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### **TESTIMONY OF GREGORY E. PYLE, CHIEF CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA**

#### **BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE HEARING ON H.R. 4347 DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR TRIBAL SELF-GOVERNANCE ACT OF 2009**

**JUNE 9, 2010**

Halito. My name is Gregory E. Pyle and I am the Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I am pleased to be here today to provide formal testimony before the Committee on this very important Tribal Self-Governance initiative.

First, I would like to acknowledge and personally thank Congressman Dan Boren, also from the great State of Oklahoma, for his leadership in introducing H.R. 4347, the "Department of Interior Tribal Self-Governance Act of 2009". He and his staff have worked diligently on behalf of Tribal governments and we are greatly appreciative of his efforts to advance Tribal self-governing authorities under H.R. 4347. This important piece of legislation enhances Tribes' abilities and Self-Governance opportunities by amending Title IV of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) (P.L. 93-638 as amended). I am here today to urge you to promptly take action to enact H.R. 4347.

#### **Benefits of Title IV Amendments**

The Title IV amendments create consistency between the Title IV Self-Governance initiative in the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Title V Self-Governance initiative in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Since

its enactment in 2000, Title V has provided a solid foundation for implementing government-to-government agreements and has served as an excellent vehicle in advancing health care for American Indian and Alaska Native people. Specifically, Title V directly addressed many of the problems that emerged during the Title IV rulemaking process. As a result, many of the improvements included in Title V are unfortunately not included in Title IV. Tribes like Choctaw Nation, who operate Self-Governance programs under both Title IV and Title V, are left with two different sets of administrative requirements, one for IHS and one for DOI.

H.R. 4347 provides further consistency and clarity to bring implementation of Self-Governance under Title IV in line with Title V of the Act. Further, H.R. 4347 minimizes some of the existing administrative burdens and advances Self-Governance opportunities within other DOI agencies.

The Title IV amendments have long been a top legislative priority of Self-Governance Tribal leaders. As a matter of fact, Tribal leaders and staff have worked with both the Administration and Congress over the past decade on this legislative effort. Enactment of these Title IV amendments would be a significant landmark to advance Tribal self-reliance and would positively impact the 260 Tribes currently participating in Self-Governance within the DOI as well as those Tribes considering Self-Governance as an option.

### **Reasons for Self-Governance**

Under Title IV, Tribes have responsibility for management and operation of numerous DOI programs such as education, roads, housing, law enforcement, Tribal courts and natural resources, just to name a few. The benefits of managing these programs under a Self-Governance agreement include:

- ▣ **Improve the quality & quantity of services provided to Tribal citizens;**

- ▣ **Recognize Tribe's right to determine priorities, redesign and create new programs to meet local needs;**
- ▣ **Formalize relations between the United States and Indian Tribes on government-to-government basis as provided for in the U.S. Constitution;**
- ▣ **Promote greater social, economic, political, cultural stability and self-sufficiency among Indian tribes;**
- ▣ **Establish better fiscal accountability through expanded Tribal Governmental decision making authority;**
- ▣ **Institute administrative cost-efficiencies through reduced bureaucratic burdens and streamline decision-making authority; and**
- ▣ **Change roles of the Federal Departments and agencies serving Indian Tribes by shifting their responsibilities from day-to-day management of Tribal affairs to that of Protectors and Advocates of Tribal interests.**

Self-Governance is not just another federal program. Rather, Self-Governance is the exercise of Tribal sovereignty through genuine decision-making power. Self-Governance is about Tribal empowerment, accountability, responsibility and self-sufficiency. Since enactment of the initial 7 Self-Governance agreements under DOI Self-Governance in 1991, the total number of Tribes participating in DOI Self-Governance under Title IV has steadily increased to a total of 260 Tribes today. Self-Governance works because it places management responsibility in the hands of those who care most about seeing Tribal programs succeed and services to citizens improved—the Tribal government itself.

### **Choctaw Nation – Self-Governance Best Practices**

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is federally-recognized by the United States government through the Secretary of the Interior. The Nation consists of ten and one-half counties in the southeastern part of Oklahoma--- bounded on the east by the State of Arkansas, on the south by the Red River, on the north by the South Canadian, Canadian and Arkansas Rivers. The western boundary generally follows a line slightly west of Durant, then due north to the South Canadian River.

The Tribe is governed by the Choctaw Nation Constitution which was ratified by the people on June 9, 1984. The Constitution provides for an Executive, a Legislative and a Judicial branch of government. The legislative authority of the Tribe is vested in the Tribal Council, which consists of 12 members. Members of the Tribal Council are elected by the Choctaw people. The Tribal Council is responsible for adopting rules and regulations which govern the Choctaw Nation, for approving all budgets, making decisions concerning the management of Tribal property, and all other legislative matters. The Tribal Council Members are the voice and representation of the Choctaw people in the Tribal government.

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma believes that responsibility for achieving self-sufficiency rests with the governing body of the Tribe. It is the Tribal Council's responsibility to assist the community in its ability to implement an economic development strategy and to plan, organize, and direct Tribal resources in a comprehensive manner which results in self-sufficiency. The Tribal Council recognizes the need to strengthen the Nation's economy, with primary efforts being focused on the creation of additional job opportunities through promotion and development. By planning and implementing its own programs and building a strong economic base, the Choctaw Nation applies its own fiscal, natural, and human resources to develop self-sufficiency.

These efforts can only succeed through strong governance, sound economic development, and positive social development.

I have served as the Chief of the Choctaw Nation since 1997. In this capacity, I have witnessed and been part of the significant growth and development of all programs and services provided to our citizens and I am proud of our strong history and governance capability.

The Choctaw Nation operates under Self-Governance agreements with both DOI – Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and HHS – Indian Health Services (IHS) programs. Because of the flexibilities and authorities provided under Self-Governance, we have numerous success stories and best practices that could be shared. However, I would like to talk briefly and highlight our Choctaw Nation Health Services Authority, the best rural health care system in America.

We provide health care services to all American Indians/Alaska Natives who present at our facilities. We have managed our entire health delivery system since 1985, initially through a 638 contract under Title I of the ISDEAA, and since 1994 through a Self-Governance Compact under Title V of the ISDEAA. Our healthcare delivery system is comprised of a 37-bed hospital, 8 out-patient clinics, 2 substance abuse in-patient centers and a wide range of preventative programs including nutrition counseling and a diabetes wellness center. All these programs are JCAHCO accredited. Our emergency room is the only ER service within a 50 mile radius. It is a life saver for the community, for Indian and Non-Indian. The Choctaw Nation Health Services Authority's mission statement is "To provide the highest quality health care to the people we serve." Self-Governance has been instrumental in making this Mission become a reality.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to thank this Committee for holding this important hearing on Tribal Self-Governance. I sincerely hope that this Congress will enact H.R. 4347, to further assist us in achieving our mission and goals.