

# Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma



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## TESTIMONY OF SARA JANE SMALLWOOD CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA

**Before the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies**

**Native American Public Witness Hearings**

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Halito sv hochifot Sara Jane Smallwood. Choctaw Nation aminti li. Promise Zone ahofanti li tuk. Vm olhti yvt skvlli iksho hoke. Vm olhti yvt skvlli iksho kvt na moma ka in shahli. Atuko Promise Zone aiimma anumpoli li kvt vm achukma hoke.

Hello my name is Sara Jane Smallwood. I am from the Choctaw Nation. I grew up within the Promise Zone in the poorest county. It is my pleasure to be here to discuss the Promise Zone with you.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am the Director of Public Policy and Promise Zone Coordinator for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In this role, I oversee the implementation of the White House Promise Zone Initiative for the Choctaw Nation - the only Promise Zone currently administered by a tribal government. On behalf of my Chief, the Honorable Gary Batton, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the achievements of the Choctaw Nation Promise Zone, our challenges, and recommendations on how to ensure the successful implementation of the Promise Zone initiative in Fiscal Year ("FY") 2017 and beyond.

The Promise Zone designation is an Obama Administration initiative to focus federal agency resources in twenty (20) of the most economically disadvantaged areas in America. To qualify for this designation, urban designees must have an overall poverty or extremely low income rate of 32.5 percent or greater. Rural designees must have a poverty rate at or above 20 percent with at least one census tract at or above 30 percent. To-date, thirteen (13) Promise Zones have been designated, with the remaining seven to be identified by mid-2016. Two designations directly impacting Indian Country have been included among the Promise Zone designations, along with rural Appalachia and inner city areas.

### **Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Promise Zone**

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma was designated as the first tribal Promise Zone, encompassing over 11,000 square miles, in January 2014. At the time of our application, all of the 10.5 counties located within the Choctaw Nation fell into the U.S. Department of

Agriculture's ("USDA") extremely high poverty designation, two (2) of these counties have the highest unemployment rates in Oklahoma, twenty (20) percent of adults in the Promise Zone have less than a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education, fifteen (15) percent lack basic literacy skills, and southeastern Oklahoma has the highest rate of violent deaths in the State. However, through the leadership and record success of Choctaw Nation, we are using the Promise Zone designation to combat these statistics by establishing strong partnerships with federal, state, and local governments, community leaders, and non-profits.

In 2013, the Choctaw Nation Promise Zone had thirty-nine (39) Promise Zone partners who supported our application to become a Promise Zone. The Promise Zone currently engages with hundreds of local educational, business, nonprofit, and municipal partners to move southeastern Oklahoma forward. Through this collaboration, the Choctaw Nation Promise Zone has been able to invest \$80 million in southeastern Oklahoma during the first two (2) years of the initiative. Investments include a \$15 million grant to partner with local HeadStart centers and childcare providers to expand access to high-quality, comprehensive services to low-income infants and toddlers; and a ConnectHome pilot site by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") – a nationwide announcement made right in the heart of Choctaw Nation by President Barack Obama in July 2015. This program brings together HUD, USDA, and other public and private sector partners in an effort to connect Choctaw citizens in public housing with affordable internet service, often as low as \$9.95 month. Within one (1) year of the President's historic announcement, 100 percent of all K-12 students living within the Choctaw Nation Housing Authority's households will have access to internet to support their educational growth and development.

## **Promise Zone Challenges**

The Choctaw Nation Promise Zone and our partners have worked diligently to implement the Promise Zone initiative and empower our communities. However, there are several challenges the Choctaw Nation Promise Zone face. From recent conversations with our sister Promise Zones, we have found that these experiences are not unique to our Promise Zone.

### **1. Lack of Federal Agency Participation**

No funding is allocated to Promise Zone designees. Promise Zones are given preference points in a handful of competitive grant programs. In 2015, thirteen (13) federal agencies participated in the Promise Zone initiative, providing preferential access to forty-two (42) programs. The Choctaw Nation Promise Zone has benefited from working closely with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Education, and USDA Rural Development - the lead agency for tribal and rural Promise Zone areas.

