



The Honorable Heidi Heitcamp
502 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

September 17, 2014

Dear Senator Heitcamp,

On behalf of First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions, I am writing to thank you for your leadership in introducing the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children Act (S.1622). As an organization dedicated to promoting the wellbeing, best interests, and safety of all our nation's children, we support your efforts to bring to light the significant challenges facing American Indian children, and to invest in finding concrete solutions to respond to these challenges.

American Indian children are three times as likely to be reported to Child Protective Services and twice as likely to remain in foster care for more than two years than peers. In 2009, 32.4 percent of American Indian children under the age of 18 lived in poverty. In addition, there is a high prevalence of trafficking on tribal lands. American Indian youth are five times more likely than their peers to be victims of sex trafficking. Rates of substance use are also higher among American Indians than the national average in the United States. All of these factors put children at risk for abuse and neglect which inhibit their ability to succeed in the classroom and become prosperous adults. This population is often overlooked when reforms are made to laws that affect children and we applaud your initiative in specifically addressing the needs of American Indian children.

S.1622 would create a Commission made up of leading experts in the field to study all programs that serve American Indian children. Further, the Commission would examine a number of programs, both private and public, to understand what barriers and challenges exist for programs and entities that work with American Indian children and youth. In particular, we are encouraged that the Commission is tasked to study the impact of concurrent jurisdiction on child welfare systems, data collection challenges, best practices, and barriers to applying and reporting on public and private grants. We are hopeful that an in depth examination of these issues will guide to Commission in making recommendations aimed at reducing the number of children entering child protective services, lessening the amount of time spent in foster care, increasing coordination between agencies, encouraging recruitment of licensed social workers in Native communities and addressing the mental and physical health of American Indian children.

We thank you for your leadership in introducing this legislation and believe that it has the potential to positively impact the lives of over one million American Indian children. We look forward to working with you in the future to continue to promote such efforts aimed at improving the wellbeing of all our nation's children.

Sincerely,

Bruce Lesley
President