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CONTENTS

Hearings:
April 8, 1974 .................................................. 1
April 9, 1974 .................................................. 159

MONDAY, APRIL 8, 1974

STATMENTS

Abourezk, Hon. James, a U.S. Senator from the State of South Dakota ........... 1
Bergman, Dr. Robert, accompanied by Dr. George Goldstein, Indian Health Service, Gallup, N. Mex. .......................................................... 128
Brennan, Jere, Superintendent, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fort Totten Agency, Fort Totten, N. Dak ................................................................. 134, 139
Byler, William, executive director, Association on American Indian Affairs; accompanied by Bert Hirsch, staff attorney .................................................. 3, 14
Cook, Leon F., department of Indian work, Minneapolis, Minn .................. 145
DeCoteau, Cheryl, Sisseton, S. Dak .................................................. 51
Fournier, Mrs. Alex, Fort Totten, N. Dak .............................................. 116
Hirsch, Bertram, staff attorney, Association on American Indian Affairs .... 35
Jim, Roger R., Sr., Yakima tribal councilman, president, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians ................................................................. 119
Lawrence, Mary Ann, Pine Ridge, S. Dak., and Richard Lone Dog, Rosebud Detention Center, Rosebud, S. Dak ................................................. 150
Mindell, Dr. Carl, and Dr. Alan Gurwitt, child psychiatrists .................... 54, 61
Sampson, Mel, Northwest Affiliated Tribes, Washington State; accompanied by Louie Cloud, vice chairman, Yakima tribal council ................. 116
Shore, Dr. James H., psychiatry training program, Portland, Oreg.; accompanied by William W. Nichols, director, tribal health program, Confederated Tribes, Warm Springs Reservations .................. 100, 105
Townsend, Margaret, Fallon, Nev ....................................................... 40
Westernmeyer, Dr. Joseph, Department of Psychiatry, University of Minnesota .......................................................... 45

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

AAIA and Devils Lake Sioux Protest Child Welfare Abuses, from the Indian Affairs, Newsletter of the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc., June-August 1968 .................................................. 95
Indian adoption and foster care statistics: Oklahoma .................................. 40
Arizona ............................................................................ 72
Minnesota ........................................................................ 75
South Dakota ...................................................................... 84
State of Washington ................................................................ 89
Wisconsin ......................................................................... 92
Indian Child Welfare and the Schools, from the Indian Affairs, Newsletter of the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc., September—November 1968 .................................................. 97
Tribes Act To Halt Abuses, from the Indian Family Defense .................... 99
INDIAN CHILD WELFARE PROGRAM

MONDAY, APRIL 8, 1974

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS,
OF THE COMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND INSULAR AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met at 9 a.m., pursuant to notice, in room 3110 Dirksen Office Building, Hon. James Abourezk presiding.
Present: Senators Abourezk and Bartlett.
Also present: Jerry T. Verkler, staff director, and Forrest Gerard, professional staff member.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES ABOUREZK, A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Senator Abourezk. The Indian Affairs Subcommittee hearings on Indian child welfare is now in session.

We have called these hearings today to begin to define the specific problems that American Indian families face in raising their children and how these problems are affected by Federal action or inaction. Many Americans and the Congress are becoming more aware of the difficulties Indian communities face in a broad range of areas: Health, education, land and water rights, economic development, among others. But there are few who are knowledgeable about the difficulties American Indians face in a matter of vital concern to them; namely the welfare of their children and their families.

It appears that for decades Indian parents and their children have been at the mercy of arbitrary or abusive action of local, State, Federal, and private agency officials. Unwarranted removal of children from their homes is common in Indian communities. Recent statistics show, for example, that a minimum of 25 percent of all Indian children are either in foster homes, adoptive homes, and/or boarding schools, against the best interest of families, tribes, and Indian communities. Whereas most non-Indian communities can expect to have children out of their natural homes in foster or adoptive homes at a rate of 1 per every 51 children, Indian communities know that their children will be removed at rates varying from 5 to 25 times higher than that.

Because of poverty and discrimination Indian families face many difficulties, but there is no reason or justification for believing that these problems make Indian parents unfit to raise their children; nor is there any reason to believe that the Indian community itself cannot, within its own confines, deal with problems of child neglect when they do arise. Up to now, however, public and private welfare agencies seem to have operated on the premise that most Indian children would...