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Alaska**

**Testimony for “Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native Communities:
Native Languages One Year Later.”**

Thank you honorable Senators, and Manalo Chair Brian Schatz, and Quyanaq, Iliġanamiik vice Chair Lisa Murkowski. My name is Yaayuk Bernadette Alvanna Stimpfle, and I represent myself here today, speaking in favor of the Native American Language Resource Center Act and the Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act of 2021. I am hopeful that increased budget allocations can be made towards Alaska Native languages, and more attention can be given to small Tribes who do not have the capacity to write and manage complex federal grants.

I teach the Inupiaq language and want to share with you that we have struggled with maintaining our classes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly every Alaska Native language has fewer speakers now than when the pandemic led us to a nationwide shutdown over a year ago. The need to protect our elders, communities, and selves meant we had to try to switch to online classes and meetings. This was difficult because of the limited bandwidth in rural Alaska, and high cost of internet access in our communities. In addition, many of our teachers were not familiar with online teaching and how that changes our abilities to communicate, teach, learn, and grow together.

Alaska is home to 23 Alaska Native languages. I am the chair of the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council, and we have received testimony about the challenges Alaska Native languages face today. Of those 23 languages, two are no longer actively spoken today, 17 of them have fewer than 100 remaining speakers. The State of Alaska declared a linguistic emergency in 2018, but has done nothing to improve matters at the state level since that time. In fact, budget cuts at the University of Alaska and the neglectedness to listen to the recommendations of the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council have left us worse off than when the emergency was declared.

If we are going to create changes, we need a number of substantial shifts in Alaska. Overall, we need to focus on Indigenous language teacher preparation, materials development, language normalization, and reforming education to be inclusive of Alaska Native languages.

The Alaska Native Studies Council has been working with colleagues in Hawai'i and New Zealand to develop a proposal for the College of Alaska Native Languages. This college would be housed within the University of Alaska that would allow us to develop Alaska Native language teacher certification, and licensure processes to increase activity in language documentation and access. This idea needs federal support and the University of Alaska and State of Alaska need to assist and collaborate with the development of the college.

In addition, if the University of Alaska received funding dedicated to open access, we could develop zero credit online options for existing courses so Alaskan people do not have to pay tuition to learn their own endangered languages. This would open doors to provide healing opportunities. It only adds to the trauma to charge someone to learn their own language, which was denied to them and their ancestors due to state and federal governmental actions and policies.

The Alaska Native Language Center needs to be bolstered and be transformed into an Alaska Native Language Media Network that produces multimedia content and creates access to Alaska native language materials. We have Alaska Native artists, writers, animators, filmmakers, and journalists, and we can help make sure that Alaska Native languages are heard, seen, and felt all across Alaska. This would also need funding and advocacy to bring the idea into being.

Alaska Native Place names need to be restored, because thousands of colonial names have come over our land and threaten to eliminate Indigenous place names and alienate people from their ancestral lands. Just imagine if Alaska embraced its

Indigenous history by restoring the names on the land and reversed a damaging process of putting the names of colonizers and explorers on lands that already had names there had thousands of years of history behind them.

We need your help. Alaska was already in a crisis thirty years ago with Alaska Native languages, and now the majority of our languages are on the verge of being lost. It is so hard to reverse language shift, and our efforts are often pulled into political battles that have nothing to do with the love we have for our languages, and the ways we need them and the ways that they heal us. I don't know what the future holds, but I hope that it is brighter than today, and I am hopeful that you will be the ones who will take the bold steps that are needed to bring us to a destiny other than loss and sorrow. Thank you, honorable Senators, for your time. I am available for questions should you have any.