

## **Still Waiting: Tribal Elders' Growing Needs Go Unmet FY 2009 Administration on Aging Budget Recommendation**

Testimony by  
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While delegates at the White House Conference on Aging recommended a number of amendments to the Older Americans Act that would assist Tribes and their Elders, the recently enacted law did not include most of these amendments. While the higher authorized levels of funding for the caregiver programs under Title VI, Part C pleased Tribal communities, the lack of increase for the nutrition and supportive services under Titles VI, Part A and B need to be addressed by the President. His budget for Fiscal Year 2009 must include adequate funding for a growing population of Elders who are low-income and targeted for assistance by OAA programs. While some Tribal communities and states have been able to assist the Tribal elderly programs with their own supplemental funding, this is not true of all Tribes nor in all states. As a result, meals to the homebound, medical transportation and other supportive services are rationed due to lack of funding and rising fuel costs. This state of affairs contributes to the overall decline of health and social services available for Indian Country's most vulnerable community members.

As noted in our testimony last year, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that 9 million of the baby boomers failed to graduate from high school. This population includes many American Indian and Alaska Native Elders because of the poverty and lack of educational opportunities in Tribal communities during the 1940s and 1950s. Respectful of this history, the National Indian Council on Aging (NICOA), on behalf of its members who are Tribal Elders and Tribal Nations across the United States, offers several recommendations for the President's Fiscal Year 2009 budget to address the growing disparities experienced by American Indian and Alaska Native Elders who need assistance to remain active, contributing members of their communities.

### **Increased Funding for Title VI of the Older Americans Act**

Indians comprise the most economically disadvantaged elderly minority in the nation. Even so, their needs for in-home and community-based services are not available through Title VI programs, although funding for these services is provided to other populations through Title III. Some Title VI programs are forced to close for several days each week, unable to provide basic services such as transportation, information and referral, legal assistance, ombudsman, respite or adult day care, home telephone visits, homemaker services, or home health aide service. Recent gasoline price

increases also severely reduces the ability of Title VI service providers to provide home delivered meals and related supportive services to home bound Indian Elders. Transportation is the one number barrier for Elders in accessing the services they need in their communities. So the importance of increase Title VI funding to assist with transportation needs as well as access to additional resources from Title III programs are critical to addressing Elders' needs. With the fiscal constraints caused by the growing national debt, Tribes acknowledge that the 25% increase requested last year for Title VI funding is not achievable next year. Therefore, we recommend the President request a modest increase of \$28.875 million for Title VI nutrition programs in FY 2009.

Additionally, the Administration on Aging takes up to one percent off the top of Title VI funding to provide training for Title VI staff. Skilled staff working with Elders is absolutely critical in Tribal communities, but that training should not come at the expense of meals for Elders. The President must provide separate funding for staff training under Title IV in order to ensure the maximum amount of resources are still available to support nutrition and other supportive services for Indian Elders under Title VI. This practice limits meals and other services the Title VI programs can offer to the Elders and often does not allow enough resources for adequate training for all Title VI staff. Tribes recommend the President request \$700,000 under Title IV, the OAA provision providing training and technical assistance, to address the training needs of Title VI staff in FY 2009.

Funding for the Native American Caregiver program is inadequate in two respects. The grant amount provided to particular Tribes is often so low to make it impractical to plan and implement adequate caregiver programs in the tribes. Also, there is practically no training to Tribes to use caregiver funds effectively. Recently, in the amendments to the Older Americans Act signed by the President last fall, increased authorization levels for Title VI, Part C for caregiver support were provided. Tribal leaders urge the President to request the authorized level for FY 2009 of \$7.2 million provided for in the new law.

### **Elder Abuse Awareness and Protection Demonstration Grants for Indian Country**

Title VII of the Older Americans Act authorizes a program for Tribes, public agencies, or non-profit organizations serving Indian Elders to assist in prioritizing issues relating to Elder rights and to carry out activities in support of these priorities. Funds have never been appropriated for this purpose.

While funds have been appropriated to states for similar purposes, these programs seldom reach Indian Elders due to cultural, jurisdictional, and geographic barriers. Indian Tribes have little or no access to the agencies, departments, ombudsman, or other programs that are available to states. Further, Tribes have no additional source of mandated federal funding for Elder protection activities. Anecdotal evidence provided by those involved with Elder services in Indian Country suggests a high incidence of elder abuse. In 2005, the Administration on Aging released a report on elder abuse in

Indian Country after the National Indian Council on Aging had issued a report on the same topic in 2004. Both reports highlighted the growing presence of elder abuse, particularly financial exploitation and neglect due to the poverty present in Indian communities, and the need for programs to provide education, outreach and intervention in Tribal communities. It is commonly acknowledged that "abusers" are often family members and Elders often do not realize they are being abused. If they do know, they are reluctant to disclose this information to the authorities.

