

White Mountain Apache Tribe



Addressing the Housing Needs of Native American Veterans with Disabilities Hearing

Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity

Official Written Testimony
of the
White Mountain Apache Tribe

Submitted by

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Navajo Nation Museum
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INTRODUCTION

Good Morning Honorable Congresswoman Ann Kirkpatrick, Honorable Chairwoman Maxine Waters and other esteemed members of the panel. I bring greetings from the White Mountain Apache Tribe. I am Margaret Baha-Walker from the "eagle" clan and born for the "bear" clan. I serve the White Mountain Apache Tribe as it's Vice Chairwoman and am here today to present testimony on their behalf. As always, I appreciate the support and leadership of Congresswoman Kirkpatrick and her willingness to work with our Tribe to address important issues such as housing and Veteran affairs.

BACKGROUND

Currently there are over 300 members of the White Mountain Apache Tribe that are Veterans. Of those 300, it is estimated that 200-250 of them have a disability. The type of disabilities vary in degree. Recently we have begun to see an increase in health complications in our Veterans that could result in disability. Those who served in Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan are developing new health problems. Some of them are slower to heal from illnesses because of a possible new blood disorder. It is believed that somehow their immune system has been weakened and not able to fight off diseases as easily.

Disabled Veterans living on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation have very little housing options. Because of our general housing shortages, many of these Veterans live with their families or extended relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing. The older homes are in desperate need of rehabilitation. Many Veterans do not have their own homes to fit their personal needs. Some of these Veterans are homeless, a sad but true reality.

IMPACTS & OBSTACLES OF NAHASDA ON WMAT

While we are grateful for the funding received under NAHASDA, it has not even begun to make a dent in our housing and community development needs. The White Mountain Apache Tribe receives two major sources of funding authorized by NAHASDA: the *Indian Housing Block Grant* and the *Indian Community Development Block Grant*. Currently we have 1109 of housing stock but also face a waiting list of over 1000 families needing homes. The average waiting period for a rental unit is approximately two and half to three years.

The current membership of the White Mountain Apache Tribe is 15,000 with a 3% annual growth rate. With many new and young families on the way, the number of them needing homes is sure to increase.

BENEFITS OF HR 3553

The Indian Veterans Housing Opportunity Act of 2009 would ensure that our honored Veterans receive much deserved housing assistance under NAHASDA. The disability and survivor benefits they receive should not be counted as income. I'd like to emphasize how important the Veterans are to not only my Tribe, but to the State of Arizona and the United States. They served to protect

our freedoms and security and the least we can do for them is make sure they have reasonable housing opportunities without penalizing them for receiving other benefits (survivor/disability). We need to focus our efforts more on providing assistance to those in need rather than weighing arbitrary "income" variables to deny people who need it most. The White Mountain Apache Tribe, like the rest of the country is enduring a severe economic recession. In the last decade, we've also had to deal with the Rodeo-Chediski Fires and it's aftermath. More recently, we experienced severe storms that have devastated our lands. We suffer from unemployment rates that would be unthinkable anywhere else in the United States. The people have suffered greatly and our Veterans need fewer hurdles to recover, not more

CLOSING

I stand before you today filled with a genuine pride in our men and women in uniform who bravely defend our country today and also in those who proudly served in the past.

We owe our Veterans a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid. They sacrificed their lives and safety so that we may enjoy the freedoms that we do today. On our behalf, they faced bullets and looked into the face of death so that we may call this land ours, so that we may speak our native tongue, so that we may practice our traditions and so that we may keep the promise of a brighter tomorrow for our children and theirs.

On behalf of my people, thank you for listening to the concerns of my Tribe. Ashoog.

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