

Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

On S. 1535

The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Equitable Compensation Amendments Act

June 14, 2006

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice-Chairman, and other members of the Committee. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide supportive testimony for the Tribe's efforts to obtain immediate access to its funds under Public Law 106-511 -- which I will refer to as "JTAC funds" -- to implement the Tribe's JTAC Plan.

My name is Sharon Vogel; I am an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and am the Administrative Manager for the Tribal Ventures Project. Tribal Ventures is a planning project between the CRST and the Northwest Area Foundation to develop a 10-year plan to reduce poverty and increase prosperity for the families residing on our reservation.

For the past two years, we have been engaged in an inclusive planning process which encouraged the participation of all reservation residents, especially those living in poverty. The results have been astounding. With resources from the Northwest Area Foundation, our eyes were really opened about the state of poverty on the reservation—and what we could do to address it. We will take this testimony to review the state of our reservation, and the ways we are ready to improve it.

Poverty Assessment

In order for us to begin to plan poverty reduction strategies we first had to understand the nature and extent of poverty on our reservation. We found that poverty is widespread, but there isn't a "one size fits all" definition. According to the latest statistics, 46 percent of Indians on the Reservation live in poverty, making it one of the poorest in the Nation. What's worse, 60 percent of Native families with small children live in poverty, starting those children off on the wrong foot with regard to economic success later in life.

There are many categories of poverty definition – all of which apply to Cheyenne River. Below is a summary of those types of poverty which I will reference later in my testimony.

- **Structural Poverty:** This results from underlying conditions of the economy.
- **Incidental Poverty:** This results from changing events in people's lives, also known as situational poverty.
- **Generational Poverty:** This is defined as being in poverty for two or more generations.
- **Poverty of Place:** For decades our reservation has faced a declining economy which has created a poverty of place. The 2000 US Census data ranked Ziebach County as the poorest county in the State of South Dakota.
- **Poverty related to people:** Because we have had ongoing decades of persistent poverty we have seen a steady increase in the number of social, medical and economic problems; this has been compounded with the emerging new threats to the well-being of our families.
- **Forced Relocation and Loss of Personal Assets:** Forced relocation is extremely disruptive on both economic and emotional levels. Sudden loss of personal assets can have the effect of plunging families into poverty overnight. Individuals on our Reservation experienced both of these due to the Oahe Dam project, and its repercussions on our community are still felt today.

Our families are suffering from the effects of persistent poverty. The high poverty rate has impacted our families who suffer from despair, hopelessness, lack of opportunities, disparities in health conditions creating an additional burden of illness, impacting our children's education, and perpetuating the impoverished conditions of our reservation.

Suggested Programs and Services to Alleviate Community Poverty

Through the Tribal Ventures planning activities we hosted a series of community conversations that were held in each of our 19 tribal communities. These community conversation meetings allowed us to gather ideas on what our 10 year poverty reduction plan should have in it. Ultimately, we recognized our need to respond directly to the people on the reservation, so these meetings enabled us to identify our people's priorities. In other words, we got it straight from the horse's mouth.

We found that the people who participated in the Tribal Venture planning activities were united on common themes regardless of their age or community residency. Their comments were compiled and sorted into categories, which we then organized into common themes. What we found was that our community was thinking about its own future, and came up with suggestions that grouped roughly into ten themes. Under those themes, we filed the suggestions tribal members produced, and came up with what follows:

1. Promoting Life Long Learning and Training
 - Leadership
 - Life skills
 - Social skills
 - Job Training

Community Education
Individual Development
Parenting
2. Restoring individual and Community Wellness
 - Healthy lifestyles
 - Health Promotion
 - Disease Prevention

Exercise
Nutrition
3. Preserving Cultural Teaching & Values
 - Language
 - Storytelling
 - Genealogy

Arts & Crafts
History
Horse Culture
4. Creating Economic Engines
 - Partnerships
 - Legislation
 - Investments

Tourism
Entrepreneurship
Chamber of Commerce
5. Improving Community Relations
 - Peacemaking
 - Race Relations

School-Parent
Health Care-Patient

Conflict Resolution	Community Radio
6. Maintaining Community Safety Quality of Life Safe and Nurturing Environment	Community Policing Animal Control Vandalism
7. Building Reservation Infrastructure Transportation Expansion of Water System Commercial Buildings	Multi-purpose Community Buildings Mixed Use Housing Development Land Use Planning
8. Strengthening Families Parenting Financial Literacy Spirituality	Mediation-Family Conferencing Homeownership Life Coaches
9. Enhancing Agricultural Resources Expansion of Packing Plant Indian-owned Livestock Program	Fish Hatcheries Organic farming Tree farm Value Added Products
10. Valuing Education Alternative Education Programs Community-based services Vocational Education	Community College Tribal Department of Education Scholarships

As you can see, our community was quite diverse and thorough in the way it perceived the Tribes. Though it may seem like too many undertakings, they are merely examples of programs or services the Tribe can pursue with JTAC funds. In the time since the reservation study and today, Tribal Ventures has created a plan for how to address the reservation's poverty and to implement our community's ideas.

