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Office of the Chief

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**May 26, 2021**

**Testimony of Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr.  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing on “Examining the COVID-19 Response  
in Native Communities: Native Languages One Year Later,” and Legislative Hearing on S .989,  
*the Native American Language Resource Center Act of 2021*, and S.1402, *the Durbin Feeling  
Native American Languages Act of 2021*.**

Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Osiyo. On behalf of Cherokee Nation and its 392,000 citizens, I thank you for this opportunity to testify on one of my greatest responsibilities—the protection, preservation, and revitalization of the Cherokee language. It is my honor to speak with you today. Through this testimony I will share some of the innovative ways we are working to preserve our language, speak to COVID-19’s horrific impact on our Native speakers, and reiterate Cherokee Nation’s strong support for both S. 1402, the Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act of 2021, and S. 989, the Native American Language Resource Center Act of 2021.

Preserving the Cherokee language is preserving Cherokee identity, as the heritage and traditions of the tribe are rooted in our language. Our language contains knowledge and ways of thinking that can never be fully captured in translation. Quite simply, the Cherokee language is the heart and soul of our tribe. The same is true for tribes throughout the United States. Accordingly, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes that we have a right to use, revitalize and transmit our languages to future generations. And, the UN General Assembly has declared 2022-2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Unfortunately, for many decades, the federal government actively suppressed the teaching and speaking of Native languages. Today, only about 2,000 people can speak Cherokee fluently. If we allow our language to perish, all our accomplishments—what we have done in health care, education, and economic development—will be for naught as these things can only be fully achieved when we save our language. Cherokees generations from now will be unimpressed by all we have done—frankly, they will be bewildered as to why the great Cherokee Nation failed to do what was necessary to save our language.

***How Cherokee Nation is Working to Protect, Preserve, and Revitalize the Cherokee Language***

My administration has made language preservation a top priority. This is not something we can fail at, and it is not something we can wait to do. The average age of a fluent speaker is 70, and

our language experts estimate that we lose as many as 15 fluent speakers each month and we are losing as many as 23 per month during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within my first 100 days in office, I signed into law the *Durbin Feeling Cherokee Language Preservation Act*. This tribal law dedicated \$16 million to our language efforts, the largest investment in language in our tribe's history. As part of this law, we are investing \$5 million in the construction and renovation of a new language center in Tahlequah. This center, named after the late Cherokee linguist Durbin Feeling, will house all our tribe's language programs under one roof for the first time in our history. I am pleased to announce that we broke ground on this center last week.

This center will include our Cherokee Immersion School, a Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade education program aimed at training the next generation of Cherokee speakers. Our immersion school is in its 18<sup>th</sup> year and has added 64 fluent speakers to our rolls. Students follow the same state learning objectives as other students in public schools, but materials and content are converted into Cherokee and the curriculum is taught in Cherokee. At present, 98 students are enrolled in the program, but we had as many as 148 children enrolled before the pandemic.

The new facility will also house the Cherokee Language Master Apprentice Program. This program offers an opportunity for adult language learners to earn a stipend while being fully immersed in the Cherokee language. After completing the program, students will have 4,000 contact hours with the Cherokee language and will have spent more than 40 hours each week studying and speaking the language. We are partnering with area public schools, expanding our own staff and finding jobs for graduates in Cherokee language promotion and preservation.

Adjacent to the language center, we are building efficiency homes for Cherokee speakers, often elders, so that they will have safe, affordable places to live and provide opportunities for speakers to interact daily with our staff and young people. Our goal is to create and foster a Cherokee language village—a language campus where fluent speakers and students work side by side and live side by side.

Finally, the Durbin Feeling Cherokee Language Preservation Act also creates a cabinet level Secretary of Language, Culture and Community position in my administration, ensuring that our language and culture are always elevated to the highest levels of the Cherokee government.

The pairing of the immersion school, master apprentice program, and homes for speakers reflects a multigenerational effort to preserve and promote the Cherokee language for future generations and builds on our prior revitalization efforts. Cherokee Nation couples younger first language speakers with our oldest distinguished speakers to identify, learn and preserve these core foundational understandings. This group reviews our oldest written documents to glean at risk words to document, learn, perpetuate and create the standard for the next generation of distinguished speakers.