While this is a great start, most federal agencies and their departments, especially those that have the potential to have a lasting impact on Promise Zone designees, have not been involved as lead organizations. For example, the U.S. Department of Interior is only now

slowly coming on board as a collaborative partner at the persistent request of the Choctaw Nation. In addition, the Choctaw Nation Promise Zone has faced serious obstacles in meeting the cultural and environment needs of our designation. Due to the Choctaw Nation's vast geographic service area, we have needs that can only be addressed through the collaboration and partnership of all federal agencies, especially those that directly impact Indian Country.

## **2. Lack of Information and Training and Inconsistency in Promise Zone Application**

Another challenge that the Choctaw Nation has faced is the lack of information and uniform Promise Zone implementation strategy across federal agencies. Ironically, the Choctaw Nation often has to educate federal agencies on Promise Zones and the role they play in carrying out the initiative. Even within the same federal agencies, there is a lack of consistency in Promise Zone priority and implementation. One example of this is the USDA Rural Development Distance Learning & Telemedicine grant program. Even though USDA is the lead agency for rural and tribal Promise Zones, this highly sought after funding mechanism did not include Promise Zone preference points for the first two years of the initiative. By providing feedback and communicating with USDA staff, Promise Zone priority was included in the FY 2016 application. The Choctaw Nation currently has an application being considered for this year's funding. While we are appreciative of the dedication of USDA and other federal agencies who have been working with Promise Zones to make these important changes, the lack of consistency amongst programs is frustrating for all involved. More importantly, it can be difficult to convey to our local partners who have identified areas of need and focus, only to discover they are unable to tap into much needed resources because of inconsistencies within the agency's implementation of the Promise Zone initiative.

### **Promise Zone Recommendation**

We come to you today for consideration of a recommendation that will make Promise Zone implementation smoother, more streamlined, and help fulfill the initiative's promise to Indian Country and other areas of high need. We present the following language for consideration in FY 2017 General Administrative Provisions to fully implement the Promise Zone and priority points for FY 2017.

ALL FEDERAL AGENCIES – PROMISE ZONE PREFERENCE POINTS

BILL LANGUAGE:

“Notwithstanding any other provision of law, any applicant which, as of May 1, 2016, has been designated one of the twenty (20) Promise Zone entities, shall be offered preference points or priority or special consideration in the competitive award of all funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this or any other Act for federal grant programs, technical assistance and other capacity building opportunities: Provided, That the project or activity to be funded includes specific and definable

services or benefits that will be delivered within a Promise Zone or to Promise Zone residents.”

The truth is that most of the statutes authorizing federal grant competitions effectively preclude preference points. This has sharply limited the usefulness of the Promise Zone designation, which has had little, if any, relevance to most grant award competitions during the first two (2) years of Promise Zone implementation. Without the requested bill language, the White House has concluded that it may apply Promise Zone preference points to only a handful of competitive grant application programs, a limitation that sharply curtails the potential promise of the Promise Zone initiative.

The bill language would provide preference points to the twenty (20) Promise Zone designees who apply for any federal competitive grants, technical assistance funds, and other capacity building opportunities. This statutory “notwithstanding,” across-the-board authority is required to ensure that the Promise Zone initiative is implemented as intended. This language would provide clarity and consistency across federal departments, and help the Promise Zone initiative fulfill its goals to serve high need areas.

The Choctaw Nation Promise Zone has received broad support for this request from other Promise Zones and their lead institutions. The Choctaw Nation values its partnerships with its sister Promise Zones and continues to work in solidarity to overcome the challenges Promise Zone designees face in navigating the federal bureaucracy. Today, your committee has the unique opportunity to further support and improve the Administration’s Promise Zone initiative to better meet the needs of some of our country’s neediest areas.

The Choctaw Nation is honored by this opportunity to testify before you and we appreciate your time. We look forward to engaging with you in this unique and collaborative approach to empower communities within the Choctaw Nation Promise Zone, as well as with our Promise Zone colleagues around the country. More importantly, your support will help fulfill the Promise Zone’s commitment to empowering Indian Country.

Yakoke!