

Indians.com Article on Former Senator Byron Dorgan Opinion on Sequestration's Effect on American Indians

Former North Dakota Democratic Senator Byron Dorgan recently penned an opinion piece on *The New York Times* website titled "Broken Promises," where Dorgan takes a closer look at how and where exactly the sequestration is affecting American Indians.

In the column Dorgan says "our country has left a trail of broken promises to American Indians," before sharing experiences he has had in touring Indian country. Among the topics he touches on are education, poverty, housing and treaties.

Dorgan tells of a young Indian student who only wanted electricity turned back on so she could study, a story he says "is all too familiar."

"I believe that American Indian children are the country's most at-risk population. Too many live in third-world conditions."

Dorgan, who created the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, goes on to talk about a recent trip to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in Shannon County – the second poorest county in the United States.

Pine Ridge is home to the Sioux Indians as Dorgan points out, and just like many of the 566 federally recognized tribes in that they have a treaty with the U.S. – the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. The treaty promises that the tribe's health care, education and housing needs would be provided for by the government. The treaties as Dorgan says were promises to provide services in exchange for their land in which they were pushed off of.

"Tribal leaders, parents and some inspiring children I've met make valiant efforts every day to overcome unemployment, endemic poverty, historical trauma and a lack of housing, educational opportunity and health care," Dorgan writes in the column.

"But these leaders and communities are once again being mistreated by a failed American policy, this time going under the ugly name 'sequestration.' This ignorant budget maneuvering requires across-the-board spending cuts to the most important programs along with the least important. American Indian kids living in poverty are paying a very high price for this misguided abandonment of Congressional decision-making."

While visiting Pine Ridge, Dorgan says he held a round table discussion with students of Pine Ridge High School where he heard stories of no funding for a wrestler who qualified for states; youth suicide and homelessness.

"When I asked a group of eight high school students who among them had had someone close to them take their own life, they all raised their hands. More than 100 suicide threats or attempts, most by young people, have been reported at Pine Ridge so far this year," he writes.

A grim statistic given that sequestration has cut mental health services, including one provider on the reservation already gone this year. Further amplified by the closure of the youth center on the reservation due to lack of funding, along with the elimination of the summer high school work program.

Dorgan continues to write, “The very programs that we set up to provide those basic life necessities on reservations are the same ones feeling the indiscriminate, blunt cuts of sequestration. How can we justify such a thoughtless policy?”

In closing Dorgan offers some advice for the United States government, “Congress should hold a series of investigative hearings on our unfulfilled treaties with American Indians. Add up the broken promises, make an accounting of the underfunding, all of it, and then work with tribes to develop a plan to make it right. In the meantime, we must exempt Indian country from sequestration — right now.

Read more at <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/07/11/dorgan-says-sequestration-just-another-name-broken-promises-150375>

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR, Broken Promises, By BYRON L. DORGAN, Published: July 10, 2013

WASHINGTON — WHEN I retired in 2011 after serving 30 years in Congress, there was one set of issues I knew I could not leave behind. I donated \$1 million of unused campaign funds to create the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, because our country has left a trail of broken promises to American Indians.

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, I once toured a school near an Indian reservation where I encountered a teacher who told me that when she asked a young Indian student what she wanted for Christmas, she said she wanted the electricity turned on in her house so she could study at night.

That type of story is all too familiar. I believe that American Indian children are the country’s most at-risk population. Too many live in third-world conditions. A few weeks ago, I traveled to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. It’s hard just to get there. A two-hour drive from Rapid City brings you to Shannon County, the second poorest county in the United States.

The proud nation of Sioux Indians who live there — like many of the 566 federally recognized tribes — have a treaty with the United States, the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which promised that their health care, education and housing needs would be provided for by the federal government.

Tribal leaders, parents and some inspiring children I’ve met make valiant efforts every day to overcome unemployment, endemic poverty, historical trauma and a lack of housing, educational opportunity and health care.

But these leaders and communities are once again being mistreated by a failed American policy, this time going under the ugly name “sequestration.” This ignorant budget maneuvering requires across-the-board spending cuts to the most important programs along with the least important. American Indian kids living in poverty are paying a very high price for this misguided abandonment of Congressional decision-making.

When we pushed American Indians off their tribal lands, we signed treaties making promises to provide services in exchange for that land. On my visit to Pine Ridge, I saw how we continue to cheat them. Sequestration, which should never have applied to sovereign Indian reservations in the first place, only compounds the problem.

It’s easy for many to believe those who say that automatic budget cuts aren’t hurting anybody much. But that’s wrong. And I can introduce you to the kids who will tell you why.

At a round-table discussion I had with students of Pine Ridge High School, I met a young man who qualified for the state wrestling tournament this year. The school and tribe had no money to send him. So the wrestling coach spent \$500 out of his own pocket to pay for travel and food. The student slept on the floor of the gymnasium because there was no money for a motel room.

When I asked a group of eight high school students who among them had had someone close to them take their own life, they all raised their hands. More than 100 suicide threats or attempts, most by young people, have been reported at Pine Ridge so far this year.

The rate of suicide among American Indian youth is nearly four times the national average, and is as high as 10 times the average in many tribal communities across the Great Plains. At the same time, mental health services are being cut as a result of sequestration, with Pine Ridge losing at least one provider this year.

The youth center on the reservation is closed because of lack of funding. Money for the summer youth program, which pays high school students to work during their break, has also been eliminated.

I met a 12-year-old homeless girl at the emergency youth shelter. Her mother is dead. She doesn’t know the identity of her father. She’s been in multiple foster homes and been repeatedly sexually abused. She found safety in the shelter, but its funding is being cut because of sequestration — an indiscriminate budget ax, I might add, that was thought of as so unconscionable when I was in the Senate that it would never have been seriously considered.

The very programs that we set up to provide those basic life necessities on reservations are the same ones feeling the indiscriminate, blunt cuts of sequestration. How can we justify such a thoughtless policy?

While I was at Pine Ridge I also met with the Tribal Council, whose members described a severe housing crisis. In one district more than 200 homes are without electricity. Throughout the reservation, I saw many dilapidated homes missing windows and doors.

Pine Ridge students told me that many of their friends and families were homeless. “Our friends sleep in tents,” one student said.

Even in normal times, the Indian Health Service operates with about half the money it needs. Tribal Council members told me that some of their health funds last only until May. If you get sick after May, too bad. Now these health care programs, already rationing care, are subject to the sequester. The Indian Health Service estimates that as a result it will have 804,000 fewer patient visits this year.

Congress should hold a series of investigative hearings on our unfulfilled treaties with American Indians. Add up the broken promises, make an accounting of the underfunding, all of it, and then work with tribes to develop a plan to make it right. In the meantime, we must exempt Indian country from sequestration — right now.

Byron L. Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, served in the House from 1981 to 1992 and in the Senate from 1992 to 2011. He is a senior fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center.