



CHEROKEE NATION

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Written Testimony of Chad Smith, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation Committee on Financial Services Subcommittee on for Interior and Related Agencies

My name is Chadwick "Corntassel" Smith and I am the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to describe the things happening in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains of Oklahoma.

One of the highlights of being Chief is being able to visit a remote location hidden in the hills. Even before you are able to see what is happening, you hear hammering, sawing, the humming of a generator- all interspersed with the sound of the Cherokee language being spoken: You hear laughter and children playing in the nearby woods. These are the sounds of a house being built in a Cherokee Community by a Cherokee Community.

Houses are built with materials purchased by Cherokee Nation using federal housing NAHASDA funds. Community members provide the labor. Construction supervision is provided by the Cherokee Nation through USDA funds, as well as tribal funds.

I know to wear my work clothes when I visit one of these sites because I will be admonished by the Community members to "make myself useful". I will be expected to pick up a hammer or a saw and get to work.

A stable, flexible funding source such as NAHASDA allows Cherokee Nation to determine what works best for our members. It is very important to put our tribal citizens in a situation where they can rebuild their communities, acquire new capacities and expand their capabilities to help themselves.

The leadership of Cherokee Nation can "make ourselves useful" by thinking strategically about how to use our resources in a manner that enhances opportunities for tribal citizens to help themselves. By thinking in a broader context, Cherokee Nation seeks to build people- not just physical structures.

One of our self-help participants is a full blood Cherokee in his mid-40's who has caught chickens for a processing plant all his life. This is back-breaking work that is demanding and often physically-debilitating through the years. This man often puts in an 8 to 10 hour work day catching chickens. He then helps build housing for Cherokee Communities for another 4 to 6 hours that same day. He has just learned how to use a tape measure and now thinks he might want to build houses for a living. He wants to volunteer to assist and to teach other Cherokees

what he has learned. Cherokee Nation would like to see more instances such as this- to make our limited funding go further- to create an epidemic of this type of excitement and activity. Our tribal citizens are creating efficiencies that will stretch our limited funding further, which helps Cherokee Nation to more adequately and efficiently meet our communities' housing needs.

The Cherokee Nation has used NAHASDA in many other strategic ways to promote capacity building and housing opportunities. We fund Individual Development Accounts or IDA's that match the private savings of individuals dollar-for-dollar, or sometimes more, for the purpose of homeownership or business development for residents of federally assisted housing.

We provide "materials only" for low income individuals who need to rehabilitate their privately-owned homes; We have trained and certified staff to eliminate lead-base paint hazards in the housing of low-income Indians; We are utilizing a Rural Housing and Economic Development Grant to establish a structural insulated panel or SIP manufacturing facility; We are exploring the latest methods, technologies, and materials to more efficiently construct decent, safe, durable, safe, and affordable housing; We provide rental assistance to thousands of families, along with case management services when needed; We are exploring the idea of limiting the time residents can receive the rental assistance subsidy, and are planning to provide job training, money management education, and other services to enhance the citizens' ability to become self-sufficient; We are focusing on the youth that currently live in assisted housing and are promoting self-sufficiency for their futures by enhancing their leadership skills and offering entrepreneurship training and financial literacy classes; All of these initiatives will allow Cherokee Nation to house more of the neediest.

Cherokee Nation has leveraged resources, such as The Low Income Housing Tax Credit, to develop several projects. We are the largest user of the loan guarantees under Title VI of NAHASDA, nearing the end of our second year of participation which gave us \$50 million, which has been used for the provision of over 400 houses to Indian families. Cherokee Nation is exploring the option to ask for additional loan guarantees, since relatively few tribes have utilized this valuable resource. We plan to aggressively market not only Section 184 loan guarantees, but also USDA's 502 program to our citizens.

Cherokee Nation has built or acquired over 1,000 homeownership units in the last 3 years through NAHASDA block grant funds, Title VI, and other funds. We have attempted to create a balance between creating programs to serve the neediest and facilitating the development of the private housing market for those ready for homeownership. Cherokee Nation has a uniform principle for all of our programs: Build the capacity of our tribal citizens in every way possible.

I hope this gives you some sense of what an Indian Tribe can do through self-determination and self-governance when given an opportunity, such as that afforded under NAHASDA. There are some issues that, if resolved, would better enable Cherokee Nation to strategically address the housing needs of our members. The issues include a.) improving and/or coordinating processes to allocate and utilize Indian Health Service Sanitation Facilities Construction funding, b.) standardizing the environmental review or NEPA process across federal agencies and c.) streamlining the residential leasing procedures through the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Stable, consistent funding and processes would allow us to more strategically utilize the very limited available resources.

Another example of more effective utilization of limited resources is the Indian Community Development Block Grant. As the second largest Indian Tribe in the Nation, we could better plan housing, infrastructure development, and economic opportunities if we received funding through an allocation formula like large cities under the public CDBG, or for that matter NAHASDA.

As far as specific funding, I would like to draw your attention to an area of particular concern to Cherokee Nation: illegal drug use. Oklahoma has the dubious distinction of being ranked 4th in the United States for the highest number of methamphetamine “busts” or seizures. When the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program was phased out, the monies previously set aside were instead placed in the Public Housing Capital Fund. Tribes and tribal housing authorities would have received funding for the Drug Elimination Program with such funds, but after the phase out there was never a corresponding appropriation back to NAHASDA. Tribes should be given access to these funds which were previously available through the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program.

I would also like to comment on the NAHASDA formula allocation for funding and the use of U.S. Census. The Cherokee Nation citizens and other Indians in our area are undercounted by whatever census classification or count, whether it be by “single race” or “multiple-race”. However, Census information, at this point, is the only available information collected systematically in which we have confidence and the use of which was determined through negotiated rulemaking between the tribes and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. This use of census information should be used as long as it approximates citizenship. We believe any other use of Census classifications, such as a restriction to only using “single race,” becomes purely a race-based policy rather than a “proxy” for citizenship in federally recognized tribes when the effect is to artificially underestimate the number of tribal citizens in an area. The use of the “multiple race” classification from the U.S. Census results in a more accurate estimate of the number of tribal citizens in our area, although even that number is undercounted. We support any system that is verifiable and reliable that best reflects the number of citizens of federally recognized tribes and Alaska Natives for specific formula areas.

Cherokee Nation supports any mechanism that is verifiable, reliable, and that best reflects the number of citizens of federally recognized tribes and Alaska Natives for specific formula areas.

Cherokee Nation is committed to being responsive to the needs of its members. We strive to assist federal agencies, Congress and other tribes in formulating regulations and policies that affect Indian services and programs. For example, Cherokee Nation fully participates in the process of providing comments to the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ proposed regulations. Cherokee Nation also remains active in the legislative arena, both at the state and federal levels. We have faithfully undertaken the responsibility of insuring participation and involvement in government-to-government relationships of the future.

In closing, I would like to read the mission of the Cherokee Nation:

The Mission of the Cherokee Nation is “ga du gi”:

Working together as individuals, families, and communities for a quality of life for this and future generations by promoting confidence, the tribal culture and an effective sovereign government.

Cherokee Nation citizens are also citizens of our State, of our Nation, and of the World. We know that a successful Indian Housing Program depends on our program as well as our fellow Indian tribes’ programs. We all know that by actively participating, consulting, and negotiating with federal agencies, we can truly build a successful program.

In the spirit of Ga-du-gi, we will “make ourselves useful” in any manner possible to this committee, just as you have done for the Cherokee Nation and other Indian tribes through your support of Indian programs, and Indian self-determination and self-governance.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding this issue.