Plans for Tribal Resources

Despite the Tribe's needs and current social condition, I don't want to leave you with the impression that we are sitting idly until the Government meets our needs; we know better

than to do that. Instead, the Tribe is ready to implement programs and invest in businesses aimed at alleviating poverty on the reservation.

We have a diverse array of business and program development projects underway, ready to be expanded, or in the planning stages. Below are a few quick examples of these initiatives and how increased resources will help them along.

Lakota Thrifty Mart

The Tribe took over the grocery store on the reservation—Lakota Thrifty Mart—fifteen years ago. Since then, we have upgraded the facilities there to include a fresh bakery and a food court to serve the residents of Eagle Butte. The Thrifty Mart currently employs 57 people, and is consistently turning a profit. In an effort to serve other areas of the reservation, the Tribe plans to expand the Thrifty Mart to both Cherry Creek (on the west end of the reservation) and LaPlant (on the east) in the next couple of years. This will not only expand services to our residents in those parts of the reservation, but it will also create 45 new jobs. While we are producing a profit at the Lakota Thrifty Mart, it isn't large enough to get the other stores off the ground as soon as we'd like. JTAC funds would enable us to get these projects going sooner.

Diabetes Treatment Center

Like many reservations, Cheyenne River has a very high incidence of diabetes among our people. Despite the IHS responsibility to provide health care to our community, diabetes is at epidemic proportions. Accordingly, the Tribe plans to construct and operate a diabetes treatment center alongside our wellness facilities. We are currently in the planning stages of the project, but are ready to begin construction and service delivery as soon as we can put capital into the project. Waiting until 2011 for JTAC funding would prevent us from moving forward to provide a solution to one our reservation's major problems.

Education

We've identified our two priorities as infrastructure development and education. When we were holding our planning sessions, we spoke to almost all the young adults on our reservation. We found that they wanted to stay at home, but that the job prospects and educational opportunities were too limiting. As a result, we'd like to use our funding to train our young people — provide them an education — as an inducement to stay on the reservation. Our population is overwhelmingly young — almost half are under 25 years-old — we must act as soon as possible to ensure that we don't lose a generation because of lack of opportunity.

Infrastructure Development

We have identified that economic development requires infrastructure. While the federal government has an obligation to the Tribe to provide roads, drinking water, water treatment, and other infrastructure, the Tribe has a role too, and the JTAC funds could be used to leverage infrastructure improvements. For example, the Tribe has initiated discussions with Merrill Lynch to use JTAC funds to finance an advance funded roads construction effort, similar to an advanced funded road project that the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe did using some of its JTAC funds.

Of course, there are just examples of the several plans we are ready to implement. We hope to create a cultural center, to enter the energy industry with wind turbines, to start a credit union, to expand our hotel, to develop tourism, and to create partnerships with private entrepreneurs who realize the opportunity Cheyenne River presents. We can no longer wait to develop our economy, communities, and families in a piecemeal fashion. We must have multiple strategies that are linked to establishing a stable economy, reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for our reservation families; we need access to the resources promised under JTAC.

Specifically the JTAC funds when applied to strategic activities/projects will result in

- Increasing the assets of the Tribe, community and our families
- Creating economic opportunities for our families
- Creating education opportunities for our tribal members
- Development of comprehensive social and health programs
- Continuing to increase the capacity of our tribal government to develop long-term strategies that will result in sustainable economic, community and social development.

I would like to note, however, that payments to individual landowners that the Tribe is seeking will also do a lot to alleviate poverty on the reservation. Obviously, the payments will directly counteract the "loss of assets" aspect of poverty and—combined with financial literacy education and other advising—will serve to alleviate both situational and generational poverty as well. Tribal landowners and the heirs who receive these payments will have the capital to invest in both their families and their communities. Some may choose to become business owners that employ other tribal members, and some may choose to use the funds for their or their family's education. As President Kennedy said, "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Mr. Chairman and members of the Tribal Council thank you for scheduling this hearing and gathering recommendations from tribal entities and tribal members regarding the urgent need for accessing our JTAC funds.