

Testimony
of
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On
“Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native Communities: Native Languages One Year Later
Presented to Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
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Aaniin Committee Chair Schatz, Vice-Chair Murkowski, and Members of Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Miigwech for the opportunity to testify before you.

My name is Leslie Harper, and I am an enrolled member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. I live on our reservation homeland which is in north central Minnesota. I have worked in grassroots Native American Language revitalization in community-based adult language learning projects, and co-founded and served as Director and taught at all elementary grade levels at our Niigaane Ojibwemowin Immersion school at Leech Lake. I currently provide consultation to Tribes and organizations to support community development and evaluations in Native language communities. I am President of the National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs. Our Coalition is a volunteer group that advocates for the use of Native American Languages as the primary medium of instruction, which means that a Native American Language is spoken and treated as the language of communication for all operations and all subjects. The National Coalition brings together schools and programs that use Indigenous languages as the medium of instruction under the provisions of the U.S. federal Native American Languages Act of 1990 (NALA). Native language medium schools and programs (sometimes called immersion or dual language programs) educate students *through* a Native American language.

National Coalition advocates come from a wide variety of jurisdictions, including Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools, state public schools, charter schools, and private non-profit schools. National Coalition advocates range from infant care, preschool programs, elementary schools, secondary schools to tertiary education. These schools and programs are currently enacted in eighteen states and U.S. territories.

In this context in the United States, there are unique linguistic and cultural principles we work within to revitalize languages. Along with this, there are unique legal policy principles and unique legal responsibilities to our Native American Language-speaking and learning communities. Native American Language revitalization acts in many places in our communities. While many choose an education setting to implement, we find that Native American Languages are an important intervention across many areas of our community vitality.

Committee members, you received testimony on April 28th, 2021 on Covid-19 effects on Native education. Our colleague Dr. Kauanoë Kamana described relevant issues affecting Native

language medium schools, and I will refer you to her testimony and agree with all that Dr. Kamana provided in that setting.

We have been disrupted from our language delivery and our learning spaces this year due to Covid-19. Some have pivoted and learned ways to do our best – some have successfully pivoted to online and distance learning, learned new technology to share space and time to speak our languages together. Native American language revitalizers are visionary and are innovators who often propose an alternative way to live our lives in our languages.

With great grief, I report that many more of our Master speakers of our Native American languages have passed away this year. I do not have an official count. Though every language revitalizer in my network can anecdotally name speakers who have been lost this year. In a time of dwindling numbers of Elder First Speakers of our languages, Native American language revitalizers are working as always, against a clock, to prepare new speakers of our languages for multi-generational, healthy, living language speaking communities. The covid-19 crises of this year in lost connections and lost lives show us how critically we must regard a wide range of language revitalization strategies.

This year has shown us how critically low our stock of speakers is, and how deeply we work to build new speakers. Native American language revitalizers have, from necessity, dedicated *even more* time to research, dream, build, test, reinvigorate, re-energize, and value our languages. We have been disrupted again in transmitting our languages even with the best-laid plans. While our programs and schools have not been able to provide consistent in-person language support, many language revitalization plans went into ‘life-support’ mode to continue to share language with our students and families of students.

Successful exemplary programs develop and create language speakers across all ages and generations as resources. Language programs create new child-age speakers of our languages to normalize language transmission in our lands, and we also focus on creating new adult speakers of our languages who can teach, design, and support language learning programs. There are revitalization programs to help grandparent-age generation passive speakers to re-awaken language that may have been forcibly removed from them at a young age. Adult language learners share in the work to create relevant language plans, to write proposals, to evaluate our actions, to survey community members, and to maintain our sustaining rituals that keep us going. It is imperative that we articulate for ourselves and seek critical, relevant, intentional support to pick up our work to keep moving forward.

When we consider the story of Native American Languages in the United States, we envision a healthy future: all generations in all spaces speaking our languages together. We dream of creating that with fully supported research and development spaces, and the time and ability to examine multiple spaces needed to revitalize our languages. We build capacity in new speakers, new learning modes, new curricula at all levels birth through elderly, determining value measures in multiple spaces, territories, land contexts. We will determine value and intersection with other world languages. Policy protections for Native American Language communities will be ensured. Health and wellness measures will include language vitality in all areas of economy,

recreation, ceremonial communities, infrastructure, energy, and environment. These are all spaces in which our languages deserve to live. Native American Language revitalization can affect the healthy futures of all these areas of citizenship in the United States – when we have the supports to grow and do so.

A Native American language resource center that studies and broadens those realities will help to fulfil unique sovereign, self-determining, locally understood ways to live our lives, honor our pasts, and brighten our futures.

This is already offered to World languages in multiple centers – Congress has funded sixteen Language Resource Centers at various universities to establish, strengthen, and operate centers that serve as resources for improving the nation’s capacity for teaching and learning foreign languages through teacher training, research, materials development, and dissemination projects. However, Native American Languages have been overlooked. The invisibility of the unique legal and political rights of the original languages of the United States of America leaves a gap in the opportunity to fulfil Congress’s support for all languages in our country.

There are about 175 Native American Languages with some speakers today and an estimated 300 prior to the European invasion of North America. The Federal Foreign Service reports that it takes 1,100 hours of study to develop professional level proficiency in a language with major linguistic and cultural differences from English. Native American languages meet this criterion, and probably exceed it due to limited teaching resources. Federally funded language resource centers are providing the teachers and support for world language immersion and dual language programs. Those programs are spreading nationally in pre-school through high school level programs for World languages and Native American languages are being left behind. We do not yet have an opportunity to do what the national Language Resource Centers are doing for foreign languages. Designing Native American Language Resource Centers as partnerships between skilled local practitioners, universities, and Tribal Colleges will bring resources together to support language revitalization in the intensive work that is sorely needed.

The majority of Native American students in the United States attend public schools and non-Tribal universities. World language resource centers are supporting the study of world languages in the schools that these Native American students attend. We encourage equitable access to the opportunity to study Native American languages. Tribal Colleges and Bureau of Indian Education Schools should have a national resource center to help build capacity to learn and design exemplary practices in the teaching of their languages. In the same way that world languages often have the support of foreign countries to teach their languages, we would like to see capacity built for Native American language expert practitioners here to support teaching of Native American languages.

Native American language communities also have limited access to data-gathering design, analysis, and results. Native language medium schools or program populations are often left out of large-scale studies on Native learners, due to small n-size in unique interventions. It is important that we recognize and honor the place that Native American languages hold in the vitality of our futures in this country. Timely, relevant data regarding the number of Native

American language speakers, our unique community contexts, and capacity needs will provide support to justify increasing the resources available to Native American languages.

“Indapiizikaa gosha,” some of our Elders would have said in the past when they were alive, which translates to, “I’m doing the best I can with what I have”. This saying, from an Ojibwe perspective, can mean that I am acting to honor my personal role in the community to the best of my ability. Historically however, in many of our negotiation spaces, translations may have been imperfect or biased. At times, this phrase may have been misunderstood or mis-applied to justify a scarcity of resources or to avoid addressing barriers in a meaningful way. We must continue to work together with you and all the other members of Congress to ensure that NAL revitalization work is mutually understood and honored.

Miigwech for this opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions and can provide written information as follow up as needed.