Testimony of Ms. Ka‘iulani Laehā, CEO, ‘Aha Pūnana Leo, Inc.

United States House of Representatives
House Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Subcommittee Hearing: Strengthening Indigenous Communities Through Cultural and Environmental Preservation

October 26, 2022

Chair Teresa Leger Fernandez and committee members and Aloha to committee member Representative Case,

Mahalo nui for coming to visit our program in Hilo, Hawai‘i in August along with Representatives Case and Kahele. I am Ka‘iulani Laehā, the Chief Executive Officer of the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo, a 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization dedicated to the revitalization of the Hawaiian language and the longest standing indigenous language medium language nest program in the United States that contributes to an educational pipeline from early childhood through to the doctorate all taught through the Native Hawaiian language. E ola ka ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, the Hawaiian language shall live is the vision that drives our work.

As a Native Hawaiian serving organization we know firsthand that our work is crucial to the cultural preservation of Hawai‘i’s indigenous people as identified in Hawai‘i’s statutes HRS 10H-1 statement of recognition:

The Native Hawaiian people are hereby recognized as the only indigenous, aboriginal, maoli people of Hawaii. [L 2011, c 195, pt of §2]

We have tirelessly advocated to earn recognition in federal statute including the Native American Languages Act 1990 (NALA), the Native Hawaiian Education Act, the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, and others. While these recognitions have been beneficial to our local communities, we need to be given the opportunity to represent Native Hawaiians in discussions and federal hearings regarding indigenous communities.

We are part of a larger consortium partnership with Ke Kula ‘o Nāawahīokalani‘ōpu‘u (Nāawahī) and Ka Haka ʻUlakelani Hawaiian language college, that is a P-20 model that demonstrates successful private-public partnership and best practices in language revitalization. We are nationally and internationally recognized as leaders of indigenous language revitalization. The effort within our state served thousands of students preschool to grade 12 through Hawaiian. We advocate for policies in federal programs aligned to NALA and would be able contribute to discussions focused on indigenous and cultural preservation.

Mahalo nui loa,

Kaʻiulani Laehā