



**CENTER FOR NATIVE
AMERICAN YOUTH**
AT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

TESTIMONY OF VANCE HOME GUN, YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER FOR THE
CENTER FOR NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH AT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

LEGISLATIVE HEARING

SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

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Good afternoon, Chairman Barrasso, Vice Chairman Tester, and members of the Committee. My name is Vance Home Gun and I am member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Montana. I am here today to provide testimony from my position as a Youth Advisory Board member for the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony highlighting Native American youth priorities today.

I am grateful for the opportunity to sit here with these distinguished leaders and hear the priorities of various tribal organizations. The priorities of Native youth are not unlike what you will hear from these partner organizations – we want you to keep your promises to provide services to Native Americans and allow our governments to express our sovereign right to decide how best to serve our people. My role today is to tell you about priorities we hear on the ground from Native American youth. I also want to tell you about some of the issues that are most important to me and the other 2.1 million Native Americans under the age of 24 including: sovereignty, culture, language, education, child welfare and health care access, especially to mental and oral health services.

At the outset I want to lay out the overarching priorities for my testimony. These priorities are:

- (1) Adequate funding for programs that serve Native youth, especially: education, language, culture, physical and mental health, and child welfare programs.

- (2) Make it easier for tribes and tribal organizations to utilize federal grants rather than bog them down with duplicative and capacity-draining administrative requirements.
- (3) Engage with and listen to Native youth in their home communities and when they come to DC.
- (4) Make it a goal to prioritize Native youth issues in this Congress.

Positive Youth Efforts in Indian Country

I want to tell you a few stories to help you understand why investing in Native youth should not just be a priority for me and my peers, but that it should be your priority because it is an American priority.

Too often stories about Native youth focus on the negative. While we do have unique needs, which I will share more about later, Native American youth are also leaders who – when given space to lead – are changing lives and improving Indian Country and the greater United States as a whole.

I became involved with the Center for Native American Youth through their Champions for Change program. I was named a 2013 Champion for Change. The goal of this program is to reach out and lift up those youth, of which there are many, who are working to improve their communities, encourage their peers and leaders, and to promote hope! Inspired by a White House initiative, the program highlights young, inspirational leaders from Indian Country who are making a difference in tribal and urban Indian communities.

I was named a Champion for Change because as a high school student and recent graduate I worked with tribal departments, local organizations, and youth groups for over six years to help preserve the Salish language. I taught language classes at high schools and created an organization called Yoyoot Skwkwimlt (Strong Young People) that utilizes peer-to-peer methods to teach language and culture. Within a short time, I was asked to lead the language department for my tribe. Through my work, we educated 100 students and now 12 are fluent in Salish.

CNAY's inaugural class of Champions for Change also included a 14 year-old – Dahkota Brown – who created an after-school program called NERDS (Native Education Raising Dedicated Students). He saw too many of his peers dropping out of school and created a program to support and encourage his Native peers to excel in education. While high school graduation rates hover around 50 percent for Native Americans, those students involved in Dahkota's program have had a 100 percent graduation rate. The 2014 class of Champions included a 16-year-old who was recognized for successfully placing over 18,000 new books into the hands of children in need.

I believe these stories are inspiring. There is so much good news in Indian Country and there will be even more if we work together to find ways to support Native American youth and students.

Challenges and Barriers to Native Youth Success

Even so, young Native Americans across Indian Country face several significant challenges in their daily lives. More than two centuries of failed policies and chronic underfunding have led to intolerable disparities between the health and well-being of young Native Americans and that of their non-Native peers, seriously impacting their ability to reach their full potential. They are the most at-risk in terms of nearly every demographic.

- Native children have the nation's highest suicide rates and in the last decade, 2.5 times the national rate and in some communities that number is even higher.
- Over the last decade, high school graduation rates increased for all racial groups except Native Americans.
- Native Americans suffer from high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, chronic disease, and mental health issues.
- They are exposed to violence at disproportional rates and overrepresented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems

Despite those many challenges, tribal leaders, tribes and urban Indian organizations, and youth themselves throughout Indian Country are doing incredible work to serve Native Americans and provide a better future for the First Americans. And they are doing so with limited or no resources as a result of policies that are not in line with the federal government's trust responsibility.

A prime example of this is the simple fact that the funding for federal programs and services for Native Americans is discretionary, rather than mandatory, meaning public safety, education, child welfare, housing, language programs, and healthcare are all susceptible to budget cuts.

These programs and services, which are meant to provide for the basic needs of Native Americans, and which are guaranteed through treaties – not handouts but treaties, transactions with the federal government. Our priorities are simple: adequate and just funding for the programs and services we were promised.

In addition to underfunding, the system of federal programs serving Native youth is complex and even the federal agencies and Administration themselves are confused about what programs are available, where and how to get the funding, and limited in terms of flexibility and holistic services. If the federal agencies and Administration are confused by their matrix of programs, won't tribal communities and youth programs be just as confused or more?

