 20201  
*Transmitted via email*

**RE: Preserving Tribal Nations' Access to Important ACF Programs in Fiscal Year 2026**

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations serving Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens and communities, we write to express our deep concern regarding reports that the President's Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request may propose eliminating several critical programs important to Indian Country that are operated by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). This letter follows up on our April 18, 2025 [letter](#) to you regarding imminent harm to Tribal Nations from proposed cuts to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and our February 14, 2025 [letter](#) to you explaining why Tribal programs should not be caught up in implementation of the Administration's other policy priorities.

The ACF programs we write to you about today serve Tribal Nations' most vulnerable community members. They contribute to family stability, encourage a thriving workforce, create safer Tribal communities, and provide pathways out of poverty toward self-sufficiency and economic mobility for Native families. The United States' methods for delivery on its trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations and Native people are diffused and varied across the federal government, and these ACF programs play an important role in this delivery.

We do not believe the Administration intends to impede its delivery on trust and treaty obligations to Indian Country. Indeed, this delivery falls into carve outs the Administration has created in its Executive Orders, including for direct services, essential programs, public safety, and legal mandates. Through Tribal consultation, we can help the Administration understand where within the federal government direct and essential services and funding are being provided to Tribal Nations and how to implement the Administration's policy priorities without affecting ongoing legal requirements to Indian Country. Through the Tribal consultation process, we can find better solutions together. The following provides details regarding concerns from Indian Country.

***ACF Programs are Crucial to Tribal Communities***

ACF is a lifeline agency for Tribal Nations and Tribal communities. Programs proposed for elimination include those that:

- *Provide critical family support and capacity to meet Native families' basic needs*, such as Head Start (including American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Head Start), the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and the Community Services Block Grant;
- *Protect and support developmentally challenged Native people*, such as the Developmental Disabilities Protection and Advocacy Program;
- *Provide trauma-informed services to address mental illness and prevent suicide for at-risk Tribal youth and adults*, such as the Tribal Behavioral Health Programs (Mental Health and Substance Abuse Prevention Programs) and Circles of Care Children's Mental Health Programs; and
- *Promote economic development in rural and low income Tribal areas*, such as the Community Economic Development and Rural Community Development Programs.

These programs do not operate in silos; rather, the impacts of these services reverberate to create healthy families, reduce risk factors that threaten well-being, stimulate the local workforce and economy, and create thriving Tribal communities.

ACF administers a large number of critical social services that Tribal Nations rely upon, providing vital services to families and communities that would otherwise face dire challenges in meeting basic needs. These resources allow Tribal Nations, as sovereign governments, to create a comprehensive network of social services to meet the unique needs of Tribal communities, support self-sufficiency and economic mobility, and utilize cultural and community strengths to create impactful change. In essence, ACF programs are a critical element of robust economies, safe and stable families, and healthy communities.

For example, AI/AN Head Start is not just an early childhood education program; it is also a vital force for cultural and language reclamation, economic stability, and long-term positive outcomes for Native children and families. It provides essential health services, parent education, and comprehensive family support that extends beyond childcare to promote family stability, keep children in a healthy and safe home environment, support risk reduction efforts to create safe communities, and empower children and families to achieve upward mobility. AI/AN Head Start is often the only available source of these services in many Tribal communities. Through the Tribal Colleges and Universities Head Start Partnership Program, Head Start also builds the capacity of qualified education staff to work in AI/AN Head Start programs. AI/AN Head Start agencies provide employment opportunities to thousands of Tribal and local community members, creating a productive workforce of childhood development specialists and other service providers.

Additionally, AI/AN Head Start facilitates the exercise of Tribal sovereignty and tailored service delivery to meet local needs. It empowers Tribal governments to develop and implement culturally grounded, community-specific curricula that reflects Indigenous languages, values, and educational priorities, and to prepare their youth for success in schooling and beyond. The AI/AN Head Start model supports Tribal sovereignty and self-governance. Any statement that Head Start constitutes federal overreach in education misrepresents the structure of AI/AN Head Start. These programs are not governed by top-down mandates but are built on Tribal self-determination and local control.



