

OPENING STATEMENT

I want to thank each of our witnesses for sharing their knowledge and insight for this Subcommittee’s first hearing.

As the new Chair of this Subcommittee, I must acknowledge my awe of my colleagues who’ve championed Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian issues for so many years in Congress. I especially acknowledge Chair Grijalva and our Dean of the House, Ranking Member Young, as well as my immediate predecessor Congressman Gallego.

With the historic elevation of our former colleague and my fierce New Mexican hermana Secretary Deb Haaland, this Subcommittee also stands at the cusp of history. Secretary Haaland understands issues affecting indigenous people as no one else before her could. With a Secretary of the Interior who so intimately understands both the trust responsibility and, sadly, the centuries of neglect, we have the opportunity to affect the long-lasting change the communities within the jurisdiction of this committee have been asking for. Imagine if the history books mark this period as the true transition to economic and cultural sovereignty for our communities.

I envision a productive congressional session where we work collaboratively with federal agencies and our indigenous governments and communities to address many of the structural issues that have caused the great sorrow and despair that we will hear about today.

I am honored to serve this Subcommittee as it advocates for the 2 million Indigenous peoples of this country. I was Counsel to

“A Year in Review: The State of COVID-19 in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Communities—Lessons Learned for Future Action.”

numerous Native American Tribes and their entities for 30 years. Indeed, I attended my first tribal council meeting at Secretary Haaland’s Laguna Pueblo in 1990 and my last on December 18, 2020. While I might have brought the legal expertise to the team, *I was also taught to see the different perspectives and to honor the indigenous wisdom.*

I was lucky enough to work with my tribal mentors on many groundbreaking projects, from building health clinics and infrastructure to promoting economic development and protecting cultural sites, and everything in between.

Self-determination and tribal sovereignty were the very principles upon which my daily work depended.

Today’s hearing will highlight the structural deficiencies that led to the devastating impact of Covid 19 on Native American and Indigenous communities.

A year into the pandemic, American Indian and Alaska Native populations continue to have the highest COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death rates in the country.

Native Hawaiians represent the third-highest pool of COVID-19 positive patients in the State of Hawaii.

A review of this sad year is essential for us to begin to comprehend the underlying vulnerabilities that caused such deadly disparity.

The hearing's subtitle also calls us into action.

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Our call to action in the 117th Congress must recognize that Indigenous peoples have demonstrated an incredible resilience over generations. What we will hear from our experts today, and ask leaders throughout our Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities, is: *what can Congress do to help you build upon that resiliency so that your communities are strong enough to handle both future pandemics and the current economic and climate crises we face?*

I’ve asked the witnesses to take some of their time to direct our attention to specific policies they’d recommend to build that future resiliency.

And to help us learn when visions of resiliency may look different for each community. Our work must partner with the unique traditions, culture, and history of those we serve. For example, when we hear that COVID’s devastating impacts were because of overcrowding and intergenerational homes, let’s remember, that the problem isn’t that tribal people want to keep their grandmothers close but that there is no choice but to crowd together in homes that lack basic infrastructure like water. If maintaining intergenerational households is the preferred choice, then how do we make that possible?

Perhaps, as the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo did in New Mexico, by building safe homes following traditional concepts that keep families and clans in proper proximity.

Looking forward at future hearings and bills, I’ll be asking my colleagues and our tribal and indigenous leaders to help us identify the legislation needed to build economic prosperity in

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their communities. What will it take to create economic sovereignty?

As we also turn our attention to the impact of the climate crisis on these communities, we should heed Chair Lindsey’s advice: to incorporate Native wisdom and stewardship principles in any comprehensive plan to address climate change. I also anticipate we will hold hearings and consider bills around cultural preservation and strengthening tribal sovereignty and the government to government relationship.

Because we must do more than just listen, we must commit ourselves to work in true partnership with the governmental entities that represent the communities within the jurisdiction of this committee.