

CURRENTS

DHS Secretary Noem Tells Tribes ICE Does Not Target Native Americans



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American Indian Movement (AIM) flag at PowWow Grounds Coffee in Minneapolis. (Photo/Facebook)

In a letter sent to tribal leaders, enrolled members, and citizens of federally recognized tribes on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2026, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

does not target Native Americans and has not conducted operations on tribal lands, responding to concerns raised by tribal leaders about enforcement activities and recognition of tribal identification.

Noem said in the letter that ICE's mission is "singular and clear" — to apprehend and remove people unlawfully present in the United States — and does not include targeting U.S. citizens based on appearance, ethnicity or community affiliation.

"To date, there have not been any ICE operations in tribal lands," she wrote.

The letter follows outreach from tribal leaders and community members who expressed concerns about the recognition of tribal identification cards and ICE operations in areas with significant urban Native populations.

Noem said ICE agents recognize tribal identification cards as valid identification to verify citizenship status. She also encouraged Native Americans who possess a state driver's license, passport or state identification card to carry and present those documents if approached by federal law enforcement and asked for identification.

She acknowledged tribal and federal jurisdiction and said the department seeks to work with tribal leaders and their law enforcement agencies, including partnering with them if individuals unlawfully present in the country are found on tribal lands.

Noem thanked tribal nations that have distributed fact sheets encouraging citizens to comply with federal law enforcement and to be wary of misinformation about tribal members being detained. She criticized what she described as false claims that ICE detained tribal citizens and expressed disappointment that some tribal councils have voted to ban ICE from reservations.

The secretary also referenced past congressional testimony from tribal leaders who raised concerns about cartel activity on tribal lands and sought federal assistance. She urged tribes not to "turn away the very help" they previously requested.

Under President Donald Trump, Noem wrote, the administration aims to enforce immigration law and remove violent criminals and people in the country illegally from tribal nations.

She said her senior adviser on Indian affairs and intergovernmental affairs staff are available to tribal leaders for questions and pledged continued partnership.

Here is the full text of Noem's letter:

Dear Tribal Leaders, Enrolled Members, and Citizens of our Federally Recognized Tribes,

As the United States Secretary of Homeland Security, I am grateful for the tribal leaders and community members who have directly shared their concerns with me and my Department, particularly regarding the recognition of tribal identification cards and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations in areas with significant urban Native populations.

Let me be unequivocal, ICE's mission is singular and clear: to apprehend and remove individuals who are unlawfully present in the United States. ICE does not target, and will not target, Native Americans or any U.S. citizens based on appearance, ethnicity, or community affiliation.

To date, there have not been any ICE operations in tribal lands.

We recognize tribal jurisdiction and federal jurisdiction and as we strive to work with tribal leaders and their tribal law enforcement agencies, it is encouraging to see many tribal nations acknowledge and respect our federal authority and requests for ICE to partner with tribal law enforcement agencies should there be illegal aliens on tribal lands.

ICE agents recognize tribal identification cards and continue to acknowledge tribal IDs as proper and accepted identification to verify citizenship status. I encourage all native people who have a valid state driver's license, passport, state identification card to also use those forms of identification if approached by federal law enforcement and asked for identification.

I want to thank the tribal nations that have taken a proactive approach and shared their own fact sheets with their tribal citizens, encouraging them to comply with ICE federal law enforcement, answer their questions, and recognize these men and women are simply doing their jobs. I am also grateful to tribal leaders for informing their citizens to be cautious of misinformation about tribal citizens being detained or other lies about ICE.

I have reviewed the Congressional Record from during the Biden Administration where tribal leaders testified to cartel and cartel affiliates operating in your tribal lands and your request for federal government assistance to get them off your tribal lands.

I was disappointed when some of those same leaders took tribal council action to ban ICE from your reservations, making false claims that tribal members have been detained by ICE, misrepresenting facts and

spreading misinformation. Please don't turn away the very help you asked for from your testimony to different Congressional Committees just a few years ago. Under President Trump, we simply want to do what the last administration failed to do and that is to enforce the law and get violent criminals and illegal aliens out of your tribal nations.

My senior advisor on Indian affairs and Intergovernmental Affairs teams is always available to take your call and answer your questions.

I look forward to your continued partnership.

Kristi Noem, Secretary

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