



Hearing Summary

“Examining Efforts to Maintain and Revitalize Native Languages for Future Generations”

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

2:15 - 4:00 pm ET | Dirksen Senate Office Building, Rm. 628

Senators in Attendance:

- John Hoeven (R-ND) (Chairman)
- Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)
- Steve Daines (R-MO)
- Jerry Moran (R-KS)
- John Thune (R-SD) -- not on cmt.
- Tom Udall (D-NM) (Vice Chairman)
- Jon Tester (D-MO)
- Maria Cantwell (D-WA)
- Brian Schatz (D-HI)
- Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND)
- Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV)
- Tina Smith (D-MN)

Witness Panel:

- Ms. Jeannie Hovland, Commissioner, Administration for Native Americans, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC
- Ms. Jessie Baird, Vice Chairwoman, Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, Mashpee, MA
- Ms. Namaka Rowllins, Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration Director, Aha Pūnana Leo, Hilo, HI
- Dr. Christine Sims, Director, American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center, University of New Mexico, ABQ, NM
- Ms. Lauren Hummingbird, Graduate, Cherokee Nation Immersion School, Tahlequah, OK

Opening Statements of Note

Sen. Udall is sponsoring the reauthorization of the Esther Martinez Act through 2023 and is excited to work with Commissioner Hovland to pass it.

Sen. Daines mentioned that he has sponsored a study of the benefits of learning languages along with Sen. Schatz, and believes wholeheartedly in the many benefits of language learning.

Sen. Tester brought up that “not too long ago” children were forced in boarding schools, prohibited from using their native language, and even severely punished for it. He also highlighted the connection between language and culture as the “life-blood of people.”

Sen. Murkowski said that Alaska has 5 grants from the Administration of Native Americans (ANA). She said language provides people “a sense of identity, self and purpose.”

Sen. Thune, who is not a member of the committee, was allowed opening remarks. He praised his former staffer of Indian Affairs, now Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans in DHS, Ms. Hovland, on her extensive experience in tribal affairs.

Testimony of Note

Four of the five witnesses began their testimonies in their native tongue.



Ms. Hovland mentioned how ANA programs' outcome metrics were strengthened in 2008 for those seeking to reapply for grants. She would like to "amend EMA" to include a new framework, which she later clarified will focused on updating the program's IT infrastructure and data-gathering for programs.

Dr. Sims noted that English-based standards (such as established in Common Core) and English-based assessments are harmful to Native American Language revitalization efforts. "They do not do justice to our children." What should a language assessment in a Native American Language look like? Assessments should look like what the community writ-large expects its speakers to use the language for.

Questioning of Note

Hoeven to Hovland:

Q: How do you balance awarding grants to bigger tribes that have the money and infrastructure to write grants, and those smaller tribes that cannot?

A: ANA has free online resources and trainings that assist grant applicants in the process of soliciting a grant.

Hoeven to Hummingbird

Q: Do you use the language often?

A: Yes, daily. Outside the classroom with my family and friends. She tells an anecdote: "when the elders are speaking among themselves, they don't expect the younger ones to understand, but we know what they're talking about (everyone laughs). And when we respond to them, the elders are completely surprised (this story had everyone in the room transfixed). Language is a cultural, multi-generational bond for us."

Udall to Sims

Q: Is EMA working?

A: More could be done to fund teachers' professional development and training.

Murkowski states that EMA is allotted \$12 million for language programs, but it is more than funding language programs: it is about keeping a culture alive.

Murkowski to Hovland

Q: How will you develop better outreach for EMA grants?

A: Hovland is new to the job (June 2018) and is working to build a network of tribes, associations and many others. (JNCL spoke with Hovland after the meeting about sharing our network with hers).

Schatz to Sims on "traditional Western metrics":

Schatz: Can you talk about the obstacles that you faced within the Department of Education in proving the results of your program in order to grant funding for the University of New Mexico?

Sims: We were able to show that our pre-K students that were taught native language (what they call "the Nest") were reading by kindergarten. Our college students have gone on to top Universities and have done international language learning experiences like Peace Corp.

Schatz: "What you are doing is working in both the 'traditional Western' mindset (meaning quantifiable measurement) and in the non-traditional way (by supporting family cohesion, quality of life)."

Cortez Masto to Hovland on amending EMA:

Cortez Masto: I would like to work together on expanding the EMA funds allotted to language learning (\$12 million) to include the hiring of "Cultural Coordinators."



Udall to Hovland on the reauthorization of EMA.

Udall: Are you predisposed to reauthorization?

Hovland: Very much so.

Udall: I am very interested in to raise the EMA grant period up from 3 years to 5 years; and to lower the minimum class size from 10 to 5.

Meeting adjourned 4:00pm ET