

## 2026 USET Youth Tribal Sovereignty Statement

### Presenters

1. Chaka Yani Smith (Seminole Tribe of Florida)
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We are 92 high school students representing 10 USET Member Tribal Nations. Our peers selected us to present the 2026 USET Youth Statement on Tribal Sovereignty. Throughout our time together, we have deliberated on the meaning of Tribal Sovereignty, its vital role in protecting our people, and its impact on key issues affecting our communities.

Tribal sovereignty allows Tribal Nations to govern themselves and exercise economic freedom. This enables them to create and operate businesses—such as casinos, agricultural enterprises, and hotels—that support jobs and generate revenue. Economic sovereignty also ensures that tribes control how funds are used, allowing resources to be directed toward community priorities such as schools, healthcare, and job creation.

This economic freedom helps strengthen culture, whether through traditional agricultural practices or cultural goods like beadwork and regalia. Larger industries, such as casinos and resorts, provide significant revenue that benefits the entire community.

The USET Sovereignty Protection Fund can advocate by defending Tribal economic freedoms, helping manage finances, supporting business growth, and raising awareness of the importance of economic sovereignty. In doing so, future generations can thrive in a prosperous Tribal economy.

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Tribal sovereignty means the inherent right of Tribal Nations to govern themselves, including creating and enforcing their own laws and running institutions such as police and fire departments. When sovereignty is limited, it affects everyone. It could mean losing control over the economy, land, or cultural identity. For example, tribal casinos could fall out of tribal control, affecting how money is spent on community needs.

USET should advocate for strong legal protections for tribal self-governance and ensure that both people and culture are protected. This means advocating for tribal emergency services, supporting tribal officers and responders, and ensuring tribes have the resources to handle emergencies without outside interference.

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Tribal Nations exercise sovereignty over health and community well-being by providing affordable healthcare services, supporting elder programs, water access, and other necessities, and creating training opportunities for key roles. These efforts show how Tribal Nations can respond directly to the needs of their communities and build systems of care that reflect their own priorities.

Exercising control over health issues benefits the community in many ways. It can reduce financial stress by creating better opportunities and reducing worries about the cost of care. It can also strengthen relationships between youth and adults by creating more trust and understanding within the community. Access to clean foods through farms, drop boxes, and similar programs also supports healthier lives and stronger communities.

The USET Sovereignty Protection Fund can advocate for this issue by providing training, building understanding among youth, supporting sports and wellness programs in underfunded tribes, and increasing advertising and awareness of available resources and opportunities. By supporting these efforts, USET can help Tribal Nations strengthen healthcare, community support, and overall well-being.

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Tribal Nations exercise educational sovereignty by developing their own education departments, schools, and programs. These efforts include after-school tutoring, financial aid, and experiences like the USET Close Up trip. Tribal schools are shifting toward culture-centered curricula, ensuring students learn about both academics and their own traditions. This is vital, as some tribes lack reservation schools and most public schools omit Native histories. Exercising control prepares Tribal members for the future, helping them pursue higher education and careers. Yet, challenges remain: graduation rates on reservations are often lower, and costs are higher. The USET Sovereignty Protection Fund can help by boosting support, raising graduation rates, and fostering Tribal Colleges—empowering students, communities, and culture.

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Through sovereignty, Tribal governments make decisions about how land, water, forests, wildlife, and other resources are used and cared for. They create laws and policies that reflect both political leadership and cultural values, often drawing on traditional knowledge and practices to protect the environment and preserve their heritage for future generations. When Tribal sovereignty is not recognized, it becomes harder for Tribal Nations to govern themselves and meet their people's needs.

The USET Sovereignty Protection Fund can advocate for this issue by supporting Tribal leaders, speaking with Congress and state representatives about Tribal rights, and helping protect laws and policies that uphold Tribal sovereignty and treaty rights. It can also help strengthen Tribal governments by sharing resources, training leaders, supporting Tribal programs, protecting Tribal lands and resources, and promoting unity among member tribes. By working together, Tribal Nations can build a stronger voice to protect their sovereignty, cultural traditions, and future.