## **Innovative ways we're working to protect/revitalize language through technology**

The Cherokee Nation language revitalization programs are some of the most technologically advanced in Indian Country. The tribe has long standing partnerships with Microsoft, Apple, and Google that ensure the Cherokee language is compatible with all major digital platforms. Since 2016, every computer, smart phone, and tablet supports use of the Cherokee syllabary. The tribe is a liaison member of the Unicode Consortium which is the international standards body that governs how writing systems are displayed by computing systems. This helps the tribe keep our syllabary up to date with the latest technology.

These kinds of innovations opened doors for the Cherokee language to be used in any digital medium ranging from social media posts, text messaging, Google searches, interactive media, optical character recognition of syllabary, complex databases, and everything in between. The Cherokee Nation has created 3D computer animated cartoons in Cherokee language with Cherokee syllabary subtitles; an immersive 3D Cherokee language video game for Apple and Android devices; a virtual classroom platform for the Cherokee Immersion School which has the user interface completely in Cherokee syllabary; and a searchable Cherokee language word list that features audio recordings, just to name a few examples.

The tribe's leveraging of technology has fostered an environment of innovation for language revitalization. New advances will be forthcoming, including text to speech technology in Cherokee language and voice activation. A large-scale dynamic, cross referencing online Cherokee language database is being developed which will house historical Cherokee language documents as well as new materials the tribe collects. These kinds of advances will serve as valuable tools in Cherokee Nation's language revitalization efforts.

I am proud of the annual multimillion-dollar investments our Tribe makes to protect, preserve, and revitalize the Cherokee language, and I am happy to see Congress continue to acknowledge the need for additional federal investments in this area.

## **COVID-19's Impact on Cherokee Speakers**

As we were making these historic investments in the Cherokee language, the most devastating pandemic in our lifetimes hit Cherokee Nation, and our Cherokee speakers were among the most vulnerable. During the worst of the pandemic, we made concentrated efforts to support our speakers, providing food assistance, telehealth services, support to pay the costs of utilities and direct elder assistance payments.

Despite these efforts, we lost more than 50 fluent speakers to COVID-19. Every life is irreplaceable, but when you lose a speaker, you are losing more than a person—you are losing a national treasure.

Knowing that we needed to protect this segment of our population, I prioritized Cherokee speakers for our first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. I ensured that our Cherokee speakers

were eligible for the vaccine in Phase 1 of our distribution plan, right alongside our healthcare workers.

Their contributions to our tribe are immeasurable and their health and safety are one of our highest priorities. In 2019, we created a Cherokee Speaker Roll to begin identifying Cherokee speakers and showing our appreciation to them. Little did I know at the time, this roll would be invaluable to us when distributing the COVID-19 vaccine.

**Cherokee Nation Strongly Supports the Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act**

I thank you for introducing S. 1402, the Durbin Feeling Native American Languages Act, which carries the name of a great Cherokee citizen—Durbin Feeling. I say without equivocation that my friend Durbin was the largest contributor to the Cherokee language since Sequoyah, the inventor of the Cherokee syllabary. Durbin dedicated his life to saving and preserving the Cherokee language for future generations. He spent decades breathing new life into the language. He was a tireless advocate for Native language and revitalization efforts.

His generosity to the Cherokee people and his unwavering commitment to Cherokee language perpetuation will be the foundation upon which we teach future generations to honor and carry on our traditions. This bill speaks to everything he stood for and will build upon his many years of work.

The Durbin Feeling Native Languages Act will ensure that the federal government is upholding its promises and the carrying out the policies designed to support native languages. The nationwide survey it produces will help guide investments in native language and ensure that all native languages remain vital for generations to come. It is an important bill, and I urge each member of the Committee to commit to getting this legislation to the President's desk this Congress.

We are going to save the Cherokee language. We can, we must and we will. We are going to do it not just because of what Durbin Feeling did, but because of the vision that he had. I pledge to you today that we will carry out Durbin's vision but I need your help.

I hope that my grandchildren and future generations grow up in a United States where native languages are valued, revered and given the full respect they deserve.

I thank you for your support of Native languages and the opportunity to speak with you today.

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Chuck Hoskin Jr., Cherokee Nation Principal Chief