

**Testimony of the Klamath Tribes  
Before the Interim Senate Committee on Housing and Development  
Hearing on COVID-19 Housing Issues**

**Written Testimony of the Klamath Tribes  
Chairman Donald C. Gentry**

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This written testimony is being submitted by Donald C. Gentry, Chairman of the Klamath Tribes. On behalf of the Tribes, I would like to thank Chair Fagan and the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the Klamath Tribes, and particularly on housing for our Tribal members.

The Klamath Tribes are now federally recognized as one Indian tribe whose constituent tribes, the Klamath, the Modoc, and the Yahooskin Band of Snake Indians, have resided in South-Central Oregon since time beyond memory. Our people have always relied upon the resources of the Klamath Basin, including its water and water-dependent resources, to sustain our livelihood and our culture. For thousands upon countless thousands of years, we survived by our industriousness in utilizing the natural resources the Creator gave us.

In our 1864 Treaty with the United States, we ceded over 22 million acres of aboriginal lands in exchange for the exclusive rights to live on a smaller plot of land, called the Klamath Indian Reservation, located within our aboriginal territory. Like many tribes across the United States, the Klamath Tribes were forced to give up vast tracts of our aboriginal land in exchange for a much smaller reservation that would serve as our permanent homeland. Part of the agreement for the Klamath Tribes, as for many tribes, either explicitly or implicitly, was that the United States would provide support for adequate housing for the Tribes and its members. As with many such Treaty-based promises, the United States has fallen woefully short in meeting that obligation. Indian tribes generally, and the Klamath Tribes specifically, continue to suffer disproportionately high rates of homelessness, overcrowding and substandard housing conditions.

For nearly 100 years, our people resided on the Reservation, during which time we maintained a self-sufficient economy and subsisted on the rich and diverse resources of the Reservation. In the 1950s, however, the Tribes were subjected to Congress's ill-considered policy of "termination," through which Congress unilaterally deemed that certain tribes would no longer be recognized as Indian tribes by the federal government and set in motion a process for the dismantling of reservation land. Termination was disastrous for the Tribes. Tribal lands were transferred to private parties and to the U.S. Forest Service. The State, taking its cue from the federal termination of the Tribes' recognition, began to restrict the Tribes' members' exercise of their ancient hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering ways. The Tribes were thus stripped of our land, our economy, our means of subsistence, and our cultural traditions by the ill-considered

actions of the Federal and State governments.

Termination impacted our housing situation adversely too. While the United States established the agency and programs that would ultimately come to be administered by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1937, it was decades before any of that federal housing support came to Indian Country. Yet during much of that time the Klamath Tribes were not eligible for those services due to termination.

After a decades-long effort, the Tribes succeeded in having its federal recognition restored in 1986. However, it was not until 1996 that Congress adopted a tribal-specific federal housing program under the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act (NAHASDA). While NAHASDA was a substantial step forward in recognizing that the housing needs of tribes were unique and required a tribal-specific approach, the funding provided under NAHASDA has fallen far short of what is needed to address the chronic housing problems in Indian Country generally and for the Klamath Tribes in particular. The appropriations for the NAHASDA program have remained essentially flat for the last 24 years, and have not kept up with inflation. Thus, in a real sense, that funding has steadily been dropping.

Yet the need continues to persist. The Tribes have established the Klamath Tribal Housing Department (KTHD), whose mission is to achieve program and individual self-sufficiency through providing decent, safe, and sanitary housing for eligible low income Native American families residing in Klamath County. KTHD is also striving to eradicate substandard housing, eliminate homelessness, provide housing assistance for foster care, and increase affordable rental housing and homeownership opportunities for low and very low income Native Americans.

In furtherance of that mission, KTHD provides the following services:

- Affordable rental housing for low-income Native Americans
- Rental assistance vouchers (like the HUD Section 8 program)
- First Time Homebuyers Program
- Housing preservation program (providing grants for repairs of existing housing)
- Emergency shelter for homeless families
- Elder Congregate Facility (affordable housing complex for elders)
- Transition Rental Assistance Program
- Help process applications for IHS for septic tank and water well construction and maintenance
- Homebuyer loan guarantee program (Section 184)

KTHD currently serves 337 Native American families through these services. Yet despite KTHD's best efforts, we cannot come close to meeting the housing needs of our membership or the other Native American families that we serve. We have long waiting lists for every KTHD program – **over 200 families in all are on those waiting lists.**

The lack of safe and sanitary housing is a significant problem even in the best of times. But these are far from the best of times. The arrival of COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief the reality of an underfunded housing program. COVID-19 is impacting Indian Country at a disproportionate rate: currently the top five areas in the country for per capita COVID-19 infections are Indian reservations. New York City, which is often discussed as the “epicenter” of the pandemic in the United States, is sixth.

We are learning from the data that substandard housing conditions exacerbate both the spread and the severity of COVID-19. Many of our families live in overcrowded housing, a prime vector for transmission of the disease among family members – particularly elders. Substandard housing without adequate sanitation or running water make it more difficult to take the steps needed to slow the transmission of the disease, such as frequent hand-washing. Homeless persons are particularly vulnerable to infection and, once infected, vulnerable to the worst ravages of the disease. Our emergency homeless shelter provides free housing for homeless families for 60 days. That shelter is almost always full with many families waiting to get in.

Further, due to COVID-19, KTHD had to shut down construction on a fitness center and on four new homes – both desperately needed in our community.

Congress has appropriated some funding under the recent COVID-19 legislation that is going to Indian tribal housing programs. But such support is still far from adequate to meet the needs. Our waiting lists for services are still unconscionably long. Far too many of our families still remain in overcrowded and substandard housing. The federal COVID-19 funding will provide some help in the short term – enabling us to provide additional rental relief, emergency supplies and other lifelines. But it will not remedy the underlying inequities, and will leave our membership particularly vulnerable.

Further, we do not know what this disease has in store for us yet. While Oregon is slowly re-opening for business, we may face another outbreak of this modern-day plague. We are fearful for our future, fearful for our elders, fearful for our families. Our main source of economic development is our modest-sized casino in Chiloquin, Oregon. Yet due to COVID-19 we took the necessary step of closing the doors of the casino in March, and we are only contemplating re-opening now. Many of our Tribal members rely on the casino for employment, and the Tribes rely on casino revenues to fund our governmental services. The loss of jobs and revenue due to COVID-19 is only making the housing crisis worse for our people, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to COVID-19. It is a vicious cycle that needs to be broken.

The Klamath Tribes appreciates the opportunity to testify before this Committee, and would appreciate any assistance you can provide to help us serve our people. While our people are members of the Klamath Tribes, they are also citizens of the State of Oregon.