

The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children S. 246

Background

In January 2015, Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) re-introduced her bill, S. 246, to create a Commission on Native Children with Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK). If passed, the bill would begin a long-overdue national conversation about the state of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children. The Commission would examine the unique challenges Native children face and make recommendations on improving the current system by building on the strengths and leadership of Native communities. The Committee on Indian Affairs approved the bill unanimously on February 4, 2015. On June 1, 2015 the Senate passed the bill under Unanimous Consent. The bill awaits further consideration upon referral to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Indian, Insular and Alaska Native Affairs.

Summary of S. 246

Tribal governments face numerous obstacles in responding to the needs of Native children. While the federal government has a trust responsibility to provide for the education, health, and safety of Native children, existing programmatic rules and burdensome grant applications stymie efforts to reduce the disparities among Native children. To exacerbate issues, federal agencies too often lack clear guidance and operate unilaterally inhibiting the ability to effectively address the needs of Native children.

S. 246 would create a Commission on Native Children to conduct a comprehensive study on the federal and local programs, grants, and supports available for Native communities and Native children as well as assist non-Native partners and communities in understanding and addressing the needs of Native children. The 11-member Commission, appointed by the President and leadership in the House of Representatives and Senate, will include experts in areas of juvenile justice, social work, education, and mental and physical health.

The appointment model ensures the President and federal agencies have input while guaranteeing congressional oversight and engagement. Recognizing the need to include children in the conversation, the bill establishes a Native Children Subcommittee comprised of one young person from each Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) service area and one Native Hawaiian. The Native Children Subcommittee will provide advice to the Commission members and offer insight to guide the Commission's work.

Three years after the date the Commission is fully appointed and fully funded, the Commission will issue a report with its recommendations on how to achieve, including:

- **Better Use of Existing Resources** – The Commission will identify ways to streamline current federal, state, and local programs to be more effective. It will provide ideas to give tribes greater flexibility to devise programs for their communities in the spirit of self-determination and suggest best practices for assisting government agencies in redirecting resources to the areas of most need.
- **Increase Coordination** – The Commission will seek to improve coordination of existing programs and resources currently addressing Native children's needs. The federal government houses programs across numerous different agencies, yet these programs often work independently and inefficiently.
- **Measurable Outcomes** – The Commission will recommend measures to determine the wellbeing of Native children and use such measurements to propose short-term, mid-term, and long-term national policy goals.
- **Stronger Data** – The Commission will seek to develop better data collection methods. Too often Native children are left out of the conversation because existing data collection, reporting, and analysis practices exclude them.
- **Stronger Private Sector Partnerships** – The Commission will seek to identify obstacles inhibiting public-private partnerships in Native communities.
- **Implementation of Best Practices** – The Commission will identify and highlight successful models that can be adopted in Native communities