

## Native language protection bill headed to the president

Written by Staff Reports

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act S. 256 passed the House Dec. 9 after passing the Senate in June. This bill, which honors Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo traditional storyteller and Tewa language advocate who died in 2006, is now headed for the president's desk.

The bill received the support of the New Mexico delegation in its effort to safeguard and revitalize Native American languages. The bill amends existing law to reauthorize two federal Native American language programs at the Administration for Native Americans until 2024, expand eligibility for those programs to smaller-sized Tribal language programs, and allow both programs to offer longer grant periods.

The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act, S. 256, will help preserve Native languages to combat the predicted extinction of all of the approximately 148 Native languages still spoken within the next 50 to 100 years. Biennial evaluations by the Department of Health and Human Services show the program increases fluency with 4,000 speakers and trains between 170 and 280 Native language teachers each year.

The legislation, authored by Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., passed the Senate in June, after being reported out of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. It was co-sponsored with nearly unanimous support from House Democrats, including members of Democratic Leadership and the Congressional Native American Caucus.

"Native languages in the U.S. represent some of the greatest linguistic diversity in the world and embody the cultures, histories, and resiliency of the Native communities that speak them," Udall said. "With passage of the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act today, Congress has continued its commitment working with Tribes to

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protect and renew Native languages. This bill is also important for its recognition of Esther Martinez's legacy of Native languages advocacy in New Mexico and across the country. I'm proud the House joined the Senate to honor Esther Martinez's work and look forward to this bill becoming law."

"Esther Martinez was a champion for Native languages who spent her life teaching others and promoting the growth of indigenous languages and culture. With the passage of this bipartisan legislation, Congress has taken a major step to deliver results on this top priority for Native communities that are working to preserve their languages," Cong. Ben Ray Luján stated. "I was proud to help spearhead the passage of this legislation to ensure language justice for future generations."

"The protection and preservation of our Native languages is crucial to the cultural identities of tribal citizens and the overall sustainability of tribal nations," Chief Executive Officer of the National Congress of American Indians Kevin J. Allis said. "We are thrilled to see the House pass the Esther Martinez Native Languages Programs Reauthorization Act, which provides tribal nations the critical resources needed to ensure Native languages continue to be spoken for generations to come. We appreciate Representative Luján and Senator Udall's tireless efforts to get this important legislation through Congress."

"Native language preservation is central to advancing culturally responsive education. Our children thrive inside and outside of the classroom when learning their own language," National Indian Education Association President Marita Hinds said. "The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act represents a milestone in expanding tribal flexibility to develop and implement Native language immersion programs which serve the unique academic and cultural needs of Native students."

"As indigenous languages face a sharp decline, with only 20 indigenous languages expected to remain viable by the year 2050, the All Pueblo Council of Governors is grateful for the passing of the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act. The act will help tribes stem the loss of Native languages by significantly increasing support for language immersion programs which will help ensure the cultural practices vital to the traditional well-being of our indigenous nations stays alive with our stories, songs, and prayers being passed on for future generations," All Pueblo Council of Governors Chairman E. Paul Torres said.

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“Ohkay Owingeh is sincerely grateful for the passage of S. 256, the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act of 2019. But here at home Poe Tsawa legacy has already been established in the hearts and minds of all the Ohkay people, most of whom she instructed, including this writer,” Governor of Ohkway Owingeh Pueblo Ron Lovato announced.

“We deeply appreciate the leadership of Senator Udall and Rep. Lujan on passage of this important legislation. This legislation will help support our efforts to preserve the Apache language and our culture by providing critical resources for our Nde’ Bizáá program and at Mescalero Apache schools,” Mescalero Apache Tribe President Gabe Aguilar said.

Esther Martinez’ family made this statement, “Our family is thankful for the decisive action the House of Representatives has taken to pass legislation to safeguard Native languages for generations to come. This important initiative, one that recognizes the legacy of Esther Martinez, will help revitalize and prevent the loss of Native languages. Our language is central to our culture, and it’s critical that we train Native language teachers and increase fluency with Native speakers to protect it. Esther Martinez, our mother, was committed to this cause, and we are proud to see this legislation pass in her honor.”