

Testimony of Ryan Howard
Executive Director of the
Owens Valley Career Development Center
Before the House Committee on Ways and Means
On
“Celebrating Fathers and Families: Federal Support for Responsible Fatherhood”
June 11, 2019

Good morning Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and members of the Committee. I am Ryan Howard and I serve as the Executive Director of the Owens Valley Career Development Center (OVCDC).

OVCDC is a Native American tribal organization that provides education, training, and family support through a number of federal programs including Early Head Start, Native American Career and Technical Education and Tribal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). We are headquartered on the Bishop Paiute Indian Reservation in Bishop, CA, and our programs serve twelve tribes across Central and Eastern California.

At OVCDC, we see the significant impact that strong fathers contribute to family success every day, so we commend the Committee for looking into this important issue.

We developed our specific fatherhood program based on an unmet need. We realized several years ago that many of our services were tailored to our female TANF participants. This made some sense given the demographics of our caseload, which is overwhelmingly female, however we were missing engagement with our fathers receiving TANF services. Our services also broadly excluded non-custodial fathers even though research shows that non-custodial fathers have a significant impact both emotionally and financially when actively engaged with their children. We made a programmatic decision to target some specific services to our fathers by providing programming designed for them and exclusively funded through our Tribal TANF grant.

The authorizing TANF statute includes four broad purposes--one of these is to encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families. Our experience indicates that an actively involved father is a key component of a strong family, and thus we choose to allocate a significant portion of our resources towards this purpose. The foundation of our program is that a child's most important educators are his or her parents. It is our long term vision that by engaging fathers in understanding and practicing responsible fatherhood, we will produce more positive outcomes for the children. OVCDC encourages all

fathers who qualify for TANF to participate, including non-custodial and non-biological fathers, as they play a key role developing strong, stable and successful families.

The curriculum for our program was developed by the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association and is titled, "Fatherhood is Sacred." The course is designed for 12 two hour sessions and teaches participants to connect with their Native American heritage as they become actively involved in the lives of their families. Family is truly at the heart of Native American culture and because of that, there is no other duty or role in life more important than fatherhood.

The curriculum is designed to teach five core concepts: The Creator, choice, being teachable, wisdom and service. While the curriculum provides a solid base of instruction, it is easily adaptable and exportable to different tribal communities by allowing for the incorporation of local traditional beliefs and teachings. The course is a mixture of lecture and interactive discussion with participants.

One area I'd like to highlight is the "Service" component. We try to demonstrate that engaging in service with one's family is not just personally rewarding, but also strengthens the family and community bonds and improves the world around you. To this end, our fatherhood groups have worked with local Forest Service offices to repair fencing at a campground. Another group built wooden benches at a tribal ceremonial ground. These group service activities strengthened the concept of service learning by giving our fatherhood groups a collective project and purpose.

While we believe our program is incredibly effective, a lack of resources has limited our ability to reach more families. We have received requests for this course from our local law enforcement agencies, from local prisons, and from child welfare agencies, but our TANF grant is insufficient to meet the needs of these communities with whom engagement would clearly be effective and beneficial. To expand our programming, we would need to apply for a specific fatherhood grant, but we lack the grant writing expertise and would be forced to compete with States and other national non-profits for this competitive funding. Even though statewide programs may be effective, the reality is that they often do not reach into tribal communities where this help is needed the most.

Additional resources would also help us better evaluate the long term effectiveness of our program. OVCD does use a portion of our funding to administer a pre- and post-participation survey, and we collect written testimonials. Through these surveys, our fathers indicate they have developed the ability to better control anger, have become more involved with their children through play and other activities,

have started to talk with their children on a regular basis and show more positive behavior towards the child's other parent. Anecdotally, we believe these programs have resulted in reduced recidivism, but we lack the resources to prove this. We have not been able to conduct more intense or long-term assessments, which would be valuable information to show the true effectiveness of this programming and help make future grant applications more competitive.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this Committee and thank you for your continued support of fatherhood programs like ours. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.