



## Testimony of Angella Dancer, Sr. Director of Home Visitation, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

### United States House Committee on Ways and Means *Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support*

March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022

#### “Hearing on Improving Family Outcomes Through Home Visiting”

Thank you, Chairman Davis and Ranking Member Walorski, as well as members of the Worker and Family Support Ways and Means Subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify. Greetings on behalf of Chief Gary Batton and Assistant Chief Jack Austin, Jr., and it is my honor to testify on behalf of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

My name is Angella Dancer. I am the Sr. Director of Home Visitation Services for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, a federally recognized Tribal government with a tribal reservation consisting of 13 counties in rural southeastern Oklahoma. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has more than 205,000 tribal members, and it is the third largest tribe in the United States.

The home visitation programs I oversee within our tribal Nation strive to improve family outcomes for Native American families with very young children within our communities through educating caregivers on a wide range of subjects including child health, family well-being, educational attainment, and poverty. These programs are made possible by Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visitation (TMIECHV) grant funding from the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Childcare, Department of Health and Human Services.

I have been an employee of the Choctaw Nation for over 25 years. Early in my career, I was employed by the Nation’s Children and Family Services where I worked with families that were within the tribal child welfare system. My most dreaded and heartbreaking task was having to remove tribal children from their homes and families due to the home being unsafe or unfit. Despite the reason for removal, it was always heart-wrenching to have to strip a scared, distraught child from the only family and home that he or she knew. I began to see an overwhelming need for services that could break the cycles of child abuse and poverty before these problems became compounded and such extreme interventions became necessary. We needed to make a difference for our next generation of families through a wrap-around, holistic approach.

In 2006, I found my opportunity to make a real difference for our children and families when the Choctaw Nation was awarded a grant to provide home visitation services to families who were expecting or had recently had a child, facilitating the creation of the preventative services

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that were critically needed. Though the program did not utilize “evidence-based” approaches, it was the first step towards building the Nations’ home visitation services to where they are today.

#### Adapting Evidence-Based Models to Meet the Needs of Our Community

In 2010, the Choctaw Nation received our first TMIECHV grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. TMIECHV funding required evidence-based approaches that went above and beyond the promising practices and effectiveness evaluations of the previous program. The first grant task was to complete a detailed, comprehensive needs assessment focusing on the needs of families with young children across the Choctaw Nation. This was accomplished through interviews with staff from other early childhood programs; surveys of professionals, parents, and community members; and focus groups at daycare and Head Start facilities. Results of these efforts showed the areas where we needed to focus our home visitation efforts. The areas of need were found to be 1) a lack of parent engagement; 2) parents having little actual knowledge of child development; and, 3) school readiness of tribal children at the time of school entry.

The Nation chose to address these needs by implementing the Parents As Teachers curriculum. The curriculum was customized to our Choctaw communities by providing twice monthly one-on-one home visits, monthly group meetings which include cultural components, and assessments that meet the needs of our families. Families are enrolled for two years. Under TMIECHV funding, Choctaw Nation has provided home visitation service to over 600 tribal families.

TMIECHV allows tribes to incorporate their unique culture as components of their programs, which vastly improves the relevancy to the community and the sustainability of the program. Families feel a stronger connection to the program, and are more likely to complete the 24-month program. Family knowledge of Choctaw culture ranges from highly traditional to families with little to no knowledge of Choctaw culture. Choctaw Nation is in a state of cultural awakening and revitalization, and the Parents as Teachers curriculum has allowed us to provide cultural lessons and adaptations that meets the needs of each individual family, tailored to their level of cultural knowledge, through home visits and group connections. Some examples include, but are not limited to, Choctaw language and traditions, storytelling, and group cultural activities such as dance, stickball, pottery, beading, and preparation of traditional foods. We have also incorporated culture by exclusively hiring tribal members as Home Visitors to increase the trustworthiness of our staff to the families they are serving. TMIECHV also encourages grantees to choose their own assessments for performance measures as long as they are proven to be valid and reliable, which has allowed us to align assessments with the values of our community.

