

**Written Testimony of Brian Vallo
Governor, Pueblo of Acoma, New Mexico**

**"45th Anniversary of the Native American Programs Act and the Establishment of the
Administration for Native Americans"**

**Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing
February 27, 2019**

Thank you Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on the unique role that Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grants and programs fill in Indian Country. My name is Brian Vallo and I am the Governor of Acoma Pueblo, located in northwestern New Mexico. Since 1996, our Pueblo has worked with the ANA to develop and implement short-term and multi-year grants that support language and cultural revitalization projects in our community. The manifold benefits of these grants cannot be overstated. We have seen first-hand how the seed from an ANA grant can grow into a sheltering tree for the entire community. My testimony describes Acoma Pueblo's positive experience with the ANA grant process and makes several recommendations for ways to strengthen it even further.

I. Administration for Native Americans

Since its establishment in 1974 pursuant to the Native American Programs Act, the ANA has served as a valuable resource in helping Native communities achieve their goals in self-sufficiency and cultural preservation. The ANA provides discretionary grant funding for community-based projects, as well as training and technical assistance (T/TA). The beauty of ANA grants lies in the control that is given to tribal applicants in identifying an area of need within their community and developing a plan of action to address it with federal funding. The singular focus on community-based and community-driven projects that promote the exercise of self-determination and cultural flourishing makes the ANA unique within the federal family.

II. Acoma Pueblo's Experience in Leveraging ANA Resources for Vital Language and Culture Programming

The Seed – Acoma Language Retention Program. Acoma has over a decade of experience working with the ANA. Our first award was a planning grant in 1996 to establish a community-based language initiative known as the Acoma Language Retention Program. The Program was not intended to be nor was it implemented as an academic study of the Keres language. Instead, the Program's focus was on re-strengthening the link between the Keres language and Acoma cultural practices through an ambitious plan for language revitalization aimed at younger generations in the community. The community identified the widening disconnect between the number of knowledgeable Keres speakers, particularly among Acoma youth, and the level of engagement with our traditional cultural practices as a critical issue. ANA provided financial support enabling our Pueblo to establish its first language program tasked with finding solutions to this issue.

Prior to the ANA grant, our Keres language had only been utilized as part of a limited federal bilingual education program at the local Bureau of Indian Education school between the 1970s and

1980s. When federal bilingual funding began to wane by the late 1980s, this program came to an end. The result was a gap of almost 15 years in the formal instruction of the Keres language. The ANA short-term planning grant enabled us to chart out a new framework for our language and cultural revitalization goals. We used ANA funds to compile data on the status of the language (i.e., language use in the community among different age groups) to identify the segments of the population most in need of Keres language learning support.

The ANA was available to us as a resource throughout the grant development and implementation process. Critically, they limited their assistance to the technical aspects of the grant, such as data analysis and reporting final outcomes. It was left to Acoma to decide what was appropriate in carrying out the Program's goals. ANA operates on the understanding that tribal grantees have a specific vision for their communities and know what will work best for them. It does not dictate how federal funds should be used. Instead ANA grants are founded on and seek to advance the expression of our sovereignty by focusing on project outcomes and facilitating the realization of grantees' self-determination goals. While other federal funding sources include self-determination as one of many factors to be considered in a grant application and implementation process, the ANA is one of the rare federal partners that makes it the determinative factor in a grant award.

The Growth – Keres Language Immersion Programs. Our ANA Grant activities were always meant to be fully accessible to all Acoma members. We did not want these to be limited to a classroom setting or only a segment of the population. To that end, the development and implementation of summer Keres language immersion programs for Acoma youth were designed to bring them together with Acoma elders and Keres-speaking adults who led activities in our villages, in our ancestral home of Haak'u and in and surrounding locations on our reservation. The high visibility of these Keres language initiatives was important in fostering intergenerational cultural ties, language usage, and community engagement and support.

As the activities funded by the ANA grant developed, their popularity within the community continued to grow. Our first attempt to pilot a two week summer immersion program brought Acoma youth, adults, and elders together to learn about Keres-based cultural practices. The program was so well attended that we subsequently offered a four week and later a six week immersion experience! As a result of these programs we saw more children and youth participating in cultural practices and actively engaging in community life. We also saw increased intergenerational engagement, which is critical to passing on the traditional knowledge that only our elders and fluent Keres speakers possess.

The first generation of children to participate in the immersion programs in the 1990s are now adults and parents themselves. Many have become key participants in the socio-cultural traditions of the Pueblo. Those of us from the community have observed how those children have grown up and been shaped by the availability of Keres cultural programming. Now, the children of that first generation of beneficiaries have the opportunity to participate in Keres language classes, both in the community and in some local schools, are following in the footsteps of their parents and relatives in being integrated into the cultural practices and linguistic tradition of our community. We have been made stronger from the inside because of it. The benefits of that original ANA short-term planning grant continue to translate into long-term positive gains for our community.

The Branches – Expansion and Leveraged Funding. After our community-based programs were firmly established, we began to expand the sphere of Keres cultural teaching into the classroom setting. The Tribal Council guided the carefully designed vision as it was implemented in our local school system in the early 2000s. We first expanded to the local BIE school, then to a local public high school and elementary school, and finally to a parochial pre-kindergarten program. The phased expansion of our vision was only made possible because of ANA support. ANA grants allowed us to train Acoma language teachers, develop curricula, and implement the program in diverse settings. Throughout this process, we maintained fidelity to our original vision of strengthening the community by renewing the link between the Keres language and Acoma cultural practices.

