

## Navajo Council Chair testifies for tribal public safety programs

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WASHINGTON D.C. — The Chair of the Law and Order Committee Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton, provided testimony to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on March 20, urging for equitable compensation and benefits for Public Law 93-638 employees, guaranteed funding allocations for the replacement of Bureau of Indian Affairs facilities, and the strengthening of collaborative efforts with federal public safety counterparts.

During a hybrid listening session convened by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, the focus was cast on the critical needs concerning public safety and justice resources within native communities.

Highlighting the urgency of the situation, Charles-Newton shared some alarming statistics.

“Our Nation is home to 661 registered sex offenders. Between 2019 and 2022, there were 233 instances where cases were not pursued by federal prosecutors, including 75 involving child sexual assault, and 44 related to murder or attempted murder,” she said. “Despite a population exceeding 400,000 and a vast territory covering more than 27,000 square miles across three states, we are severely understaffed with only 214 law enforcement officers and three criminal investigators.”

She also pointed out the difficulties faced by the Nation in attracting and retaining law enforcement personnel due to noncompetitive wages and benefits when compared to neighboring jurisdictions.

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Charles-Newton highlighted the disparity in pay between tribal officers and their federal counterparts indicating that tribal law enforcement officers and criminal investigators are not compensated at the same level as federal employees, even though they perform comparable duties primarily due to tribes lacking the authority to negotiate all aspects of PL638 contracts effectively.

To address these challenges, the LOC Chair urged the Committee to approve increased funding to ensure salary and benefit equality for all PL638 employees, including law enforcement, criminal investigators, and detention officers. Furthermore, Chair Charles-Newton emphasized the urgent need to replace numerous public safety facilities that have been deemed unsafe due to various hazards.

“The BIA facility replacement line item must be fully funded in order to give tribes the opportunity to fund operation and maintenance costs,” Charles-Newton said.

She also expressed frustration over the repeated calls for enhanced cooperation and communication with federal public safety agencies—such as the U.S. Department of Justice, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the BIA within the Department of Interior—that have yet to materialize.

“Crimes are happening in Indian Country and people are being killed. The BIA is once again ignoring its federal trust responsibility by leaving us with an increase that won’t even cover inflation and mandatory third-party costs. We have no money for tribal officers to get pay raises. We need the BIA to hear and convey our needs. We need more funds,” Charles-Newton said.

At the listening session, U.S. Senator Brian Schatz, D-HI, thanked the gathered tribal leaders for participating.

“As I’ve said before, this is your committee. We do the work, but you lead us, and this will guide what we do next legislatively, in terms of oversight and appropriation,” he said.

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