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### The Importance of Home Visiting in Our Community

Our population suffers from immense “generational trauma” stemming from the loss of our tribal ancestors during the forceable removal of the Choctaw Nation from our ancestral homelands in the southeast United States to Oklahoma which continued with the removal of our tribal children from their homes during the boarding school era. Our people have suffered a devastating loss of basic child-rearing practices. Tribal MIECHV allowed us to maximize resources and networks to assist parents and grandparents to overcome their complex historical challenges in new and innovative ways. Our families have a diversity of needs that include basic tangible needs such as food, diapers, transportation, and adequate housing, and extend to more complex challenges including educational tools, job readiness skills, and self-sufficiency. Home visitation works to address all the needs of the individual family.

The success of the TMIECHV approach is evident. Here are the stories of two families who have benefited from TMIECHV home visiting:

Chelsea was just a teenager when she enrolled in our home visitation program. After giving birth to her son, she continued to meet with her home visitor each month. Through child development assessments, we noticed that her son was not quite on task for his age. After re-testing by her home visitor, Chelsea was encouraged to take the results from the screening to her pediatrician to make sure her son did not have an underlying issue. After meeting with the pediatrician and specialized testing, her son was diagnosed with Phelan McDermid Syndrome, a rare genetic condition caused by a deletion or other structural change of the terminal end of chromosome 22. Because of early diagnosis, the prognosis for him is good. Chelsea would have not known there was a reason for concern until much later if it had not been for the TMIECHV program.

Another client, Hailey, was 18 years old and pregnant when she first enrolled in home visiting. She and her boyfriend were living in their car at the time. Her home visitor worked with the family to find housing, to locate resources for deposits, and to provide for essentials. Today, Hailey, her 2-year-old daughter, and her boyfriend have an apartment, are gainfully employed, and are expecting their second child. This family has broken the cycle of poverty with the assistance of the TMIECHV program.

### Difficulties of Re-Competing with Other Native Tribes and Tribal Organizations

The Choctaw Nation shares many socioeconomic challenges with other tribes: generational trauma, extreme levels of poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment, to name a few. Therefore, competing for funding against our brothers/sisters from other tribes does not seem to be justice as all our families can benefit from home visiting services. Given the proven success of this program, non-competitive, reliable funding would contribute greatly to Tribes’ ability to plan and sustain the program in their communities.

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Throughout my many years working in the Choctaw Nation, I have personally witnessed the debilitating, long-lasting effects of early childhood trauma and its effects on child development and the revictimization of families. It is critical that we as a Nation, must invest in quality, culturally relevant home visitation services to assist all families in healing historical wounds and making a lasting impact on the families being served. We can help reverse negative generational trends in child health, family well-being, educational attainment, and we can help break the cycle of poverty, child abuse, and neglect within our Native American communities.

#### Need for Increased Tribal Set-Aside

Funding provided by TMIECHV has allowed the Choctaw Nation to provide culturally relevant, evidence-based home visitation practices that address critical needs of our children and families, such as maternal and child health, early learning, family support, mental health and well-being, and child abuse and neglect prevention. Without critical funding for home visitation, the Choctaw Nation would not be able to provide our most vulnerable, at-risk population with these services. Although we have been successful with the funds available over the last 11 years, we have only been able to serve a total of 600 families within the Choctaw Nation reservation. There are many other families that would greatly benefit from these services that we will not be able to reach unless the Tribal set-aside is increased. Investments in preventative services such as these improve quality of life for families and reduce the need for (and cost of) intervention services later when families are in crisis.

Increasing the tribal set-aside in MIECHV is an important policy change that will further the social justice and equity aims of the program. This has the opportunity to make a lasting impact on families by helping reverse negative generational trends in child health, family well-being, educational attainment, and poverty within more Native American communities.

Yakokeye (Thank you) again for the opportunity to testify on this important program and what it means for our Choctaw families. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.