



Tohono O'odham Nation
Office of the
Chairman and Vice Chairwoman

Ned Norris Jr. Wavalene M. Saunders
Chairman Vice Chairwoman



August 5, 2021

United States House of Representatives
Office of Chairman McGovern

Dear Chairman James McGovern

**Comments of the Tohono O'odham Nation Department of Education for the
United States House of Representatives Rules Committee Chairman McGovern visit**

Introduction

The Tohono O'odham Nation submits the following comments for the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S.D.E. invited comments during its Virtual Tribal Consultation with tribal leaders April 19, 2021 in response to the January 26, 2021 Presidential Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening the Nation-to-Nation Relationships, and the Tohono O'odham submits these comments in response to that invitation.

The Tohono O'odham Nation

The Tohono O'odham Nation ("Nation") is a federally recognized tribe in southern Arizona with over 35,000 enrolled tribal citizens. The Nation's reservation, which consists of five non-contiguous areas located in Pima, Pinal, and Maricopa Counties, encompasses approximately 4,500 square miles of a mostly remote Sonoran Desert environment, with 62 miles of international border with Mexico. The political center of the Tohono O'odham Nation, Sells, AZ, where a majority of the governmental services are provided, is located almost 60 miles away from the nearest urban area. Additionally, the Tohono O'odham Nation consists of eleven political subdivisions known as districts, with over 66 rural and remote tribal villages.

Pre Pandemic Student Count for the Tohono O'odham Nation

Within the Nation's borders, there are seven Head Start Centers, including a Home Base Program, with a student capacity of 215. Six Public Education schools with a student count of approximately 1,100. Four Bureau of Indian Education Schools with a student count of approximately 670. In addition, two Faith-Based schools with approximately 150. Many of the students travel long distances, at least 30-40 miles, to attend school. There are also large populations of our tribal members enrolled in public/charter/parochial Arizona schools in the surrounding areas of Tucson,

Casa Grande, Gila Bend and Ajo at a student count of approximately 1,500 and approximately 70 students attending BIE out of state boarding schools. Our local Tohono O’odham Community College has a student count of around 240.

Tohono O’odham Department of Education Overview

The Tohono O’odham Nation Department of Education is dedicated to education services and advocacy of all tribal citizens. Department programs and divisions include: Venito Garcia Library, Recreation Division, One Stop Division, Vocational Rehabilitation, Head Start, Child Care, Special Services, Johnson O’Malley, Education Assistance, Tohono O’odham Nation Youth Council, Tohono O’odham Language Teacher Certification and Education Administration.

The Head Start is the longest established school system through Federal PL 93-638 funds that provide a form of tribal autonomy (established in 1965). Head Start and Child Care are our only department recipients of nutritional funding support from the State of Arizona’s Department of Education.

The One Stop Division is one of three programs established to support adult education and training for our citizens funded through Federal PL 102-477 and Arizona Department of Economic Security Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

The Recreation Division is comprised of five recreation centers located in five different Districts. The center were originally created for youth recreation programming, but has grown into a full community recreation facility. The Recreation Division is tribally funded.

Points of Success and Advocacy by Department Program/Division

Tohono O’odham Nation Head Start and Child Care

Successes

During the pandemic, Children/Families benefits from our nutrition program, by receiving food boxes that consist of fruits/vegetables, dairy, meat and grains (in accordance with the USDA requirements). The State of Arizona allowed changing receipt of hot meals to food boxes in the beginning of the tribal closure from the pandemic. The food boxes contained simple recipes for families to make together at home. The State of Arizona’s Department of Education assisted with resourceful information on nutrition services and other resources and technical assistance.

Advocacy

- 1. Fund nutrition/food for the full calendar year for Head Start Programs.** Head Start nutrition/food funds are only for the nine-month calendar year. The inclusion of the three summer months would allow the program to continue to provide breakfast, lunch and snacks for 215 children.
- 2. Advocate to diminish tribal match requirements for tribal Head Start programs and fully fund early childhood education.**
- 3. Advocate to increase resources to diminish food deserts on tribal lands.**

Tohono O’odham Nation One Stop Division

Successes

Tribal citizens that provide proof of enrollment in public assistance qualify for One Stop services. This includes access to higher education funding, job placement, certified training programs and other educational and career readiness opportunities.

Advocacy

1. **Revise public assistance support thresholds and timeframes to allow for family resource adjustments and transition to independence.** Clients enrolled in our One Stop program will see immediate decreases in their public assistance amounts when they receive financial support from the One Stop Program. There have been potential clients decline services to avoid loss of public assistance support. The success rate of our clients is high when their One Stop Specialist supports them during job placement. The Specialist will continue to work with them during their first 60-90 days of employment in their new job. If current clients still received public assistance at 100% for 90 days of employment, then, were reduced incrementally for the next 90 days, it would ease economic stress.

General Education Advocacy

1. **Allow for adjustment to USDA guidelines for schools on tribal lands to self-define quality nutritious food for their students in accordance with tribal nutrition standards.**
2. **Allow for adjustment to USDA guidelines for schools to provide three meals and/or snacks per day for students attending schools within tribal lands.**
3. **Increase support and funding for student mental health and well-being.**

SNAP Benefits Point of Success During the Pandemic

SNAP Benefits to families with children were increased because children were not attending schools and not receiving school meals. This benefit extended to all children and was a positive impact for families everywhere.

III. Additional Comments

The Tohono O'odham Nation Department of Education will continue to build on our current successes for the benefit of our O'odham. We support tribal education resilience by continuing working in partnership with other Indian Tribes and educational stakeholders to identify strengths and barriers to improving education outcomes and learning experiences of Native students. Through these partnerships, strategies and solutions for providing transformational learning experiences for our students is possible. Student success is dependent on student wellness. The U.S. House of Representatives Rules Committee, working collaboratively with Indian Tribes is a strength to sustain and provides opportunity to meet the specific wellness needs of students across urban, remote, and rural schools. By working together, we can help our students thrive.