



Testimony of

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Introduction

Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and Members of the Committee, it is my honor to testify before you today about the impact of COVID-19 on Native languages and cultures. I am Michelle Sauve, the Acting Commissioner for the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Native American Affairs, Administration for Children and Families (ACF). I am also a proud member of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe and a new student of my ancestral language, Kanien'keha.

As the Acting Commissioner, I oversee the implementation of the Native American Programs Act, including the Esther Martinez Immersion (EMI) and Native Language Preservation and Maintenance grant programs. ANA's language programs provide the largest federal support for Indigenous communities to ensure the survival of their languages. I have been involved in the ANA Native languages work for a decade and appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this hearing.

Overview of Native Languages and its Importance

I want to acknowledge the historic appropriations in the American Rescue Plan Act that respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities. These funds will more than double the amount of support ANA can provide for Native Languages in a typical year. American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities continue to face serious threats to their languages, with many factors contributing to this precarious position. In 2018, ANA testified at a hearing before this Committee examining efforts to maintain and revitalize Native Languages for future

generations.¹ That testimony addressed federal policies designed to eliminate Native languages and communities, child and family policies that removed disproportionate numbers of children into non-Indigenous families, and assimilatory and abusive boarding schools that severely disrupted intergenerational language transmission.

There are now over 200 tribal communities without living speakers of their mother tongue.² In almost every Indigenous community, the number of Native language speakers has dwindled, and many surviving languages are at the point of critical endangerment. The Native American Languages Act of 1992 and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006 both directed much-needed funding towards ANA's social and economic development efforts, which expanded them to include robust language revitalization programs.

ANA currently supports 49 Native Language Preservation and Maintenance and Esther Martinez Immersion grants and five Native Language Community Coordination pilot projects. In total, these awards support 27 federally recognized tribes and 22 Native organizations, and the preservation of 47 languages in 18 states, including Hawaii, Alaska, Washington, Montana, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

ANA grantee evaluations show that teaching children traditional languages helps build intergenerational connections with fluent and proficient Elders and supports parents and children to deepen their bonds by learning a common tongue that has been part of their families for generations prior to colonization. Native language grantees and their beneficiaries repeatedly share that increased language uptake in the community deepens pride in their culture and renews

¹ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg32539/html/CHRG-115shrg32539.htm>

² <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg32539/html/CHRG-115shrg32539.htm>

their sense of hopefulness. Language and culture contribute to community cohesiveness and can contribute to the prevention of factors that negatively impact health.

Through grantee impact assessments, ANA has learned that language projects require tremendous time, effort, and resource investments within communities that are already responding to many needs. ANA grants empower many of these communities to carry out critical language programs that provide intergenerational language learning and that connect Elders with youth, certify language teachers, document languages, awaken sleeping languages, and create new language learning resources.

Impact of COVID-19 on Native Peoples and Languages

A 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study found that the age-adjusted COVID-19–associated mortality among American Indians and Alaska Natives was 1.8 times that of non-Hispanic Whites.³ We also know that COVID-19-associated mortality varied by geographic area and, in one state, for example, the mortality rate among American Indians and Alaska Natives was 3.8 times that of Whites.⁴ Inequities that existed prior to the pandemic put Indigenous people at higher risk, and the resources have been critical to addressing their disproportionate burden. Beyond access to quality health care, other determinants of health, such as healthy foods, stable housing, and education, culture matters greatly in addressing health inequities. Culture informs local issues and helps identify and frame problems, solutions, and

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, December 11). COVID-19 Mortality Among American Indian and Alaska Native Persons — 14 States, January–June 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6949a3.htm>.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, April 9). COVID-19 Incidence and Mortality Among American Indian/Alaska Native and White Persons — Montana, March 13–November 30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7014a2.htm>.

how communities measure success.⁵ COVID-19 had a devastating effect on the elderly population who are the keys to cultural continuity.

The susceptibility of Elders to COVID-19 has also had a critical impact on language grantees. Elders are Indigenous communities' knowledge keepers and are integral to maintaining language vitality. Each Elder has invaluable cultural and linguistic knowledge that is essential in the continuing existence of language, culture, and traditions. Elders are often the only first-language speakers, and sometimes the only speakers, for many Native languages. For example, the Kiowa Tribe's Native Language Community Coordination program in Oklahoma recently lost two of the Tribe's five fluent Elder speaker-mentors to COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, there were only 20 fluent Kiowa speakers out of a population of 12,000. Kiowa is a language isolate, meaning no other Tribe speaks this or a related language.