Outreach and demonstration programs are needed to increase awareness of elder abuse and to help Tribes devise ways to minimize abusive behavior. A demonstration grant program directed to Indian Country in the amount of \$1,000,000 would begin to address this very serious issue. Delegates from across the country at the White House Conference on Aging supported funding this provision as have others across the aging network. We request the President provide \$1 million in initial funding for grants to Tribes and Indian organizations to begin this important outreach and educational work.

### **Training to Improve Elder Access to Social Services in Indian Country**

Title IV of the Older Americans Act, "Research and Demonstration Grants," provides important resources for improving access to social services and transferring health care information for many of the nation's seniors. The benefits of improved access, however, do not accrue to Indian Country, where many of the nation's most geographically isolated and socio-economically deprived seniors live.

Elders in Indian Country could best be provided access to essential social services and important health care information by strengthening the capacity of existing community-based programs to serve, advocate, inform, and intervene on their behalf. For Native American (American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian) Elders, these important functions are best provided by locally managed Title VI programs.

The National Indian Council on Aging concluded a pilot/demonstration project in the State of Washington in 2006 to assist Indian Elders in that state in accessing health, social and other supportive services they were entitled to receive. NICOA accomplished this by training Tribal members to serve as Benefits Counselors to Indian Elders in the urban Seattle area and among 17 Tribal communities statewide. It is NICOA's goal to implement a similar program nationwide if funding is available. Already the number of Elders accessing benefits through outreach and assistance through the help of Tribal Benefits Counselors is astounding. The ability of the Elder, Tribal community or urban Indian program to capture revenue streams of Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and Veterans benefits that these Elders are entitled to but have not previously accessed is making a significant impact. Tribal leaders request \$1 million for the National Indian Council on Aging to continue this successful program with Tribes in other parts of Indian Country.

## **Decreasing Prevalence of Health Disparities through Diabetes Programs among Elders in Indian Country**

Tribal leaders and the National Indian Council on Aging are aware and working proactively to address the high incidence of chronic diseases among Elders in Indian Country. They both recommends enhancement of the Title IV grant directed to the National Indian Council on Aging for the purpose of decreasing such health disparities. The National Indian Council on Aging has developed a pilot project with a number of Tribes in the Albuquerque Area of the Indian Health Service focusing on Elders caring for community gardens and participating in support groups to manage their diabetes. The organization would like to expand this effort to other Tribes across the country. The project will end in FY 2007 after the carryover funds have been expended. Tribal leaders request the President provide \$150,000 for NICOA to continue this effort throughout other parts of Indian Country in FY 2009.

## **Elevate the Native American Programs Director to the Deputy Assistant Secretary Level**

In 2005, at the White House Conference on Aging, delegates from across the country approved the Tribal delegates' request to elevate the Director of the American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Affairs with the Administration on Aging to the Deputy Secretary level in recognition of the government-to-government relationship between the federal government and Tribes. While that recommendation was not adopted in the recent amendments to the Older Americans Act, Tribal leaders, Elders and NICOA still support this action and have long advocated for its place within AoA. Because of the President's recognition of the importance of Tribal consultation, Tribal leaders request the Assistant Secretary work closely with them to ensure the agency's programs and services meet the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native elders under the federal trust responsibility until such time as the elevation of the Director's position can occur. As stated last year, Tribal leaders would welcome the opportunity to dialogue directly with the Assistant Secretary at this consultation and in other forums as appropriate throughout the year.

## **Summary**

As previously stated, the needs of our communities to care for our Elders are great; and, the available funding from various sources woefully inadequate to address them. In summary, the amounts that Tribal leaders request for the President to include in his budget request for FY 2009 are:

Increased Funding for Title VI of the Older Americans Act: \$28.875 million (for Parts A and B); \$7.2 million for Part C as authorized in the 2006 OAA amendments; and \$700,000 for Title VI staff training as a separate line item until Title IV.

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Funding for Title VII - Elder Abuse Awareness and Protection Demonstration Grants for Indian Country - \$1,000,000.

Continuation of Diabetes Prevention Program in Tribal Communities - \$150,000.

Continuation of Training and Technical Assistance to Improve Elder Access to Health and Social Services Benefits in Indian Country under Title IV - \$1,000,000.

Tribal leaders look forward to working closely with the President, Secretary Leavitt and Assistant Secretary Carbonell to address the needs of American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Elders in Fiscal Year 2009. We would also like to invite Secretary Carbonell to address our Title VI staff at their national training next month in Baltimore. Thank you for this opportunity to present the issues confronted by Tribal leaders and Elders and our recommendations for the President's FY 2009 budget.