

**Oral Testimony of Tehassi Hill  
Chairman  
Oneida Nation  
February 12, 2020**

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting tribal leaders to testify before you today. It is an honor to be here on behalf of more than 17,000 members of the Oneida Nation.

I am here today to advocate for a number of critical programs and policies that directly impact the Oneida Nation and Indian Country as a whole. As you know Tribes and Tribal Organizations face many challenges as identified in Broken Promises Report. In addition, both the Indian Health Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs are on the Government Accountability Office's High Risk List. Indian Country has been underfunded and underserved for too long. Below are just some of the recommendations the Oneida Nation has to improve the health, safety, and welfare for our Community.

**Section 105 (I) Leasing**

One of the fundamental trust responsibilities of the federal government is health care, and the Committee has our thanks for the substantial funding increase it provided the Indian Health Service in the appropriations measure enacted in December.

I'd like to highlight the growing use of Section 105(I) leases, through which IHS enters into a lease for facilities owned or leased by a tribe or tribal organization and used for delivery of health care services under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. Section 105(I) leases have been a great success, reimbursing tribes for the cost of providing health care facilities the IHS would otherwise have to provide. They provide much needed funds to help with maintenance and improvement of facilities we are providing to carry out our Title V Compact with the IHS. For example, the roof of our health clinic needs to be replaced and we requested funds in 2016 to assist with this project. We received notice last fall that we were approved for Backlog of Essential Maintenance, Alteration, and Repair funds for the roof replacement and are hoping that the work can begin this Spring. The Section 105 (I) leases will allow tribes to make these vital improvements in a more timely manner.

The Nation has had a compact and funding agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services since 1997 and owns and operates health care facilities serving over 10,000 patients. Our facilities are aging and deteriorating at an alarming rate and the \$306,809 we received in Maintenance and Improvement funds in FY 2019 is inadequate. That is why we decided to pursue and are in the process of finalizing Section 105 (I) leases for our facilities. This will ensure that our Community will receive the best health care in updated, safe facilities.

Unfortunately, IHS has failed to adequately plan for the widespread adoption of Section 105(I) leases and, while this Committee has increased funding for the program, IHS budget

requests have not kept pace with demand. Of the \$125 million the Committee appropriated for Section 105(l) leases in December, we understand that at least 95% is needed just to support existing leases.

Just as concerning, IHS is covering the shortfall of Section 105 (l) leasing funds by reprogramming funding intended to address cost of living increases across the IHS system. This reprogramming perpetuates health disparity in Indian Country and is an imperfect solution that must be addressed by this Committee.

In order to address this deficiency, I respectfully request the Committee take two actions:

- First, the Committee should consider creating a separate funding line for Section 105(l) leases to ensure the use of the program is fully recognized.
- Second, the Committee should classify Section 105(l) lease appropriations as separate and indefinite in the manner it did with contract support costs.

## **Self-Governance**

Next, I would like to reiterate Oneida's strong support for Tribal Self Governance—that is tribal control of the distribution and administration of federal funding.

At Oneida, we have assumed responsibility for our healthcare, education, and most BIA programs, and the result has been undeniably positive. Environmental, health and education indicators have gone up, while administrative costs have gone down. Just as important, our Tribal Government capacity has also improved. Our staff now have the knowledge, skills and experience to take on new and more complex governance operations, and they do so on a regular basis.

We thank Congress for continuing to expand the scope of programs that are eligible for self-governance, and this committee for providing funding to support tribal self-governance. The success of these initiatives reach far beyond the Oneida Nation and we all reap the benefits of their success.

## **Great Lakes Restoration Initiative**

Every culture has a story of how the world was created. Oneida Nation's creation story teaches us that everything is connected. There must be balance for the environment to thrive. It is this philosophy that led us to become a long-term partner with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

Launched in 2010, the Initiative protects and restores the largest system of fresh surface water in the world—The Great Lakes, which happens to be in our backyard. Since then, the Oneida Nation has been awarded nearly \$4.5 million for watershed improvement projects

which benefit not just our community, but the greater region. Greater detail about the many projects Oneida has undertaken has been included in my written testimony for your consideration. In short, the Initiative has been the single most successful federal program designed to restore our lands.

The Oneida Nation strongly urges the committee to fully fund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

### **Esther Martinez Act Funding**

Lastly, I ask Congress fully fund the Native American Languages Program.

For more than 80 years, we have worked hard to preserve and revitalize the Oneida language. In the 1930s, the Oneida Nation began documenting our language and how it has evolved. In the 1970s, Oneida partnered with a linguist from the University of Wisconsin Green Bay to develop an Oneida dictionary, which is still in use today.

Unfortunately, our people have not spoken Oneida as a first language for more than a century. To combat this, we launched a 10-year language immersion plan in 1996 that created an Oneida language curriculum available to hundreds of students. In 2010, thanks to a Native American Language Preservation and Maintenance Grant, we developed and implemented an 18-unit course curriculum coupled with an online learning program that has provided Oneida language learning access to thousands of students and Oneida citizens.

The Oneida language is a key component of our cultural identity. Language is medicine, and when we use *kanukwatslyo*, the good medicine of our language, we begin to heal our students and community. For these reasons, we respectfully request you fully fund the Native American Languages Program at the \$13 million level that was just recently reauthorized with the passage of the Esther Martinez Native Languages Reauthorization Act.

### **Conclusion**

There are dozens of other vitally important programs within the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations bill that are important to Oneida Nation; however, in the interest of time, I will conclude my remarks here. Thank you again for this opportunity, and I look forward to working with you to ensure that Indian Country can continue to thrive in Fiscal Year 2021, and beyond.