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Office of Governor Steve Sisolak

December 22, 2021

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

RE: Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Implementation

Dear Secretary Haaland:

Thank you and the Department of the Interior for holding meaningful consultation with the Tribal Nations as the Department works to implement the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative and uncover the past. There is great hope that this Initiative will bring peace to the children who never made it home from Indian boarding schools, make space for education and acknowledgment, and provide support for healing. As the Governor of Nevada, I commit to being a steadfast partner to the 27 Tribal Nations in Nevada as they embark on this painful journey to unlock the truth about the Stewart Indian School.

In 1888, the Nevada Legislature authorized the sale of bonds for land near Carson City, Nevada, that would become the Stewart Indian School campus. The Bureau of Indian Affairs officially opened the school two years later. For nine decades, thousands of Native children were taken from their families, enrolled in the school, and stripped of their cultural identities and languages. The Federal government's Indian boarding school policies that led to schools like the Stewart Indian School were abhorrent, and it is crucial that the State, for its part, and the Federal government make amends.

Today, the former-Stewart Indian School property is managed by the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California and the State of Nevada. On December 3, 2021, I worked with the Nevada Indian Commission (NIC) to convene a meeting at the former school with leaders of the Tribal Nations in Nevada, Stewart Indian School alumni, and members of my Cabinet to discuss the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. I was grateful to have a representative from the Department join the meeting to speak about the Initiative and answer questions. We bore witness to the recounting of first-hand experiences from former Stewart Indian School students and the generational impacts of the Indian boarding school policies on those in the room. The testimonies reflected on the malnutrition and abuse students endured and the inadequate education they received, which gave way to the pain and trauma inflicted on generations and the need for better and more accessible mental health and substance abuse services.

The Department knows all too well the emotional and logistical challenges that lay ahead as the Initiative gets underway. It is imperative that the Department continue to work with Indian Health Services throughout the investigation to make additional support services available in Tribal communities in Nevada as they cope with the unearthing of a painful past. The success of the Initiative also hinges on what actions the Department takes after the investigation is completed and how it aims to meet the needs of impacted communities so they can begin to heal and recover.

It is also essential that the Federal government assist, not inhibit, Tribal Nations in Nevada as they work to identify the students that never made it home from the Stewart Indian School. There are 96 unmarked graves in the school cemetery, which rests on the portion of the campus managed by Washoe Nation. There is also a suspected burial site that rests on the portion of the campus managed by the State of Nevada. Information critical to identifying the Native children whose lives were lost at the school could be found in the Stewart Indian School records, some of which the NIC and the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center & Museum have been trying to take possession of since 2017. Waiting four years for guidance and a response to the records request from the Bureau of Indian Affairs is unacceptable, and I will continue to work with your office, the NIC, and the Cultural Center and Museum in light of the Initiative to help the NIC get the information it requires.

My office respects the wishes of the Tribal Nations regarding the handling of sensitive information that the Initiative's investigation might uncover, and any discussion related to the potential repatriation of remains and stands by ready to assist as the investigation moves forward.

Thank you for your continued work on this important Initiative and consideration

Sincerely,



Governor Steve Sisolak
State of Nevada