

Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

For Immediate Release

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Johnson Chairs Hearing on Job Creation in Native Communities

WASHINGTON – Senate Banking Committee Chairman Tim Johnson (D-SD) held a hearing today to discuss the opportunities and challenges faced by Native American communities around the country.

The Committee discussed obstacles holding back job creation such as lack of access to capital, as well as work being done to address the problem. While progress has been made, many Native communities continue to face significant challenges, including staggering unemployment rates, inadequate health care, high crime rates, and educational inequalities.

“Fostering small business growth is a vital step toward increasing employment opportunities and improving local economies throughout the country. Small business growth in Indian Country is no exception,” said Johnson. “Encouraging the startup and growth of Native American-owned businesses is an important priority to me as Chairman.”

Tanya Fiddler is the executive director of the Four Bands Community Fund, a Community Development Financial Institution serving the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Her organization provides financial products, business training, and financial education, to support entrepreneurial skills and promote economic development.

“Businesses on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation and other reservations across South Dakota face complex challenges,” said Ms. Fiddler. “But Community Development Financial Institutions like Four Bands Community Fund are making a difference, by expanding access to capital, fostering a new culture of entrepreneurship, and helping local businesses create jobs. I appreciate Chairman Johnson’s continued support for Native entrepreneurs, and for calling this hearing on such an important issue for our communities.”

Mark Tilsen is the co-founder of Native American Natural Foods, a startup based on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He described hurdles he has faced in securing loans for his company, due to financial challenges caused by being located on a reservation.

“We appreciate the opportunity to share the challenges that small businesses face across Indian Country in trying to access capital for growth,” Mr. Tilsen said. “Because the

unemployment rate has never been lower than 60 percent on the Pine Ridge Reservation, it is time for new strategies and tactics to create new opportunities for growth. And Native American Natural Foods is breaking new ground but is limited by our lack of access to adequate financial support.”

Chairman Johnson is a long-time advocate for policies to help improve the quality of life for American Indians, and is a member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee.

Below is Chairman Johnson’s statement as prepared for delivery:

“During my time in Congress, I have enjoyed a strong working relationship with American Indian tribes in South Dakota and around the country and have advocated for policies to help improve the quality of life for American Indians. While progress has been made, many Native communities continue to face significant challenges, including staggering unemployment rates, inadequate health care, crowded and unsafe housing conditions, high crime rates, and educational inequalities. This is unacceptable.

“Fostering small business growth is a vital step toward increasing employment opportunities and improving local economies throughout the country during these difficult economic times. Small business growth in Indian Country is no exception. Encouraging the startup and growth of Native American-owned businesses is an important priority to me as Chairman, and that is why I have called this important hearing and invited all of you to testify here today.

“For many years, I have worked to ensure Native communities in South Dakota, and across the country, have adequate infrastructure in place to foster an environment where economic development can take place—from being an original cosponsor of the legislation that created the NAHASDA block grant for housing to helping fund the Mni Wiconi rural water system to supporting tribal bus transit programs.

“Today, the Committee will examine what challenges continue to hinder economic growth in Indian Country, including the lack of access to capital, small business lending, financial education, and support for start-up businesses. With unemployment rates reaching an astonishing 80% in some areas of Indian Country, we must do better to address the problems that cause this persistent cycle of unemployment.

“While it’s sometimes easy to become discouraged when considering all the obstacles that face Native communities, we will also hear about the great work so many are doing to help address these persistent problems. In South Dakota, and in other states, there are many small business owners, community development institutions, community banks and credit unions, and dedicated public servants working every day to improve the economic climate on tribal lands.

“Just this past August, I had the honor of visiting Eagle Butte on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where I was able to hear directly from small business owners about the challenges they face and the important assistance they received

from the Four Bands Community Fund. The leaders of these small businesses—ranging from Lakota Archery to Bonnie’s Quilting Boutique –really demonstrated for me the strength of the Native entrepreneurial spirit and how important CDFI programs are to small business growth in Indian Country.

“I’m very pleased we are joined by such a great panel of witnesses today, and I thank them for being here. I also want to acknowledge and thank Senator Akaka. We are all fortunate for his service on this Committee and as the Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee. I’m proud to serve on the Indian Affairs Committee under his leadership, where we’ve considered many of these important issues.”