

Testimony of Quapaw Nation Chair Wena Supernaw
House Natural Resources Committee Field Hearing on Self Governance, Healthcare and
Economic Development

Chairman Westerman, Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, Members of the Committee, and Members of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation, thank you for the invitation to testify before you today.

Let me begin by telling you just how honored I am to be testifying in my home state. While you are here, you'll see that things are a bit different in Indian Country than they are in D.C. From me, and I from assume others, you will hear that more government isn't the answer. We need a smarter government. We need one that works *with* Indian Country to meet *our* needs; not a government that is stuck in its paternalistic past.

50 years ago, President Nixon challenged the Democratic majorities in the House and Senate to reduce bureaucratic interference in the affairs of our people. As a result, Congress passed the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. That law put in place a formula that we now know works.

At the Quapaw Nation, we have elected to use BIA self-governance for 21 discrete functions, almost everything that we are eligible for. That's because when programs and services are authorized by Congress, they are most effectively administered by the Tribe.

Self Governance is not just about the efficiency of *your* government; its also about the efficiency of *our* government. In our experience, the act of self governance alone is a form of economic development. Tribal members can learn the valuable, technical skills that were previously reserved for residents of the District of Columbia.

Before I go into the specifics of programs, I want to let that sink in: self governance alone is a form of economic development.

When the Quapaw Nation moved to self governance, something changed for us. We moved from a tribe that was *dependent* on the United States to one that was *partners* with the United States. As we gained proficiency, our mindset changed from "what is the next service the federal government will offer?" to "how can the tribe better serve our people?"

Looking back, it was the skills our government and people learned from self governance that gave us the confidence to start a rehabilitation enterprise, a commercial gaming business, and an environmental services company. The skills we learned in the early days of self governance—things like cash flow, audits, reporting requirements—changed the trajectory of our nation. We took the skills developed running our government, and applied them to our economic development. It was a revelation, and for that, I am truly grateful.

Now, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, let me tell you a bit about some of the specific programs we operate.

The Quapaw Nation operates a critically important substance treatment program as a part of our Indian Health Service self-governance. Tribal leadership felt very strongly that we needed to do more for our people that struggled to find comprehensive, compassionate drug treatment. Simply put, there was not a culturally competent or qualified provider in our area. So we embarked on an effort to do it ourselves and it has become one of the services I am most proud to offer to our tribal membership and others in the community. We have already reduced some of the worst outcomes and are finally making progress to heal our people.

Two of the most important BIA programs we run are our realty and trust management services. By controlling these functions together, the Quapaw Nation now retains sovereign control of our land. As a result, we can work with landowners and lessees to quickly and transparently resolve issues on trust land.

Let me give you an example: our nation inherited a gas line trespass that tribal members had been trying to address since 1964. Instead of running to our regional BIA office or DC with our hat in our hand, the professional staff at the Quapaw Nation analyzed the problem, remained steadfast on seeking an outcome favorable by landowners, and found a way to resolve the matter without seeking litigation. In doing so, the tribe obtained an acceptable settlement for landowners, all while staying within federal regulation.

Another key function of Realty is to facilitate land acquisitions on the reservation. Before taking over Realty, the BIA would not allow restricted landowners to sell land west of Spring River. This was because the BIA wouldn't talk to EPA to understand the regulations governing the Tar Creek Superfund Site. At the time, we had a tribal member needed to sell some of this property to pay hospital bills, so it was a matter of urgency. Once we took over, the transaction was quickly approved, and we have since been able to replicate that process many times over without issue.

Finally, the most important example of self governance as economic development for the Quapaw Nation was the creation of the Quapaw Services Authority (QSA). We founded this authority to do work with the EPA Superfund program, which is working to clean up the toxic lead and zinc waste left on our reservation after the BIA allowed unsupervised mining on our land. Although there is no formal EPA self governance program—something you should work with your colleagues on the Energy and Commerce Committee to rectify—we worked with EPA and the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality to put an ad hoc program together after the first clean up crew failed to protect our cultural resources. The tribe, via the QSA, is now working in lock step with the EPA and ODEQ to restore our land for future generations.

Now, I would be a negligent tribal leader if I didn't also mention H.R. 1451, the Quapaw Tribal Settlement Act. This legislation, introduced by our Congressman, Josh Brecheen, and our Senators, fulfills the settlement of our claim against the United States for the mining disaster I just referenced. I hope to have the opportunity to work with you all on that legislation in the near future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to answering any questions.