

Critical Law Enforcement Shortage? Train more officers...

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Some people have asked what North Dakota tribal leaders talked about when they met with Interior Secretary Ken Salazar on his recent visit to North Dakota. The main subject was the same one we've been dealing with for years: the critical shortage of law enforcement personnel on Indian reservations.

For over 20 years, I have listened to tribal leaders repeatedly express the need for adequate law enforcement resources. It happened again during the meeting with Salazar. This time their descriptions were verified by information gathered during recent hearings of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, confirming the existence of a longstanding public safety crisis on many Indian reservations.

Tribal communities face violent crime rates two-and-one-half times the national average. In some places the rate is 20 times the average. Domestic and sexual violence are especially prevalent. More than one-in-three American Indian and Alaska Native women will be raped in their lifetimes, and two-in-five will be subject to domestic violence.

Tribal leaders know these statistics to be true. When a crime occurs on a reservation it usually takes hours, not minutes, for police to show up. By then the event is over, the harm is done, and the perps are long on their way. As I have said before, people in the Green Zone in Bagdad are probably safer than families on Indian reservations.

This is not the fault of dedicated law enforcement officers. It is the lack of resources in chronically underfunded law enforcement and justice programs. An inadequate police presence leaves women, young people, and especially elders vulnerable.

Your readers will recall reports about the surge in law enforcement at Standing Rock during the past year. Staffing was increased to address a violent crime rate that was over eight times the national average. The Tribe had only nine BIA officers patrolling over two million acres. Often only one officer was on duty to respond to calls from people in distress.

"Operation Dakota Peacekeeper," as it was called, demonstrated what can be done to curb crime and criminal activity and behavior when adequate resources are available. While the results were encouraging, the BIA has acknowledged that this and similar operations are not long term solutions as they rely on borrowing officers from other reservations.

One of the strategies we talked about with Secretary Salazar is creation of the Northern Plains Tribal Law Enforcement Center to train more BIA and tribal police officers.

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Around the nation fewer than 3,000 federal and tribal officers patrol 56 million acres of Indian lands. On many reservations there is no 24-hour police coverage. In its 2006 gap analysis, the BIA estimated that tribal police were staffed at 58% of need, with an unmet need of 1,854 additional police officers.

Most uniformed officers get their training at the BIA Indian Police Academy at Artesia, New Mexico. It is an agency requirement that all BIA officers receive initial training there. While the academy provides an outstanding training opportunity, it graduates an average of only 80 officers each year. The math alone signals the problem: too few officers being trained.

Tribes in the Northern Great Plains have long sought a training center within this region. Most of the tribal areas served by law enforcement programs of the Indian Police Academy are located in this region within driving distance of Bismarck.

United Tribes Technical College is a ready fit. For decades we have offered an Associate Degree in Criminal Justice. We have an existing agreement with the BIA to provide supplemental in-service training to BIA and tribal police officers. This is precisely our mission: to help bring reform to Indian Country through teaching and training, and developing the workforce and leaders needed at the tribal level.

United Tribes would require some infrastructure improvements to offer state-of-the-art training opportunities needed for progressive development of Indian country law enforcement programs. However, our current working relationship with the North Dakota Law Enforcement Training Academy in Bismarck would be an asset.

It is true that the tribal justice system itself, with its divisions and complexities, should perhaps be examined for reform. A good start is contained in legislation introduced in early April by Senator Byron Dorgan, chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and 13 of his colleagues.

The Tribal Law and Order Act (S. 797) is a major bi-partisan effort to strengthen law enforcement and justice in Indian communities. We should all be grateful for Senator Dorgan's work, and the support of the entire North Dakota Congressional delegation, other lawmakers, and Tribal leaders.

But right now, adequate law enforcement is a fundamental need that we cannot overlook any longer. Indian communities must have a safe environment if they are to have viable economic development programs.

Young people must be safe in their homes and schools to earn a good quality education. And Tribes must be able to protect their most vulnerable members. That's why training more officers and getting them onto the streets is one of the most urgent needs in Indian Country.

We deeply appreciated that Secretary Salazar listened thoughtfully.

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