

April 26, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray, Chair
The Honorable Roy Blunt, Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor/HHS/Education
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro, Chair
The Honorable Tom Cole, Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor/HHS/Education
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Blunt, Chairwoman DeLauro and Ranking Member Cole:

As your Subcommittees consider the FY 2022 Labor/HHS/Education appropriations in the coming months, the National Indian Council on Aging (NICOA), which advocates for improved comprehensive health, social services and economic well-being for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) elders, and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), which advocates for the more than 260 Title VI Native American aging programs serving those elders, urges you to prioritize Older Americans Act (OAA) Title VI Grants for Native Americans for significantly increased funding this year.

OAA Title VI Grants to Indians (Native American Aging Programs), Parts A (nutrition services) and C (caregivers) are a primary authority for funding aging services in Indian Country, where elders are the most economically disadvantaged in the nation. We encourage lawmakers to build on the 2020 COVID-relief funding for tribal aging programs and increase Title VI appropriations levels given the current and future needs of American Indian elders and the pre-pandemic years of insufficient growth in funding to meet escalating need.

The National Indian Council on Aging, in its efforts to fulfill its mission, works with all AI/AN communities and their programs for elders to ascertain the need for the development and implementation of sustainable Long-Term Services and Supports

(LTSS). In a recent survey to ascertain the need for these services among 200 tribal respondents, all indicated a need for services that embrace the Continuum of Care concept. These included additional training, community-based services such as home health care, and infrastructure needs such as assisted living structures. In previous discussions regarding OAA Title VI nutrition services, many tribal programs have told researchers that they do not provide meals daily due to limitations on funding, despite need remaining high in their communities. The need for Title VI Part C caregiver services is on the rise, as well: research has indicated that Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias is higher among AI/AN individuals than the general population (1 in 3 compared to 1 in 5).

In a survey report to be published by n4a shortly, 85 percent of Title VI Native American aging programs reported they were serving more people as a result of COVID-19, and nearly as many report that the needs of their existing clients have increased, as well. At the same time that client demand is growing, the pandemic has created workforce challenges for tribal programs, the most common include reduced staff levels due to illness or caregiving; decreased staff morale due to intensity of workload; diminished volunteer capacity; and reduced capacity of the direct care workforce. Tribal aging programs also face technological barriers in the delivery of services, especially those aimed at reducing elders' social isolation, given the fact that only 40 percent of elders have any internet access, according to estimates by Title VI directors.

Despite these challenges, Title VI programs have, with the support of Congress through COVID-relief emergency funding, risen to the occasion. Nearly all added or expanded home-delivered meals, 76 percent added/expanded delivery of groceries or supplies, 75 percent conducted telephone reassurance or wellness check-ins, 71 percent provided PPE to elders and more than half are providing elders with activities to engage them at home, in order to support increased health and wellness by reducing social isolation. It's also worth noting that more than three-quarters of directors wanted more training and technical assistance on the topic of reducing social isolation of elders—it's a major issue and one the tribes could better tackle with increased funding and support.

It's also important to note that these pandemic levels of service delivery are unlikely to abate even as the threat from COVID retreats in the face of vaccination and other measures. Just as the entire country is aging, with more than 1 in 5 people in the U.S. to be age 65 and older by 2030, so, too, is the population of American Indians, Native Alaskans and Hawaiians. It is projected by the Administration on Aging that this population will increase from 259,000 to over 443,000, an increase of almost 50 percent. The added clients the Title VI programs served for the past year are unlikely to stop needing these services once vaccinated. Advocates report that the aftereffects of a year of social isolation on many elders, will, without appropriate interventions and

support, continue to impact their well-being, cognition and overall health.

Based on these acute and widespread needs of tribal elders, we urge Congress to double funding for Title VI in FY 2022 to reach \$70.4 million for Part A (nutrition and supportive services) and \$21.6 million for Part C (family caregiver support).

Thank you for your commitment to supporting the most vulnerable older adults in their efforts to remain as healthy and independent as possible at home and in their communities.

Sincerely,



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cc:

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Ranking Member Richard Shelby, Senate Appropriations Committee
Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro, House Appropriations Committee
Ranking Member Kay Granger, House Appropriations Committee
Members of the House and Senate Labor/HHS/Education Subcommittee