

STATEMENT OF SENATOR TIM JOHNSON

Oversight Hearing on Implementation of the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act Senate Indian Affairs Committee February 13, 2002

Chairman Inouye, Vice-Chairman Campbell, members of the Committee, and witnesses. I am pleased to be here today to receive the testimony on the Reauthorization of the Indian Housing Block Grant.

For over five years, Tribes and Alaska Native Villages have been living through the experimentation of using Block Grants to provide housing assistance to Native Americans. The Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act has proven to be a vast improvement over the prior way that housing assistance was provided to Tribes in some respects, and a complete failure on others. We are here today to further review this program so that the proper improvements may be made.

It remains clear that Congress needs to further clarify the consultation process that is pivotal to the government-to-government relationship that exists between Tribes, Villages, and Rancherias and the Federal Government. Tribes should be afforded a thorough and meaningful consultation process when the federal government attempts to change the regulations governing Native specific programs. Only once has this been seen by the Tribes throughout the past five years on housing issues. There remains much discussion between the Department of Housing and Urban Development and Native peoples of this great nation on what was the actual intention. I will tell you now that the Administration must consult with Tribes as part of its federal obligation to them.

Throughout my 16 years of service in Congress, I have been dismayed by the living conditions of our First Americans. On numerous occasions, it has been documented that Native Americans have the worst housing conditions in the United States. There is rampant overcrowding, homelessness, and crumbling housing stock. In South Dakota we see some of the worst conditions overall. There is anywhere between 50-80 percent unemployment on many of South Dakotas nine Indian Reservations. According to the Housing Assistance Council, South Dakota contains 10 counties that are inhabited by 30-65 percent of persons below poverty. Nine of these counties are fully contained or directly adjacent to reservations.

The federal government has the treaty obligation to provide basic services to tribes. This has been far from the case in most instances - including Housing. I appreciate the opportunity to continue to shape the face of Indian Housing, and further improve access to safe, and decent housing for our Native people. The Federal Government must end the practice of treating our First Americans as Third Class Citizens.

Mr. Chairman I thank you for holding this important hearing, I look forward to receiving the testimony

of our witnesses today. I ask unanimous consent that my statement be included in the record, and I will submit questions in writing.