

**Hearing Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs**

**Hearing on Advancing Tribal Self-Determination:
Examining the Opportunities and Challenges of the 477 Program**

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**Testimony of Lee Spoonhunter
Northern Arapaho Business Council**

I. Introduction

Chairman Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the Northern Arapaho Tribe.

My name is Lee Spoonhunter. I am an enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe and have been Co-Chairman of the Tribe's Business Council since 2016 and served as Chairman from 2018 to 2020.

For over 20 years, I have dedicated my career to public service. I had the pleasure of working for the Northern Arapaho Tribe's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program for almost a decade. I then went on to help build and improve the Northern Arapaho child support program. Prior to being elected to the Business Council, I served as the Northern Arapaho Sky People Higher Education Director.

In addition to my work for the Tribe, I serve on the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Tribal Intergovernmental Advisory Committee and have also worked as a consultant to several other tribes to help with their respective TANF and Child Support programs. So, I have seen, first-hand and for several decades, the needs of the Northern Arapaho people and native people at-large.

Though not without its faults, Public Law 102-477 ("477") has been an important step towards tribal self-governance and sovereignty in managing federal programs that affect our members. 477 has allowed for increased budget flexibility, reduced program inefficiencies, and allows the Northern Arapaho Tribe to prioritize programs that help our people build sustainable lives for themselves and their families. This testimony will discuss both the feats of, as well as key areas for improvement for, 477.

II. Overview of Services

I will start by giving a general overview about how the Tribe leverages 477 programs to empower Northern Arapaho tribal members and adjacent native people.

As a government entity, our Business Council is tasked with fostering an environment conducive to our people earning sustainable wages, providing for their families, and establishing a strong community. And we must do this while staying true to, and embracing, our ever-important cultural heritage.

To that end, the Northern Arapaho Tribe leverages 477 to create consolidated programming approved by the Business Council to achieve the following goals: (1) to reduce joblessness; (2) to assist and support individual and family efforts to become self-sufficient; (3) to encourage and support youth academic success; (4) to encourage healthy lifestyles and cultural appreciation; and (5) to strengthen the Tribe's ability to reach tribally determined goals consistent with our status as a sovereign entity.

477 programs are grouped into 5 main categories, including: (1) TANF cash assistance programs, (2) employment and training programs, (3) work experience programs, (4) childcare programs, and we also provide programming for (5) general assistance. Most programs are available to individuals that live on the Wind River Reservation, as well as those residing in Fremont and Hot Springs Counties so long as the household contains one or more Northern Arapaho child or descendant.

- **Cash assistance.** Our Tribe provides temporary cash assistance services to participant families, with or without children. Participants must meet certain requirements, including developing and complying with an Individual Self-Sufficiency Plan (ISP) or Family Self-Sufficiency Plan (FSSP) as well as engaging in approved work activities to strengthen the participant's employment capabilities.
- **Employment and Training.** We provide employment and training services to participants that are members of a federally recognized tribe and live either on the Wind River Reservation or in Fremont or Hot Springs Counties. Additionally, programs like the Native Employment Works (NEW) program are designed to aid individuals who are under-employed or unemployed on a one-time basis. The NEW program has primarily provided services to individuals and students attending the Wind River Job Corps.
- **Work Experience Programs.** The work experience programming has placed several workers in tribal departments, including Enrollment, Senior Wood Program, Utilities, Senior Citizen's Program, Housing, TERO, and childcare. Many of these individuals were hired into permanent full-time positions. Even for those who are not immediately hired, we sometimes extend participants' hours until the employer has capacity to hire them.

- **Childcare Programs.** Through childcare programming, our Tribe provides subsidized childcare assistance to low-income families engaged in an approved work, education, or job search activity. Childcare services are important to nurture and strengthen families to become self-sufficient.

III. Success Stories

Implementing programming pursuant to 477 has been largely successful and is helping the Tribe better assist individuals on the reservation and in adjacent counties with moving towards personal economic self-sufficiency.

The Northern Arapaho Tribe has used 477 programming to help individuals identify and remove barriers to employment, gain work experience, obtain and retain full-time paid employment, advance in the workforce, and make steady forward movements to achieve unsubsidized employment. Through leveraging our programs, some participants have obtained a GED/HiSET. Others have received Commercial Driver Licenses, Heavy Equipment Operators licenses, medical assistance training, electrician apprenticeships, construction experience, and more.

The Tribe has also assisted students attending Central Wyoming College with education costs, including tuition, fees, books and supplies. And we have also paid for substitute teaching certifications as the demand for substitute teachers following the pandemic has remained high.

Other examples of ways we have been able to successfully leverage 477 include:

- Installing playgrounds within our communities.
- Providing Language and Culture Camping kits for home providers to use during our tribal ceremonies. Kits included first aid materials, flashlights, books, sunblock, mosquito spray, an umbrella, face masks, hand sanitizer, and other helpful materials.
- Providing backpacks filled with school supplies.
- Providing Halloween safety handouts and goody bags to children.
- Providing arts and craft kits during the winter holiday months.

These are just some of the ways, both big and small, that we have been able to leverage 477 programming to benefit individuals and encourage economically self-sustainable, healthy, lifestyles.

IV. Challenges

While there have certainly been positive impacts resulting from 477 programming, the Northern Arapaho Tribe and the federal government can, and must, continue to make improvements and increase efficiencies where they are most beneficial.

As the Committee is well aware, government institutions are not always the most expeditious entities. Often, issues arise at a pace exceeding the speed of even our tribal government. Additional delays stemming from multi-government processes, and accounting for agency action, creates unnecessary hardships for our members. Meeting the challenges of our people requires flexible

budgets and agile government processes. And as both the boots on the ground and the sovereign governing body most familiar with the daily challenges facing the Northern Arapaho people, we are best positioned to address these needs.

Of course, the Tribe appreciates the cooperative efforts of all agencies. And we look forward to working with this Committee and other government agencies reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies where possible.

V. Conclusion

The sustainability of our culture and economy is deeply dependent on the people that compose our communities. If we want to ensure long-term self-sustainability for tomorrow, then it is necessary that we make strategic investments in those individuals and their families today. Thus, we remain committed to harnessing the full potential of 477 to deliver increasingly effective solutions and meet the needs of our people as it relates to employment, education, training, and childcare. This is essential for the Tribe as a whole, as well as its individual parts.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions during the hearing.