

The 2018 State of Indian Nations, held by the National Congress of American Indians, gathered hundreds of spectators on Feb. 12 to hear about goals, opportunities and priorities regarding the federal government and Indian Country. NCAI President Jefferson Keel delivered this year's speech and Senator Tom Udall, D-NM, delivered the congressional response.

In congratulating newly recognized Virginia tribes, including the Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Upper Mattaponi, Rappahannock, Nansemond and Monocan Tribes, Keel explained that this success is just another testament to the influence Native Americans have had on the world.

"In developing agriculture, building infrastructure, managing lands and natural resources, in governing and solving shared community challenges, we are and always have been innovators and leaders," he said, pointing to specific impacts Indian Country has had on the U.S.

According to Keel, agriculture is one of the biggest contributions Indian Country has on the U.S., summing it up to be a \$3.2 billion industry that supports nearly 72,000 jobs for natives and non-natives. Individual nations have also contributed to local and state economies, such as the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, which provides 6,000 full-time jobs, half of which are held by non-natives.

Unlike other jobs outside of Indian Country, Keel assured that Native-run jobs are not going anywhere.

"You're never going to read about how these jobs are being moved overseas because native businesses don't pull up stakes, even when market conditions change," he said. "We root our businesses in local communities for good. If you want to buy American, then do business with Tribal economies."

Sen. Udall agreed with Keel, going on to say how these successes are implemented into the three core principles he brings to all legislative decisions regarding Indian Country - guiding tribal sovereignty, promoting tribal self-determination and ensuring that meaningful government-to-government consultation happens when federal action affects Indian Country.

"Decisions made for Indians by Indians produce the best outcomes for the unique needs, cultures and beliefs of their communities," Udall said. "President Keel's address poignantly recognized the challenges Indian Country faces, but it also recognizes your success and determination in uncertain times."

Some of these uncertain times are being address by Congress, including the Native Youth and Tribal Officer Protection Act, a continued effort based on the Violence Against Women Act of 2013.

Explaining that VAWA was a critical step, Udall assured people that "there is still more to do" and said that the Native Youth Act hopes to protect women and their children from domestic abuse on Tribal lands, as well the officers who responds to those crimes. Part of the reasoning for this revision stems from the Department of Health and Human Services report "Addressing Trauma in American Indian and Alaska Native Youth," which found that native children are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from trauma, as compared to non-native youth. It also found that 22 percent of native youth suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, which is the same rate as Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

Another main point Udall addressed was the legislative combat of the ongoing opioid congress. While many policies have addressed the crisis nationally, tribal nations are usually not included in legislative plans for this issue.

The National Indian Health Board reported that the grants stemming from the 2017 State Targeted

Response to the Opioid Epidemic did not pertain to Indian Country, despite Native Americans having statistically higher opioid issues when compared to other races in the U.S.

As reported by the Centers for Disease Control, Native Americans lead second in the U.S. - whites leading in first - in overdose rate. While rates statistically have a higher rate, they also have more public health initiatives available that Native Americans do not have as much access to. Additionally, Native American youth are twice as likely as white and three times as likely as black youth to use nonmedical opioids.

Udall hopes to combat this issue by implementing more tribal-specific measures and resources.

"We can win the battle against addiction, but we must invest real resources and action, not just lip service," he said. "We must ensure that anyone who wants treatment can get it."

Other topics discussed included the continuing the survival of native languages, farming policies and procedures, infrastructure and the opioid crisis. The State of Indian Nations ended with a question and answer session with guests and a final note from Keel.

"To those young children watching, get involved, stay involved and look at what's going on around you. If you want to be part of what's happening you can do that and we look forward to working with you to help you with that."

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