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October 24, 2024

The Native American Church of North America (NACNA) applauds President Biden in issuing his historic apology to Indian country for the treatment of Native children and families under the auspices of the Federally Supported Indian Boarding School policy.

Few times in the history of the United States has the Federal Government taken responsibility for policies that are completely antithetical to its constitution and principles of democracy.

Apologies offer hope for continued healing, acknowledgment of a tragic historical record, and movement toward righting a wrong. The levers and instrumentalities of the Federal government that were so often used to take Indian self-reliance, land, water, minerals and most important children, can also be used to empower tribal communities. They can be used to create pathways to healing and promote wellness in future generations.

NACNA thanks Interior Secretary Deb Haaland for launching the Boarding School Initiative and Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Bryan Newland for the detailed and impactful Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report I, II. The recommendations contained within this groundbreaking report are laudable and provide Congress and future Administrations with a roadmap to redemption.

In this profound moment NACNA offers a perspective that themes of the report surrounding colonization, assimilation, the erasing of Native languages and cultures, isolation of Native children from families and communities points to an overarching issue. The United States of America used its full force to eviscerate Native religions, ceremonies, cultures and traditions.

By separating Native children from their families, they achieved in the 19th and 20th century a near secession of intergeneration transmission of traditional and ceremonial knowledge. This devastated continuity spanned untold thousands of years. Separating children from their families and tribes severed their ceremonial ties and language use.

NACNA views the report as a mandate to invest in the policy declaration contained within the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, stating "***it shall be the policy of the United States to Protect and Preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiians***".

This unenforceable statute has been demoted to aspirational delves rather than a legislative vehicle to rectify the inexpressible damage America has done to the Indian way of life. Indian country cannot exercise its inherent right to free exercise if there is medicine insecurity, denied access to sacred sites and places, degradation of sacred lands, and a caste system that delegitimizes tribal ceremonies and places them as subordinate to the religions forced upon our children at Indian Boarding schools.

The Biden-Harris Administration has made unparalleled investments in Indian Country, including landmark policy directives. NACNA thanks this historic Administration for its commitment to Indian Country and urges it to take decisive action to remove barriers to free exercise, honoring the primary purpose of America.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon Brady". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jon Brady
President, Native American Church of North America