

**Proposal to Amend**

**S. 575**

Native American Languages Act Amendments Act of 2003

To provide for a demonstration program

at

Sealaska Heritage Institute

for the

**Revitalization of Critically Endangered Languages**

*Prepared by*  
Sealaska Heritage Institute  
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**Proposed Amendments to  
S. 575  
Native American Languages Act Amendments Act of 2003**

*Change Sec. 110 (a) to read:*

(a) ESTABLISHMENT - The Secretary shall make grants, or enter into contracts, to establish 4 demonstration programs that will provide assistance to Native American language survival schools and Native American language nests.

*Under Sec.110 (b), add the following:*

(4) the Sealaska Heritage Institute, in consortium with other entities as the Institute determines to be appropriate, for the conduct of a demonstration program for critically endangered languages, providing training, outreach, conferences, and visitation programs relevant to--

- (A) Native language teacher training and curriculum development
- (B) master/apprentice language teams
- (C) reawakening dormant speakers
- (D) the use of Internet technologies in language revitalization
- (E) language revival techniques for languages with no fluent speakers

**Haa yóo x'atángi, haa at.óow áyá. Kée keix tootee!**

*Our language is our at.óow. Let's raise it up!*

-- Bessie Cooley, Tlingit Elder

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At present, over 85% of all Native languages in the United States are no longer being learned by children. Of these, nearly half are now considered **critically endangered** languages; that is, they are spoken by only a small number of the most elderly members of the community, and are in immediate danger of extinction.

Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), a Native-run non-profit corporation based in Juneau, Alaska, proposes to operate a *Demonstration Program for the Revitalization of Critically Endangered Languages*, as part of S. 575, the proposed amendment to the Native American Languages Act.

This document provides basic information on SHI, its work in the area of language revitalization, and details of the proposed demonstration program.

## **1. Background on Sealaska Heritage Institute**

Sealaska Heritage Institute is a regional Native nonprofit organization founded for the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people of Southeast Alaska. SHI was established in 1981 by Sealaska Corp., a for-profit company formed under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). SHI, formerly Sealaska Heritage Foundation, administers Sealaska Corp.'s cultural and educational programs.

During its first decade of operation, SHI focused on the documentation of oral traditions, a project led by Tlingit scholar Dr. Nora Marks Dauenhauer and her husband, Dr. Richard Dauenhauer. Over nearly a 20-year period, these efforts led to several major publications by the Institute of the Dauenhauers' work, including: *"Because We Cherish You ¼" Sealaska Elders Speak to the Future*, in 1981; *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors*, Volume I of our Tlingit Oral Narratives (1987); *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís: For Healing our Spirit*, Vol. 2, Tlingit Oral Narratives. (1990); the Third Edition of *Beginning Tlingit* in 1991; *Haa Kusteeyí, Our Culture: Tlingit Life Stories* (1994); and *Aan Aduspelled X'úx', Tlingit Spelling Book* in 1999. During this period, the Institute also created Naa Kahídi Theater, which won national acclaim for its dramatic presentation of Native legends.

While continuing to honor the Institute's mission statement, "To perpetuate the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures," the Trustees in 1997 adopted language preservation and enhancement as the foremost priority of the Institute. Few funds were available initially for this objective, but the Institute launched an aggressive fund-raising campaign, and today, SHI sponsors and supports numerous language and culture programs across Southeast Alaska.

## **2. Current Sealaska Heritage Institute Programs**

Under the leadership of Dr. Rosita Worl, a Tlingit and Harvard-trained Anthropologist, SHI developed its flagship language program, the Sealaska Kusteeyí Workshops, held annually in both Juneau and Ketchikan. These two-week workshops, available for university credit, provide intensive immersion instruction in all three Native languages of Southeast Alaska, as well as training in language teaching methods and curriculum development.

