



Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

PO Box 1210 • Durant, Oklahoma 74702-1210 • (580) 924-8280

Gregory E. Pyle
Chief

Gary Batton
Assistant Chief

**TESTIMONY PRESENTED BY
MICKEY PEERCY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HEALTH SERVICES
(ON BEHALF OF CHIEF GREGORY E. PYLE)
CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA**

**AT THE OVERSIGHT HEARING ON "NATIVE WOMEN: PROTECTING, SHIELDING AND
SAFEGUARDING OUR SISTERS, MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS"
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
July 14, 2011**

Good afternoon, distinguished Members of the Committee. On behalf of Chief Gregory E. Pyle, of the Great Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, I bring greetings, and extend to you the support of the People of the Choctaw Nation. My name is Mickey Percy, and I represent the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the third largest Tribe in the United States. We have over 206,000 tribal members spread throughout all states and communities, including those you represent in your respective districts. We are here before you today to speak in strong support of the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. This Act is the nexus to protect, shield and safeguard our sisters, mothers and daughters against undeserved cruelty and violence. I thank you for inviting the Choctaw Nation to provide testimony.

People are the essence of the Choctaw Nation and women are viewed as the heart of our families and communities. Choctaw women are honored as "Holitopa" meaning beloved or life giver. When women experience violence it not only has a negative impact on them, but also has a grave impact on the children, the families and the community. The children come to accept violence as a natural part of intimate relationships. Violence becomes an acceptable way to cope with anger and life's frustrations. These children have a higher risk of becoming victims or offenders themselves. Violence against intimate partners becomes normalized, and the destructive cycle continues. Small rural communities experience increasing challenges in holding offenders responsible. By targeting families and communities and working collaboratively, we have a greater potential for significantly impacting and breaking the cycle of violence for our children and our tribal community. This guiding principle has helped us build a compassionate and caring framework of victim and family- centered prevention and treatment services that address violence and sexual assault across the lifespan. Although I will use the term victim, I assure you it is an understood descriptor only, because we view all people as having strengths despite the violent experiences that have impacted their lives. To help those who have experienced violence we use a holistic, family-centered approach that has been adopted within all of our programs, one that provides a compassionate foundation for our interventions.

Over 256,598 people reside in the Choctaw service area, including over 80,000 certified-by-blood Tribal Members and 35,000 Native Americans from other tribes.¹ Levels of abuse and violence are elevated due to the extreme poverty, high rate of illiteracy, lack of education and jobs, and alcohol and substance abuse. **As has been reported, women in tribal communities are three and a half times more likely to be victims of violent crime.** In partnership with numerous local, state, and federal partners the Choctaw Nation strives to deliver effective family-based services to address the rising needs across the 11,784 square mile service area.

We believe that our youngest citizens deserve the best chance for a healthy start. Teen-age parents are vulnerable to family violence. Our response to decreasing the impact of violence to this population is comprised of two **Better Beginnings** programs that provide early childhood development services to Native American pregnant or parenting women of children age 0-5. The first of these projects is **Chahta Inchukka**, a Tribal home visiting program whose goal is to improve maternal and infant health, strengthen parenting skills, increase school-readiness and prevent child abuse and neglect. The **Support for Pregnant and Parenting Teens Project** provides services to pregnant and parenting teen mothers under 19 years old, their infants, male partners and families to reduce repeated unwanted pregnancies, improve health outcomes for mothers and infants, increase healthy parenting skills, and provide opportunities for education and job training. Both of these programs were designed to identify problematic family issues early and provide the children and young families with the tools they need to build a healthy family. If risk issues are identified, a family can also be referred to a far-reaching network of Tribal and community partners that offers comprehensive services including but not limited to family preservation, counseling, financial assistance and literacy, career development, housing, vocational assistance, and support for victims of domestic violence. **Family Preservation** builds family strength and stability, supports healthy parental behaviors, and promotes the protection of our children. The program served over 2,000 women and their families in 2010 by identifying strengths, finding solutions, and supporting self-reliance.

Project SAFE and **Project United Voice** are aimed at enhancing the safety of children, youth, and adults who have been victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. These programs encourage collaboration among tribal and non-tribal law enforcement, courts, prosecutors, community service providers, educational institutions, and health care providers. Stronger partnerships help us to identify, assess, and appropriately respond to risky situations. These programs also educate our communities to build awareness of warning signs and resources. Dating violence is addressed with the **"SAFE DATE"** curriculum that teaches 5th-12th grade students to identify healthy relationships related to appropriate and inappropriate dating behaviors and expectations. **Project Falummichechi** teaches children how to deal with their emotions in a healthy manner. The curriculum is implemented by 150 youth trained to serve as mentors to 2nd graders. The mentors present puppet shows and other creative activities as teaching tools. The older youth have a powerful impact on the younger ones.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau 2010 State and County Quick Facts.