As a result of our expansion into public schools, Acoma found itself on the forefront, along with several other key Pueblos, in pushing local school districts to enter into Memorandums of Understanding regarding the implementation of Keres language immersion programs. Acoma wanted to ensure that the Pueblo maintained control of its programs and full ownership of the materials developed for and used in the programs. We also wanted to be sure that the programs were taught only by Acoma teachers and served all interested Acoma students so that they could stay firmly rooted in their Pueblo identities and language as they matriculated from elementary to middle school and on to high school.

We encountered challenges along the way. For example, one challenge stemmed from the mistaken view that immersion programs discriminated against other students because they targeted only students who were from our community. With strong support from a State Education superintendent, we made it clear that the offering of such programs aligns with our status as sovereign pueblos and tribal nations with inherent powers of self-governance over our members, including the authority to govern how matters of cultural sensitivity and language are taught to our children and youth.

Another challenge arose from the fact that many of our Acoma elders and Keres-speaking adults lacked formal teaching degrees, which created administrative issues for public schools under the No Child Left Behind Act. Acoma once again stood at the fore in advocating for an alternative pathway for teacher certification so that our children could have access to appropriate instructors in their Keres classrooms. As the result of a collaborative multi-year effort with other New Mexico tribes, New Mexico adopted an alternative certification for speakers of Native languages teaching Native languages in public schools in 2003. Alternative certifications are only issued by the New Mexico Public Education Department on the recommendation of a Pueblo or tribal nation. Pueblos and tribal nations in the State thus maintain control over which instructors are deemed qualified to teach their indigenous language, as well as how such lessons and programs are carried out.

Further, because of our proven track with management and implementing other related ANA grants, we have been able to leverage non-federal funds to further our long-term goals. We have leveraged private funds and state funds to pilot early childhood education and other summer language and culture programs. Our successful management of these funding sources eventually led the Tribal Council to commit internal tribal resources to this effort. We have had support from all levels of government, as well as the private sector, in carrying out our vision of a strong and vibrant Keres language community at Acoma Pueblo.

The Sheltering Tree – Intergenerational Engagement with Keres-Based Cultural Practices. The expanded access to and engagement with Keres-based cultural practices would not have been possible but for the support of the ANA. Beginning with the seed of the short-term ANA planning grant in 1996, our Acoma Language Retention Program has offered an impressive array of programs and initiatives that have provided manifold benefits to our members. We have seen increases in the participation of Acoma youth in traditional practices; intergenerational engagement within the community; respect for and understanding of Pueblo sovereignty and traditions in public schools; and the resiliency of our Acoma youth, adults, and elders. Each of these achievements is rooted in and nurtured by the ongoing revitalization of our community oriented Keres-based cultural practices.

We have also been able to share the strength and beauty of our community with others pursuant to an ANA Social and Economic Development Strategies (SEDS) grant for the planning and development of the Sky City Cultural Center and Haaku Museum. Acoma Sky City is the heart of our community. We have lived at our mesa-top home for at least 1000 years, making it the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. Acoma religious, cultural, and social life revolves around Sky City, both on a daily basis and during festival times. ANA funding has been instrumental in preserving this cultural resource for present and future generations.

III. Recommendations Related to ANA Programs

While our experience with the ANA grant application and implementation process has been generally positive, we believe that are always ways to improve the process going forward. For example, it is our understanding that internal agency is working towards streamlining the application process. We support this effort. Ensuring that the application is as simple and efficient as possible would remove needless administrative burdens that might otherwise create barriers to access for tribal applicants. Acoma Pueblo is lucky to have experienced grant writers on staff. Other pueblos, tribal nations, and Native communities are not so fortunate. Streamlining the application process is critical to applicants with limited administrative and financial resources.

We also hope that the ANA will continue to provide training and technical assistance on the intricacies of the grant development, implementation, and outcome reporting process. This ties into our initial recommendation on efficient application processes. For tribal applicants of all internal capacities ANA training and technical assistance is important to the effective management of federal grants and appropriately reporting outcomes for accountability. The ANA provided key technical support during the lifecycle of each of our grants. Today, we are in the last year of a multi-year grant to complete an online Keres dictionary project and ANA technical assistance has assisted us in tracking progress towards that grant's goals.

We recognize that many tribal applicants do not have the internal capacity to support full immersion programs. We encourage the ANA to provide early technical assistance in helping applicants navigate the myriad pathways that they can choose from in developing a language and cultural revitalization program that is best suited to their community's needs and capabilities. Meeting applicants where they stand is essential to long-term project success.

We also firmly believe that every community, regardless of its current capabilities or the status of its programs, can achieve significant gains in language and cultural revitalization over time. We urge the ANA to maintain diversity in the range of grant periods that are available to applicants. Grant cycles of six months to six years enable applicants to develop projects according to the natural ebbs and flows of their community. We urge the ANA to preserve this flexibility.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important oversight hearing on establishment of the Administration for Native Americans and its role in Indian Country today. On behalf of the Pueblo of Acoma, we thank you for your dedicated work on behalf of all pueblos, tribal nations, and Native communities, particularly in the advancement of our self-determination. We hope to have the opportunity to show you first-hand the strides we are making in integrating the Keres language into our daily and ceremonial life during a future visit to the Pueblo of Acoma. Dá'wá'éh; Thank you.