



Testimony By: Martin Sensmeier

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Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Udall, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. My name is Martin Sensmeier of Tlingit, Koyukon-Athabascan, and Irish descent. I was raised in a Tlingit Coastal Community in Southeast Alaska and grew up learning and participating in the traditions of my Tribe. As a Native American actor and Native ambassador of Boys & Girls Clubs of America, it is honor to be here today to advocate for wellness among Native people of all Nations, focusing largely on youth.

Growing up, I attended the Boys & Girls Club of Alaska and learned early the benefits of a healthy and active lifestyle. Health is not just about physical and medical, it also impacts how young people cope with emotional and mental health. Throughout my life and career as an actor it has been important to maintain these habits. I am privileged to be an Ambassador for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and I am a member of the Native Wellness Institute. These platforms have provided an opportunity to reach out to more youth and play a role as a mentor and advocate promoting healthy life styles for our Native youth.

As a former Club kid, I can testify to how Boys & Girls Clubs on Native Lands are working to decrease the high rates of diabetes and obesity in Indian communities through physical activities, nutrition, and education. For 25 years, Boys & Girls Clubs of America has established an enduring presence on Native lands and has committed to improving the capacity of Boys & Girls Clubs to serve these youth. Currently, there are nearly 200 Boys & Girls Clubs serving over 86,000 Native youth, from over 100 different American Indian, Alaska Native and Hawaiian communities in 27 states.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America continues its pledge to assist communities and expand youth development in Indian Country. Such efforts have been demonstrated by the establishment of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Native Services in 2013, and growth in national staff, many who are Native themselves, that work across the country to support our Club professionals. As the Nation's largest service provider to Native youth, Boys & Girls Clubs in Indian Country are committed to addressing the challenges and issues unique to Native lands through an increase in opportunities that are culturally relevant and meaningful.

While many Native youth thrive and succeed in life, as a whole they are one of our country's most vulnerable populations. Persistent issues of unemployment, poverty, physical and sexual



abuse and a host of other risk factors existing in Indian Country, have created a climate where suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse amongst tribal youth is perpetuated. There are many statistics that paint an alarming portrait of the well-being of Native youth in America today. Because time is limited, I will offer just two that we are here today to discuss.

1. Native American youth have disproportionately high rates of obesity and diabetes relative to the American populations.
2. The rate of type-2 diabetes among AI/AN youth is nearly 3 times the national average.

Research found that 12-19 year-old AI/AN youth participating in a survey consumed fruits, vegetables and dairy products less than once per day, which is below the recommended dietary allowance.

There are multiple factors that have led to the decline in physical activity and poor nutrition habits across our Native lands. On many Native lands, families are likely to purchase foods that are locally accessible, familiar and convenient to prepare, but may be lacking in nutritional value. Youth many not learn the skills and tools to prepare healthy, balanced meals at home. This contributes to obesity, malnutrition related diseases, and a pattern of poor eating habits.

Because of the relationship between diet and obesity, Clubs are promoting healthy eating behaviors that can help decrease the prevalence of obesity. Boys & Girls Clubs on Native Lands provide the greatest opportunity for impact. Boys & Girls Clubs of America's vision is to turn these Clubs into models of wellness, improving the nutrition and health of youth and families in some of our nation's most impoverished communities.

Through programs like the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Healthy Habits program that serves K-12, our Clubs empower Native youth with the knowledge and resources to adopt healthy eating habits. Healthy Habits provides outcome-driven nutrition education opportunities for Club members, which is critical to improving their health and wellness.

In 2016, 16 Boys & Girls Clubs in Indian Country from across the country representing various tribal communities provided healthy meals and nutrition education utilizing BGCA's Healthy Habits program in a culturally sensitive and age appropriate way. Lessons covered dietary guidelines, understanding food labels, identifying food groups, strategies to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, and interactive healthy meal and snack cooking demonstrations. Clubs reported that, with consistent participation in the program, youth have begun to share new information and healthy eating strategies with their families.



Native Clubs that implemented the Healthy Habits program reported progress made to promote health and wellness among youth and the greater community. Roughly 91% of participants reported maintaining or improving their nutrition and healthy habits, specifically 74% improved and 17% maintained. Successes were achieved through increasing knowledge about healthy nutritional choices, teaching how to identify healthy options in the grocery store and demonstrating healthy meal preparation. This also includes sharing lessons learned with families and community elders.

Other programs like, Triple Play, BGCA's comprehensive health and wellness program, developed in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, strives to improve the overall health of Club members ages 6-18 by increasing their daily physical activity, teaching them good nutrition and helping them develop healthy relationships. This program utilizes three components, Mind, Body and Soul. The Mind component encourages young people to eat smart through the Healthy Habits program, which covers the power of choice, calories, vitamins and minerals, the food pyramid and appropriate portion size. The Body component boosts Clubs' traditional physical activities to a higher level by providing sports and fitness activities for all youth. Body programs include six daily fitness challenges; teen Sports Clubs focused on leadership development, service and careers in athletics; and Triple Play Games Tournaments, inter-Club sectional tournaments that involve multiple team sports. The Soul component helps build positive relationships and cooperation among young people.

In addition, Clubs provide programming that incorporates tribal-focused, non-traditional sports, such as cultural dance, canoeing and archery; while nutrition programs incorporate local, cultural foods and culinary customs to ensure kids are moving and eating a balanced, healthy diet.

According to the 2013 United States Census, American Indians/Alaska Natives had a higher rate of poverty than any other racial group, which was 29% as compared to the national poverty rate of 15%. Due to high poverty rates, access to healthy food options may be limited. As such, meals and snacks provided during Club hours may be the only or last meal a child eats during the day.

Over a lifetime, the medical costs associated with childhood obesity are about \$19,000 more per child than those for a child of normal weight.¹

¹ Finkelstein, E.A., Graham, W.C.K. and Molhotra, R. (2014). "Lifetime Direct Medical Costs of Childhood Obesity," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 133, No. 5, 854-862, <http://pediatrics.aapublications.org/content/133/5/854.short>.



- Every 100 youth Boys & Girls Clubs help develop habits that enable them to maintain a healthy weight, could save as much as \$1.9 million in lifetime medical costs.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 31 % of Native Youth are obese, a rate 177% higher than that of the general population. Whereas only 30% of all U.S. youth get physical exercise every day, Boys & Girls Clubs' outcome data reports 60% of Native Club youth exercise 5 or more days per week.

For 25 years, Boys & Girls Clubs in Indian Country have proven to be a game-changer for Native youth, by helping them overcome the many societal issues and personal obstacles they face in their communities and home environments. We would not have been nearly as successful without partners like the Indian Health Services and the National Council of American Indians.

Boys & Girls Clubs will continue to play a critical role in breaking a perpetual cycle of extreme poverty, low academic performance, and significant health problems. We envision Native youth on their path to great futures, succeeding in school, becoming community leaders, assuming roles as contributing members of the workforce, and engaging in regular physical activity and good nutrition.

Boys & Girls Clubs in Indian Country have an unprecedented opportunity to help more Native youth to lead sustainable change, while embracing their culture and traditions. We believe generations of children to come will benefit from investments in programs and services, such as Boys & Girls Clubs, that help them grow into responsible adults – and that America stands to gain from the increased productivity and contributions of these future citizens and Native leaders.

Again, thank you to the committee, we appreciate your interest in this critical issue. We are happy to respond to any questions.