All of the Choctaw Nation advocacy and treatment programs are built on respect, respecting the dignity of the victim and of the family so that we can provide the resources necessary to help them to make the decisions that are right for them at a time when decisions are hard to make. An array of integrated services is available for quick response. The **Choctaw Nation Sexual Assault Response Team** has developed a collaborative protocol to respond to the crime of sexual assault. **Tribal Law Enforcement** and **Tribal Justice** as well as multiple law enforcement and prosecutor agencies located within the Choctaw Nation are part of this effort. **Voices for Survivors** provides five **Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner** or "SANE" nurses who provide forensic exams and services at our Talihina Health Center. Sixteen victim advocates are available 24/7 to provide crisis counseling and support, as well as longer term services. A licensed counselor is co-located in our **Women's Health Clinic** to provide domestic violence screenings and counseling. **Project House** and the **Family Violence Program** provide a broad range of services such as transitional housing assistance, emergency food and clothing, safety planning, transportation, child care services, parenting and life skill enhancements, case management, court room advocacy, employment, and counseling. Two very special projects are **Project Empower**, which has served over 130 families thus far, **and Project Empower2Dream**. These programs support victims and their families by providing them with advocacy services, traditional "Healing Circles," higher education, financial assistance, and legal assistance. Faith-based counseling and traditional healing are also supported through our **Faith Based Counseling for Victims of Crime**.

A very unique collaboration has developed between the Nation and the **Child Advocacy Centers** within our tribal boundaries. Many of our Native children receive services through these centers. Through our **Voices for Survivors Program** we have co-located a Victim's Advocate who is also trained as a Forensic Interviewer. This has been a very successful collaboration and allows us to provide much needed services and resources.

We have also recognized that families dealing with substance abuse face issues beyond the drug and alcohol use. These families bring with them situations that are often difficult to conceive - past childhood trauma, grief, extreme poverty, ongoing sexual assault, and extreme violence inflicted by those we are usually taught to trust. Our **Wind Horse Family Recovery Center** offers family centered treatment that addresses both addiction and violence. Through the family we are able to identify and reduce triggers for substance use while helping the family to recognize the impact of the addiction. Family centered therapy allows us to present healthy ways of dealing with common stressors without turning to drugs or violence. Children involved in the program learn about healthy relationships and how to deal with emotions positively.

Chi Hullo Li is our substance abuse treatment facility for women and their children. Over 90% of the women admitted report that they have been abused by someone they trusted. Evidence of the cycle of abuse is evident in the women's interaction with their children. From these women we have learned that when one experiences sexual assault or physical violence it impacts every facet of one's life. Treatment focuses on healing the traumas that have been experienced and learning to break the cycle of substance abuse and violence.

It is understood by all of our staff and our tribal leaders, that our programs have a shared responsibility to create an environment of healing and safety for those impacted by the trauma of domestic violence and sexual assault. We believe wholeheartedly that our families, children, sons, and daughters all have the right to a life free from fear. We have a traditional responsibility to provide service, humbly, with caring and compassion and in recognition that all our people are Holitopa in spirit.

Without the continuation of the VAWA, these important partnerships and efforts might not survive. The reauthorization of VAWA is critical to meet the rising need of victims both for funding and for partnership efforts. The Choctaw Nation stands ready and committed to participate hand in hand with every level of government to address this critical need. As a reminder of the impact our shared efforts....I leave you with a statement from a victim client:

“My name is Wanette. I thought I had married my true love, until one day my whole world turned upside down. Very shortly after having my daughter, he starting using drugs. In an attempt to understand him, I started to use as well. That is when the abuse started. When he was coming down was always when he would get into fights. He was very physically and mentally abusive. This went on for almost two years. One day when he left me and my son stranded, it took us almost four hours to walk home, and he took our little girl to a drug house, I had enough. I left everything behind. When I called for help, the Choctaw EMPOWER folks came right over. They helped me get the things that I needed at the shelter. They helped me get all my identifications, my social security card, birth certificates, driver’s license. They also helped me get back into school. They got me a house. They’re also helping me regain trust from my family. I am now a year clean and free of that life and couldn’t be happier. They are helping me to get a relationship with my son. They have counseling for me and him both. Our relationship is getting a lot stronger. They are a great support, not only helping me with the normal everyday things, but are a great friend when I just need someone to talk to. Whenever I have a problem, they are right there helping me figure out a solution to the problem. They have also helped me get full custody of my little girl and divorced from my husband. I don’t know where I would be without them.”

Yakokeye.