It can be very difficult for communities to know what services and funding are available and there is little flexibility to break down those silos and make it easier to serve their people. Another challenge is that oftentimes tribal nations and urban Indian programs receive numerous federal grants with unpredictable funding streams or only a few years in length, meaning that by the time the programs are running well and showing positive results, the grant ends. In addition, tribal nations and urban programs are burdened with several reporting requirements that require staff time that could be used more effectively to serve Native youth and other community

members. Allowing for flexibility by combining reporting requirements for federal funding would ensure that tribes will spend more time providing valuable services.

The Center for Native American Youth has mapped out federal programs and services that touch the lives of Native youth. We attached it to my testimony. I hope this can be a roadmap to see the programs that impact our lives. I hope you will prioritize them and ensure they are properly funded.

Native Youth Voices

The Center for Native American Youth remains committed to learning from and listening to Native youth, tribal nations and urban Indian community perspectives. We directly engage students in roundtable discussions while visiting their communities and homes. I have participated in a number of these events myself – traveling to the Rosebud Sioux in South Dakota, the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw reservations in Oregon, and the Wilton Miwok Rancheria in California. To date the organization has facilitated 101 listening sessions in 21 states with more than 3,800 youth in order to gather young people’s priorities and perspectives on important issues. I will share a little bit about what we hear as top priorities for youth but I encourage you to read our annual Voices of Native Youth report that summarizes the issues that young people face in their communities. Here are some of the key findings from 2014 and issues that young Native Americans have asked us to prioritize in 2015.

Youth Engagement

A consistent and clear priority heard from young people is the need to be engaged and have safe places to go outside of school, particularly on the weekends and during summer months. A number of participants mentioned the increase of disruptive gang activity in tribal nation communities is a result of the lack of available extracurricular activities. Youth have expressed that involvement in gangs in urban areas often transfers home to the reservation bringing with it violence, drug use and other crimes. Without safe environments and positive activities to engage youth, like after-school programs offered in evenings and on weekends, there are concerns that at-risk youth will continue to turn to gangs as an outlet for their frustrations and for a sense of a belonging.

Youth participants stressed the desire to see more outlets, including cultural events, athletics, and other recreational activities in tribal nation communities. Yet, there is too often a lack of funding for these types of positive activities. Transportation is also a big priority for Native American youth because they often lack transportation to travel to such activities, to receive health care, to obtain groceries, or to visit family.

When budgets are cut, extracurricular programs and transportation services are often the first things to go. Funding for youth programs and transportation is an important priority for you to consider for improving the lives of Native youth. Without programs to engage youth, they will continue to fall victim to gangs, drugs, alcohol and other negative activities.

Education

Many Native American youth believe that education is critical to the well-being of their tribal nations and urban Indian communities and also that higher education is connected to future success of Indian Country. Native American students want culturally-appropriate student services, more Native teachers, tribally-run schools in their communities, and the integration of Native American studies into institutional curriculum. They believe these improvements will enable them and their Native peers to be successful. Native youth have identified the following barriers to attaining higher education:

- Lack of access to financial aid and difficulty finding information about financial assistance,
- Limited tutoring and other forms of academic support like after-school programs,
- Difficult school environments, including:
 - lack of infrastructure and diversity of teaching staff;
 - too few teachers;
 - lack of support from school administration and family; and
 - too few connections with community and culture.

Racial discrimination persists as a barrier to academic success for Native youth. During 2014 roundtable discussions, Native youth highlighted negative stereotyping as a major concern at school in addition to bullying and discrimination. Native participants noted that in-school bullying between Native and non-Native students, including cyber bullying, occurs frequently. One experience in the Southwest was shared about a young Native male having his long braids cut off by non-Native peers during a school bus ride. Earlier this school year, a Native boy in Texas was sent home for having long hair. Youth believe that these racist attitudes and behaviors are especially present in urban areas.

We hear Native youth asking for positive mentors and role models to help them stay focused and provide guidance throughout their education and career path. The need for supportive school environments, including encouragement throughout the education system and support in identifying, applying for, and managing scholarships and financial aid are all key education priorities for Native American students.

Health

In every roundtable discussion, health and wellness issues, including healthy lifestyle promotion, as well as challenges like alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, and teen pregnancy were raised by students. The persistent underfunding of the Indian Health Service, which is the primary agency charged with providing health care to Native Americans, makes it increasingly difficult to meet basic health needs, much less proactively address health challenges throughout Indian Country.

Native youth and our communities need access to quality, safe health care, especially primary, mental, and oral health care. Yet, what is exciting for me as a Native youth is that tribal nations are leaders in developing innovative, exciting health care programs that help address these health care needs. Indian Country can serve as a model for all communities. Below are a few examples.