AI/AN Head Start is not the only ACF program that provides essential services in Tribal communities. The elimination of other ACF programs that support developmentally challenged individuals, families' ability to access basic necessities, trauma-informed mental health and suicide prevention services, and economic development will further exacerbate the poor health and well-being outcomes that already plague Native communities. As you are well aware, health is not simply a matter of treating disease after its onset, but of supporting prevention. ACF supports prevention by offering resources for risk reduction, a stable home and community environment, mental health support, and financial well-being and opportunity assistance. Congress enacted many of ACF's programs with the understanding that a holistic approach to health and well-being is the best approach. In line with your commitment to Make America Healthy Again, we urge you to consider the impacts that eliminating ACF programs will have on our Tribal communities' health outcomes.

Finally, we emphasize that federal funding for critical ACF programs infuses much-needed Tribal government resources into our communities. Unlike states, which have the ability to generate revenue through taxation to fund the provision of governmental services, the United States' curtailment of Tribal Nations' sovereign authority to tax has left many Tribal Nations without Tribal government revenue to fund important social and other services. ACF programs help to fill that gap. They represent an investment in families and individuals who, with appropriate support and empowerment, achieve self-sufficiency and contribute to a thriving local, regional, and national economy.

### ***The Need for Follow Through on Trust and Treaty Obligations and Tribal Consultation***

As you know, Tribal Nations have political, Nation-to-Nation relationships with the United States founded in our inherent sovereignty and recognized in the U.S. Constitution. Tribal programs deliver on the United States' trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens and communities, which we prepaid for with our lands and resources, and many of these obligations are carried out through federal statutory mandates. Any Tribal program or federal funding delivered to Tribal Nations—including through Tribal Colleges and Universities, Urban Indian Organizations, and Tribal organizations serving Tribal Nations—is in furtherance of the United States' trust and treaty obligations. These obligations cannot be met without sufficient federal employees operating Tribal programs directly or disbursing funds to Tribal Nations to operate those programs. These actions are not discretionary; they are legal obligations rooted in treaties, the U.S. Constitution, and federal statutes.

Tribal Nations are already forced to operate with insufficient resources due to decades of chronic underfunding, especially for the essential services provided through the annual appropriations process. By nearly every measure and indicator, Tribal Nations and our citizens and communities face a lower quality of life than others in the United States. The proposed disruption of what little resources *are* flowing will only deepen the divide between Indian Country and the rest of the United States. We ask you and your Agency officials and staff to be leaders in following through on trust and treaty promises and Tribal Consultation.



## ***Request of HHS to Oppose ACF Cuts in the President's Budget Request***

We appreciate the support you have shown Indian Country, such as your direction to prevent Indian Health Service (IHS) layoffs and exempt IHS facilities from lease terminations. Tribal Nations are served by programs and bureaus across the Department of Health and Human Services, not just IHS, and therefore we are requesting that you intervene to ensure that programs essential to Indian Country are not negatively impacted by the President's Budget Request.

In furtherance and recognition of our inherent Tribal sovereignty and our unique Nation-to-Nation relationship with the federal government, which stands upon treaties, the U.S. Constitution, Supreme Court precedent, statutes, executive orders, and decades of relationship building, **we urge you to oppose the inclusion of these ACF cuts in the President's Budget Request.**

Sincerely,

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI)  
American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)  
California Tribal Chairpersons' Association (CTCA)  
Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Association (GPTCA)  
Inter Tribal Association of Arizona (ITAA)  
Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes (MAST)  
National American Indian Housing Council (NAIHC)  
National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development (NCAIED)  
National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)  
National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA)  
National Indian Education Association (NIEA)  
National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA)  
National Indian Health Board (NIHB)  
National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC)  
Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB)  
Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council (RMTLC)  
United South & Eastern Tribes Sovereign Protection Fund (USET SPF)

CC: Russell Vought, Director, Office of Management and Budget  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
House Committee on Natural Resources