

# OMAHA TRIBE OF NEBRASKA

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## U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

### Testimony on American Indian/Alaska Native Programs By Vernon Miller, Omaha Tribal Council Member, Omaha Tribe of Nebraska April 7, 2014

Good afternoon, esteemed members of the House. My name is Vernon Miller and I am a member of the Tribal Council of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska. I was elected to this position in November, 2013 and am here on behalf of our Chairman, Clifford Wolfe, Jr. Prior to my election, I was a High School Business Teacher at Omaha Nation Public Schools for 8 years. Because of my professional and recent tribal council experience, I have some personal knowledge of how the budgets of the BIA and the IHS impact our tribal members.

We are a federally recognized tribe living on the Omaha Reservation in northeastern Nebraska and western Iowa. Our total land area is approximately 307 square miles with a population of approximately 6,699. We have an unemployment rate of 69%. The Omaha Tribe has suffered for years as a result of dishonored treaties, which translates to inadequate funding, high poverty rates, and the loss of much of our land base due to the failed federal policy of allotment. Our rural location, combined with the fact that it was only about 4 decades ago that we were able to run our own governmental programs, has made it very challenging for the Tribe to develop viable economic ventures to fund critical government and social programs.

Our Tribal Community more recently has been devastated through 2 natural disasters due to climate change. Through the 2011 man-made flood we lost deer and buffalo due to disease that was brought on by the debris brought down the river, and we watched our nutrients float away, and then prayed for our struggling tribal farm and our crops for the next season. We cannot purchase nutrients that would replace those lost. Even though we are in the national agricultural or farm belt we do not receive agricultural dollars in our TPA (tribal priority allocation) funding. Although we sit on the banks of our Missouri river, we are unable to use this natural resource for any purpose unless we find a way to circumvent the US Army Corps of Engineers for its use. Residentially, we do not have federal dollars to help pay for our water systems, to repair or provide water to our people. Our Contract Support dollars have been warmly received at 100% this year finally, but with the decision that we take it out of funds that we are already provided with. Our tribe has faced challenge after challenge, with flood and recovery, with a tornado that devastated homes this past summer in 2012, unemployment brings on frustration, brings on depression, and ultimately criminal activity. Our people are faced with the same drug and alcohol abuse you find in the overcrowded over populated cities of America, yet we do not have a youth detention facility. Because I bring these challenges to you, I pray that you hear the



reality of the lives we the Omaha who live back in Nebraska are living with. I traveled all this way here today because our needs are great, because I honor the opportunity to meet with the leaders of our United States, and because I too am a leader. Our people do not receive HIP dollars, even though some are home owners we have vacant houses falling down because we have no true economy to help us help ourselves, no money to repair a broken water pipe, or a broken water heater. Through all of this we are still Omaha, those that go "against the current", put our heads down and fight to get ahead, we are still strong today, and live together as a united people, enjoy our traditions, and our Omaha ways, share meals together, share our medicine in a sacred circles and pray to the same God that you do.

We operate Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Indian Health Service (IHS) programs, most of which are crucial to our tribal members. In addition to providing needed services, these programs also offer sorely needed employment for both Indian and non-Indians. These programs are offered 365 days a year using only federal funds and our limited tribal income, with very little assistance from the State of Nebraska. Current and past BIA and IHS funding have never met our full basic needs.

Like most Tribes, we have inadequate law enforcement and court services on our reservation. With regard to the Tribal Court, it relies on grant-funded programs to meet the core court functions such as clerical staff and for probation. The building that houses our Court and incarceration facility is literally falling apart. Several years ago, we completed the planning process for both juvenile rehabilitation and adult correctional facilities to the point that both projects were "shovel ready", only to learn that funding is no longer available.

With regard to law enforcement, for at least the last decade, we have lacked a dedicated criminal investigator. As a result, we lack the resources to investigate and ultimately prosecute in areas such as "white-collar crime", because any resources we have must be dedicated to crimes of violence. We continue to wrestle with the issue of juvenile detention; in this regard, the closest juvenile detention facility available for long -term detention is located one thousand miles from Macy, on the Ute Mountain Reservation in Colorado. Thus, we are burdened with not only the cost of transportation, but also the loss of and expense for police officers on travel.

With this in mind, I join with the National Congress of American Indians and urge you to allocate additional funding to the BIA to increase base funding for tribal courts, and to finally fund the Indian Tribal Justice Act at \$50 million over the FY 2010 funding level of \$328 million, including an increase in funds for officer recruitment and training for tribal detention facilities operations and maintenance. Further, I ask that Congress reauthorize tribal funding under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act and restore FY 2010 levels of \$25 million in funding for the Tribal Youth Program under the Juvenile Accountability Block Grants program. Finally, I wish to voice my support for the extension of the US Attorney's Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault/Child Abuse prosecution program in Indian Country, which brought in a dedicated Special Assistant U.S. Attorney to deal with solely Indian country cases. This is a grant-funded program, which is in its last year and has made significant impact in addressing serious or repeat offenders.

In closing, the Omaha and many other Tribes are struggling to operate our BIA and IHS budgets, on the limited dollars we are provided, and our job is made a thousand times more difficult when we are forced to operate in these conditions. Continuing resolutions result in delayed awards, and delayed awards decrease the effectiveness of our programs and services.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me this time and this opportunity to speak.