In my tribal community, we have worked together to address mental health needs, despite historic efforts of the federal government to end our culture, by reaching out to elders and revitalizing our language and culture. I was recruited by my tribe to learn and teach our Native language. Through programs like these, we have provided youth with an opportunity to connect to who they are and where they come from. Addressing the mental health needs of Native youth requires us to build traditional, cultural programs and we are already seeing success in our reservation.

Another example are the community, behavioral and dental health aide programs created by Alaska tribes over ten years ago. Native youth experience oral disease rates that far surpass US averages and over half of Native youth live in what are called dental shortage areas, meaning that there are not enough dentists to serve the population size. Alaska tribes were not going to wait around for the federal government to solve the program for them, so they built a program modeled off of what every other industrialized nation already has – a mid-level dental provider. Thanks to these tribal endeavors, there are Native villages with cavity-free children and healthier communities for the first time in decades.

Native youth want what everyone wants – for our communities to be healthy and for our tribal leadership to have the ability to make the best decisions for us. Across the country we are leading movements and working together to raise our voices and promote tribal community solutions to health problems, including successful workforce models developed in Alaska. Sharing our stories is one way we can help. Recently, many Native youth are getting published in national and local news outlets to share their stories and perspectives on tribal initiatives addressing oral health needs. While stories like youth waiting months for care and trying to pull out their own teeth are sad and difficult to hear, it is important that they are told. Native youth voices tell of our simple need and right to have equitable health care and healthy smiles we can be proud of.

Child Welfare

Addressing the distinct needs and priorities of Native foster youth was a priority issue in several of our youth convenings last year. Native youth are overrepresented in foster care and many young people are being separated from their tribal communities despite laws to prevent such placements. Recognizing this, youth and families talked about the importance of keeping siblings together in foster homes, especially current or former foster children. Throughout conversations, the need to place youth with relatives or Native foster homes to provide continuity of culture and community familiarity was expressed. Native foster children also described a need to improve the public education experience for those in foster care, since education is often difficult to navigate for foster youth and can be unwelcoming to Native youth, resulting in racism and re-traumatization for Native foster children. Educational assistance and specific programs for foster youth were highlighted as necessary supports to ensure their future success.

Culture

Youth are very interested in learning more about their language and culture from tribal elders. Many say they would like to see more young tribal members speaking their Native language and practicing traditional ways of life. Although resources are limited to support cultural and language programs, many young Native Americans identify culture and language as protective factors that help them in overcoming the numerous challenges (highlighted above) experienced by Native youth. Youth also view contemporary and traditional arts as important for healthy communities, which give them a positive outlet. Youth have also expressed the desire to learn more about traditional food systems and how to prepare traditional meals, an interest which could ultimately help improve the health of Native Americans. Numerous participants brought up the need for incorporation of their culture and traditional and contemporary arts in the educational system.

Conclusion

It is also important to note that there are many other partners helping to reach out to Native American youth, which can be helpful to you as you work to make them a priority in the 114th Congress. Tribal leaders are working valiantly every day to try to ensure their children have equal and fair opportunities to succeed. Yet, they are hamstrung in terms of resources. As a Native youth, I ask you to work with tribal governments and ensure they are rightfully consulted.

Second, the organizations you heard from today – the National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Child Welfare Association, National Indian Health Board, and National Indian Education Association –are leading an effort to create a Native Children’s Agenda called First Kids First. Nike’s N7 Programs have donated more than \$3 million through grants to Native youth programs across the U.S. since 2009. N7’s contributions have impacted more than 200,000 Native youth to date, with a goal of reaching 2 million kids by 2020.

Casey Family Programs, a national foundation and current partner of the Center for Native American Youth, works in 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to influence long-lasting improvements with regards to the safety and success of children, families and communities. They have an entire team of individuals in the Indian Child Welfare Program dedicated to improving the lives of Native American children.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a national foundation, has made incredibly generous and significant investments in tribal communities and is supporting efforts to create a national bipartisan focus on children and their families, as well as growing support for tribal-led solutions to help each and every native child thrive.

Having had the tremendous opportunity of meeting many Native American Youth throughout Indian Country, I know that we are still fighters, hunters, and warriors. I hear time and time again from the youth that our language and culture must survive. Only we can ensure its survival. With the revitalization of our languages and cultures comes pride in who we are as a people. Western education is also a must for our future survival, as is taking good care of our bodies through fitness and diet. We need to do these things while still living our way of life that is unique to us. Native youth want to be a part of this great country and have the same privileges as all youth have.

Ultimately the message I have for you, distinguished members of the Committee, is simple: prioritize and invest in Native American youth. Listen to us and listen to our tribal and urban leaders. Support our priorities with proper funding of critical and basic services to our people – health care, education, social services, and community safety – and do not create barriers that make it more difficult to serve our own communities. Reach out to Native American youth; ask us what we think and find ways to help us achieve our dreams. I know there are many issues that come across your desk, but I challenge you to prioritize Native youth this Congress. We all have the same goal of creating a healthier, more prosperous, Indian Country and United States of America, and Native youth want to work alongside you as we reach that goal.