



SHINNECOCK INDIAN NATION

Shinnecock Indian Territory

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*The oldest self-governing
Tribe of Indians in the United States*

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Testimony of Lance A. Gumbs, Vice Chair, Shinnecock Indian Nation, Northeastern Regional Alt. Vice President, National Congress of American Indians

Good Morning Honorable Committee and Task Force Chairs and esteemed members. My name is Lance A. Gumbs, I am Vice Chairman of the Shinnecock Indian Nation and Northeastern Regional Alt. Vice President of the National Congress of American Indians. I am honored by the opportunity to appear before you today to help you understand the unique circumstances of Native Peoples in New York in confronting the current pandemic. I am aware that, despite the numerous committees and task forces that convened this hearing, there is no Native American Task Force or Committee charged with addressing our well-being.

I come before you as an elected tribal leader and as an elected Board Member of the largest intergovernmental Native American organization in the United States. The impact on my community is similar to that on Native communities across the country. You may have heard, on the news, that the impact of Covid 19 in Native communities has been devastating. As we speak, the Navajo Nation, spread over four states, has a rate of infection second only to New York State. Smaller tribes in New Mexico face the possibility of total extinction. At Shinnecock, we have avoided that result only through stringent measures we put in place to protect our people. We cannot survive any curve, we must exclude it entirely.

My Nation is located on the East End of Long Island, surrounded by the Town of Southampton in Suffolk County. Our Territory consists, primarily, of a peninsula surrounded on three sides by water, and on all sides by extraordinary wealth. As the pandemic hit New York City, its fleeing citizens came to our neighborhood. We were suddenly surrounded by infection and a completely unable to access any resources we needed to survive. As Suffolk County became an epicenter, we closed our Territory to outsiders and used our best efforts to keep our people safe at home. That included distributing donated food and PPE's in the attempt to keep our people from going off Territory and bringing the virus back. We were mostly successful, but we still had 7 confirmed cases and three fatalities – two of which had left the community to reside in nursing homes. We are fortunate not to have more. We have secured testing equipment, mandated quarantine of exposed individuals, and started contact tracing. We have used CDC and New York State Guidelines as models.

We are very much aware that, if the virus is successful in infiltrating our community, we will be unable to protect our elders: a sizable part of our population who range from 80 to 100 years old – and

who are our National Treasure. Beyond that, many of our younger population live with existing health conditions that make them particularly vulnerable. And too many of these people live in multi-generational housing, where they can inevitably infect each other.

Native Communities have many common issues, but I am most familiar with my Shinnecock Nation and its circumstances, and will address several fundamental concerns:

A. Fundamental Disparities in Health Care

Like other minority communities, Tribal communities are more likely to suffer pre-existing health conditions, inadequately controlled, than the general population. Native communities already suffer catastrophic levels of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity – conditions that increase risk of death even before they increase susceptibility covid-19 complications.

The necessary and difficult solution must be to address inadequate health care – expand access to primary care and preventative health and wellness programs.

B. Nutrition, Food as Medicine, Food Insecurity

Health vulnerability now reflects generations of metabolic disease – a lasting impact of colonization on nutrition in Native Communities. Traditional food sources have been replaced with inadequate substitutes, high in carbohydrates and calories, but without important nutrients, and unsuited to long term wellness.

In response, Tribes throughout the country seek to develop food sovereignty. Rather than live in a food deserts, Tribal communities need support to restore, to the extent possible, traditional food sources. For Shinnecock, this would mean protecting and enhancing our fisheries, with guaranteed access to fresh and saltwater resources. It would mean re-establishing native plantings, through community gardens and access to a tribal trade network of healthy traditional food. Inter-tribal organizations are working on this issue. increased funding and support could help to create healthier communities (both internal and external) – which would better prepare all of us for the health challenge we now face.

Food Insecurity.

For 10 weeks, we have been operating the Shinnecock Food Distribution Tent to ensure adequate food to unemployed citizens and also to encourage all people to stay within the Territory. But we have depended on outside donations, increasingly difficult as outside communities came to rely on the same food sources. We need more consistent support through state and federal food distribution programs, and not only in crisis times. According to the 2010 census, 60 percent of the Shinnecock community lives below the poverty level. A key to enhancing nutrition would be to establish permanent food pantries, stocked with shelf stable and also fresh foods, as well as areas to facilitate preparation and distribution of food to the community. In non-crisis times, these pantries could function as a community resource to re-establish traditional foods and cooking – serving deeper cultural survival and multi-generational interaction.

C. Housing

Many of our tribal people live in substandard housing, and some remain homeless. Our traditional

homelands are now encircled by some of the richest communities in the world. Jobs are scarce, and costs are high. We have limited homesites on the Reservation, and families are crowded together, or forced to seek housing elsewhere. In the current crisis, meaningful quarantine and isolation is almost impossible – meaning that a single positive case threatens many people. In the past weeks, our location has become increasingly deadly, as New Yorkers fleeing the Epicenter brought the virus to the East End at the same time that they consumed the food and emergency supplies in the local stores.

We have an urgent and immediate need for additional housing to permit individual quarantine and isolation from the larger community. We need to protect our people from the outside and from the virus that may come among us. We suggest rapid deployment of tiny house communities specifically to accommodate covid-positive individuals, as well as homeless tribal citizens at risk of exposure for lack of a safe refuge. Because some of those quarantined individuals might need additional support, we would want to implement food pantries – including reserve food storage, and facilities to prepare and distribute food.

D. The Digital Divide sabotaging Education/Telemedicine/Tribal Governance

Like many tribal communities, Shinnecock lacks robust, or even adequate internet service. As a regular matter, we see clusters of cars seeking viable access at the few locations reached by our internet service. Without full access to the Internet, the children of the Shinnecock Nation are impeded from continuing their education during the shutdown. Similarly, our meager healthcare service is handicapped from access to increasingly important tele-medicine resources. Our tribal government cannot fully participate in the business of serving and protecting the Nation when we cannot be sure if we can hear and be heard in the network of public affairs. My own participation today hinges on whether my internet connection stays intact.

Our Territory needs technology, like other minority communities across the State. We need Broadband and infrastructure improvements to extend signal across the Territory. We must implement renewable energy to alleviate the crushing utility costs in Eastern Long Island. We should guarantee that every child has the tools to be successful in school, particularly when they cannot be in their schools. We need to support our health centers, tribal government centers and the larger community to have the ability to function and communicate in the twenty first century. All that takes funds that we do not have. There are some highly competitive grants available, but expanding these should be a priority for New York State, as well as the Federal Government.

Once again, I thank you for including me in this discussion. I hope it is the beginning of an important dialogue that assists the State and Federal Governments to better carry out their obligations as Trustees for the Native Peoples whose land made this country possible. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.





Emergency Meal Kit

Kit Contains

Use By: 5/12/2020

4 Breakfast

4 Assorted Meals

Fresh Fruit

Distributed By Shinnecock Indian Nation NE Region