



## Central Council of the Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

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### **Written Testimony of Jacqueline *Kus.een* Pata**

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1<sup>st</sup> Vice President, Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Roundtable on the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act of 2025

### **Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, and Members of the Committee:**

Gunalchéesh, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the proposed Native Children's Commission Implementation Act of 2025. My name is Jacqueline Pata, and I serve as the President/CEO of Tlingit & Haida Regional Housing Authority and the 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President of the Central Council of the Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska.

We strongly support the proposed funding for a Tribal-specific Continuum of Care (CoC) program. While tribes were previously made eligible for CoC participation, no new resources were provided—forcing states to reallocate limited funds and leaving many tribes unable to benefit. This proposal corrects that by providing dedicated, direct funding to tribes to create culturally grounded, locally tailored solutions.

Alaska is an ideal location for pilot programs. We are large enough to meaningfully test program design, yet small enough that adjustments can be made quickly if something doesn't work. Policymakers often call for innovation, but innovation requires room to adapt without fear that early challenges will be weaponized as failure.

SE Conference determined housing is the top priority in Southeast Alaska. For years, NAHASDA was underfunded. Even with recent increases, it barely covers the cost of maintaining the homes we have—let alone building new ones.

Homelessness here isn't just people sleeping on the streets. It's families and individuals "couch surfing," moving from place to place with no stability. In THRHA's 2024 Housing Survey, over a third of respondents said they'd sheltered someone without housing—adding up to 95,000 nights.

CoC seed funding would let us expand supportive housing and finally start closing the gaps left by decades of federal underinvestment.

We know the proposed voucher model works through our experience with Tribal HUD-VASH. This program succeeds in allowing flexibility to meet cultural needs. Key elements of its success include:

- Intervention before homelessness occurs;

- Families in a single household being eligible;
- Ongoing case management that doesn't end after six or twenty-four months;
- Required case management as a condition for continued housing support.

However, challenges remain. In rural areas, access to a VA case worker has been a significant barrier, delaying implementation. Allowing partnerships with tribal health providers, regional housing authorities, and nonprofits—and permitting telehealth case management—would help overcome these barriers. In some areas, VA hiring and credentialing processes have caused delays and limited expansion; having flexibility to use alternative case management providers would improve outcomes.

Finally, it's important that tribal-led CoC programs are not simply overlays of the existing CoC framework. Current CoC programs can be administratively burdensome and don't recognize our existing governance structures. For these to succeed, they must be simplified and flexible, meeting local priorities without unnecessary hurdles.

The VASH program works. For example, we had a veteran living in a dilapidated camper trailer, isolated from friends, family, and not eating. Through Tribal HUD-VASH, a counselor helped him navigate the housing process, connect with services, and stabilize in private housing. That stability would not have been possible without sustained case management.

Housing is more than just four walls, it's stability, dignity, and reconnection to community. A tribal-led CoC program, designed with cultural grounding and reduced administrative barriers, will deliver far better outcomes than trying to fit our people into systems that were never built for us.

### **Codifying Tribal Advisory Councils**

Before serving as co-chair of the Tribal Intergovernmental Advisory Committee (TIAC), I worked closely with HUD in my previous role at NCAI. That experience demonstrated the value of consistent, structured relationships with agency leadership, relationships that ensure our unique needs are understood.

TACs do not replace formal consultation or the direct voice of tribal governments. Instead, they guide agencies on best practices for consultation, create ongoing two-way dialogue, and help address systemic issues. TACs support cultural change within agencies, ensuring programs are designed for tribal realities, and they strengthen local capacity by providing technical assistance and advancing self-determination over program delivery.

At HUD, TIAC's recommendations have been welcomed and acted upon, often becoming institutional policy. When this Administration set a goal to streamline programs, TIAC was part of that process having already worked with HUD on streamlining. Many times when new programs are launched tribes are made eligible without considering our uniqueness and make it almost impossible for us to apply. However, when the PRICE Grant program NOFO was launched prior dialogue with the TIAC led to changes that made the program truly workable for tribes.

Other examples, such as the Tribal-Interior Budget Council (TIBC), show TACs' ability to partner with agencies during budget adjustments, bringing forward tribal data to guide decisions and protect priorities.

Codifying TACs ensures tribal leadership has a permanent voice in shaping policies and budgets that impact our communities—one that is not subject to the shifting priorities of changing administrations. Tribal nations' priorities are non-partisan, and the programs our citizens rely on should not rise and fall with political cycles. That kind of instability has real-world consequences for our families and undermines long-term success.

Looking ahead, our ultimate goal is compacting and full self-determination over programs that serve our communities. This legislation makes meaningful progress toward that vision. In the meantime, TACs are the mechanism through which tribes shape the programs that impact our people. We share the same goal of successful programs and efficient budgets, and having a seat at the table from the start sets agencies and Tribal Nations up for success. We want to be a partner, not a barrier, in building programs that work for Indian Country.

These provisions in the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act of 2025 represents an important opportunity to advance tribal self-determination in housing, governance, and beyond. With direct funding, flexible program design, and strong tribal voices embedded in federal decision-making, we can better serve our children, families, and communities.

Gunalchéesh for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.