

April 30, 2024

United States House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs  
The Honorable Harriett Maxine Hageman, Chair  
The Honorable Teresa Isabel Leger Fernandez, Ranking Member  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

**Re: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 2687, A Bill TO ASSIST ALASKA NATIVE ELDERS,  
AND ALASKA NATIVES WHO ARE BLIND OR DISABLED.**

Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, and Members of the Committee:

As Chief Executive Officer of the Old Harbor Native Corporation, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act Village Corporation for Old Harbor, and on behalf of our shareholders and our Native Community, I wish to express the strongest possible support for H.R. 2687. Alaska Natives residing in rural and remote Villages are recognized by many authoritative organizations and official agencies, including the U.S. Congress, U.S. Census Bureau, Indian Health Service, and the State of Alaska, as among the poorest of the poor.

Many Alaska Natives living in rural, and indeed many living in urban areas, are dependent not only on their Village and Regional Corporations for financial assistance such as distributions, educational scholarships, cultural programs, internships, and elder benefits, but they also rely on federal programs such as housing, nutrition assistance, Medicare and Medicaid. For almost four decades, Section 29(c) of ANCSA (43 U.S.C. §1626) has excluded the first \$2,000 in Alaska Native corporate dividends in making determinations of eligibility for these programs.

Congress first authorized Alaska Native corporations to establish settlement trusts in 1988 and since that time, many such Trusts have been established to provide for the long-term, multigenerational benefits for our Alaska Native shareholders. However, Congress has never amended ANCSA to create an exclusion for benefits received by Alaska Natives from the settlement trusts authorized by ANCSA. This is ironic, because settlement trusts are one of the most powerful tools Alaska Native Corporations have to help Alaska Natives combat poverty, and the many ills that accompany it.

H.R. 2687 provides for a narrow but much-needed and important improvement in the treatment of distributions from the Trusts to the most vulnerable of our people, our Elders and our disabled, especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic and post-Pandemic recovery. Under H.R. 2687, distributions of Trust benefits to Alaska Natives Elders (65 years or older), or to blind or disabled shareholders, will not count against those individuals for purposes of determining eligibility for governmental assistance programs. The legislation is very beneficial because it prevents Elders and blind or disabled Natives from losing eligibility for important, life-sustaining benefits such as housing assistance and food stamps, by virtue of a distribution of benefits to them from their Alaska Native Settlement Trust.

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By way of example, an OHNC Elder had to decline receiving his monthly Elder distributions because it would make him ineligible for Medicare and Medicaid. He would talk to our staff members on a regular basis, extremely distressed, because he was having trouble paying his monthly bills without his distribution from our Elder Settlement Trust. These heart-wrenching calls and pleas for help are what initiated our request for this very important bill. Thus, for this hearing record, I would like to quote one of our Elders, James Chokwak (74), who stated:

*“My Medicaid and Medicare was impacted by my OHNC elder distributions. For a while, I had to stop receiving Old Harbor Native Corporation Elder Settlement Trust monthly distribution so that my wife and I could keep our health benefits and have the option to go to Providence and Regional hospital. My wife and I have many health problems. I use the Elder’s benefit to pay our monthly bills. We are struggling to get by every month. After paying bills, we have nothing. We need Medicaid, Medicare and the Elders distributions from Old Harbor to cover our bills. This legislation will help us and many Elders in the native community. Quyanaa”*

Our Elders and our blind or disabled people should not have to choose between health care and receiving a distribution from their Native Trust that will allow them to pay their bills each month.

H.R. 2687 is very targeted to Alaska Native Elders and blind or disabled Natives, and it does not provide a broad comprehensive exclusion for eligibility determination purposes across the total population of Alaska Natives. While Old Harbor believes such an exclusion should ultimately be enacted, because ANCSA benefits should not cause the loss of other benefits to which Alaska Natives are otherwise entitled as Natives and U.S. citizens, Old Harbor also believes it very important to prioritize the needs of Alaska Native Elders as well as blind or disabled Alaska Natives.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee and the Congress to move this bill to enactment as soon as possible. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information or materials for the Committee as it considers this important piece of legislation.

Quyanaa – Thank you!

Respectfully yours,



Carl Marrs  
Chief Executive Officer