COVID-19 has also had a severe impact on ANA-funded projects. In response to the pandemic, tribal nations shut down government operations, including language revitalization programs. Poor broadband infrastructure, physical distancing mandates, and tribal government funding shortfalls made normal functioning impossible. Communities that were able to continue operations experienced significant delays throughout the pandemic. These delays include an inability to provide in-person language instruction as required by EMI, cancellation or delay of key project objectives and activities such as language fairs and community outreach events, and

⁵ Roundtable on the Promotion of Health Equity and the Elimination of Health Disparities; Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice; Institute of Medicine. Leveraging Culture to Address Health Inequalities: Examples from Native Communities: Workshop Summary. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2013 Dec 19. A, Culture as a Social Determinant of Health. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK201298/>.

of course, the serious health concerns preventing inter-generational language activities with Elders.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the midst of the pandemic, communities have had to adapt and identify new approaches to programming. ANA grantees have leveraged all available resources, including digital infrastructure to allow their efforts to persist, even if at a distance. For example, the Keres Children’s Learning Center, an EMI grantee in Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico, reported that not all language learners and Elders have access to the internet, which caused delays for both youth and adult learners.

Another grantee, the Clare Swan Early Learning Center, which serves children 6 months to 36 months in Anchorage, Alaska, was able to post songs, read books, and produce cultural videos in Yup’ik through YouTube. These wonderful supplemental resources can continue to be used by families post-pandemic, but the best language learning, especially for children this young, must be in person.

Similarly, the Yuchi (also spelled Euchee) Tribe in Sapulpa, Oklahoma operates “The Yuchi House,” a place for Tribal members aged 3 months to 95 to come together to be in the language and embrace the Yuchi way. They ceased in-person language instruction and transitioned to online teaching utilizing platforms such as Kahoot and Zoom to assess youth reading and writing and allow students and elders to meet and learn language in real time. However, they note remote learning is not as effective as in-person instruction, and some Elders are not able to use the online platform. Yuchi is another language isolate.

These innovations underscore the ability of Indigenous communities to use the \$20 million in Emergency Native Language funding provided through the American Rescue Plan Act in adaptable and creative ways. ANA grantees have played a pivotal role—particularly during the pandemic—in recording, teaching, and preserving languages that could be lost altogether. ANA is hopeful that our language funding and support will continue these trends building stronger, more resilient communities in the wake of the pandemic.

Emergency Funding from the American Rescue Plan Act

ANA appreciates this Committee’s support for Native language programs, and our goal is to reach the most Tribes and languages possible. In planning for American Rescue Plan Act Emergency Language awards, ANA held a tribal consultation on March 26, a community listening session on March 29, and a special outreach session with the governments of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands on April 26.

Among other factors, the intent of the three ANA engagements with Native communities was to solicit feedback on allocation of the \$20 million appropriation. Most participants expressed a need to grow capacity for Native language programs, especially among tribes with smaller populations and resources, tribes or territories that have two or more languages, and tribes that lack dedicated and ongoing funding for language programs. Participants wanted as much of the emergency funds as possible to be used for direct payments and requested information on what has worked for previous language projects.

The announcement of the availability of emergency language funds has been released, and ANA is doing additional outreach, particularly to tribes that have existing languages but have not previously received ANA funding.

Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act of 2021

With respect to the Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act of 2021 (S. 1402) introduced by Chairman Schatz and co-sponsored by Vice Chairman Murkowski, Mr. Feeling played a major role in Cherokee language usage by developing a Cherokee Language syllabary in word processing to complete computer documents in their own language. This remarkable accomplishment has led to other innovative ways American Indians and Alaska Natives have worked to preserve, maintain, and grow their own languages.

The bill builds on the memorandum of agreement established by ANA and the Departments of Education and the Interior to coordinate and support Native language work. ANA stands ready to provide technical assistance on the bill should it be requested.

Closing

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the impact COVID-19 has had on Native languages and cultures, and for your commitment to supporting Native communities. I look forward to working with you to ensure the vitality of Native languages and cultures. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.