Over the past five years, SHI has offered the following courses during its Kusteeyi Workshops:

- Beginning Tlingit
- Intermediate Tlingit
- Introduction to Tlingit Linguistics
- Tlingit Literature and Grammar
- Tlingit Orthography
- Tlingit Reading and Spelling for Fluent Speakers
- Tlingit Public Speaking for Dormant Speakers
- Beginning Haida
- Intermediate Haida
- Beginning Tsimshian
- Intermediate Tsimshian
- Introduction to Teaching Methods
- Heritage Language Teaching Methods
- Teaching Methods for Alaska Native Languages
- Designing Communicative Lessons for Alaska Native Languages
- Teaching through a Language Immersion Curriculum
- Operating a Language Immersion Retreat
- Master/Apprentice Program Training
- Northwest Coast Twined Weaving
- Introduction to Chilkat Weaving
- Spruce Root Weaving

Building on the success of these workshops, SHI has undertaken a variety of other projects, including:

- ◆ partnering with the Juneau School District to create the first bilingual and bicultural classroom in Southeast Alaska at the Harborview Elementary School, now encompassing Kindergarten through fifth grade,
- ◆ operating annual, two-week Tlingit language immersion retreats near Sitka and in Glacier Bay, designed to help intermediate-level speakers achieve communicative fluency in the language,
- ◆ training teachers and developing a curriculum for a Tlingit language half-day immersion program for Kindergarten through second grade
- ◆ funding and training several sets of master/apprentice language teams throughout Southeast Alaska
- ◆ funding language and culture Summer camps in various Native communities.

To direct these projects, SHI has on staff two professional linguists specializing in Native languages and language revitalization, as well as a fluent-speaking Tlingit language specialist. SHI also contracts with several other fluent Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian language specialists on projects throughout the year. Plans call for a continuing expansion of all of these programs to better serve the language needs in all the communities of Southeast Alaska.

### **3. Proposal for a Demonstration Program**

The Sealaska Heritage Institute proposes to operate a Demonstration Program for the Revitalization of Critically Endangered Languages as part of S. 575, the pending amendment to the Native American Languages Act. Today, the overwhelming majority of Native languages in the United States are no longer being learned by children, and many are spoken by only the oldest community members. This demonstration program would expand upon the successful Sealaska Kusteeyí workshops to provide a practical model, based on both well-tested and innovative techniques, for language revitalization in those communities with the most critically endangered languages.

The proposed demonstration program would focus on the following five areas:

**(A) Immersion teacher training and curriculum development**

Two of the most important elements in any successful school-based Native language program are well-trained teachers and a curriculum designed to bring students to conversational fluency in the language. SHI has been a leader in this area in recent years, providing both teacher training and curriculum development designed for a total language immersion classroom.

**(B) Master/apprentice language teams**

In many communities with critically endangered languages, school-based language programs are not a viable option. The most successful non-school-based approach to language revitalization has been the master/apprentice language teams. This approach pairs a master fluent speaker with one (or more) younger learners for around 20 hours a week, during which time only the Native language is used. In this way, the students learn the language in a naturalistic setting, and in a manner that closely mirrors how the masters

learned the language as small children. SHI is currently providing training and support for several master/apprentice teams throughout Southeast Alaska as part of the Sealaska Kusteeyí workshops.

### **(C) Reawakening dormant speakers**

Even in communities with the most critically endangered languages, there are usually many people who retain a passive knowledge of the language -- they can understand nearly everything said in the language, but are reluctant to try to speak. These are the dormant speakers. Although usually overlooked in the development of language revitalization programs, dormant speakers often outnumber fluent speakers in communities with critically endangered languages. SHI has been developing techniques to revive and expand the conversational fluency of dormant speakers of Tlingit, so that these individuals can take a more active and productive role in carrying the language forward to future generations.

### **(D) The use of Internet technologies in language revitalization**

The development of Internet technologies in the past ten years has radically transformed many aspects of work with endangered languages, from the digitization of high-quality audio and video recordings, to the development of multimedia language teaching tools, to the creation of on-line, virtual language learning communities. SHI staff linguists have been involved in the application of these technologies to the revitalization of endangered languages in communities across the United States since the mid 1990's.

### **(E) Language revival techniques for languages with no remaining fluent speakers**

In all parts of the United States, there are Native communities who have already seen the passing of the last fluent speakers of their traditional languages. For these communities, often all that remains of their languages are the field notes and recordings of linguists and anthropologists. Even so, there are today several formerly extinct languages, such as Miami and Wampanoag, which are being relearned and reintroduced into their original communities based on just these sorts of historical records.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As part of the proposed demonstration program, SHI will provide training, outreach, conferences and visitation programs in each of the five areas outlined above, designed specifically for members of communities with critically endangered languages. Many of the most basic issues faced by these communities are left unaddressed by the three other proposed demonstration programs. We believe the inclusion of this fourth demonstration program makes the proposed amendment to the Native American Languages Act stronger and more responsive to the urgent needs of communities across the country.