



**House Appropriations Committee
Maryland General Assembly
February 18, 2025**

Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

I am Kerry Hawk Lessard, the Executive Director of Native American LifeLines, a Title V Urban Indian Health Program dedicated to serving American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations in Maryland. I am also an applied medical anthropologist and have previously served on the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs, where I chaired the Health Committee.

I am writing to express my strong support for House Bill 794, which seeks to establish the Indian Heritage and Culture Grant Program and Fund. This initiative is vital for preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Native communities within our state.

The Importance of Cultural Connection

In 2006, I participated in a project funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention that examined the role of intergenerational trauma in the contemporary health status of urban AI/AN individuals. While the study focused on HIV risk and substance use disorders, it revealed deeper insights into the challenges faced by our community. Community members identified three primary barriers to achieving and sustaining wellness:

1. **Cultural Disconnection:** A lack of engagement with traditional practices and values.
2. **Invisibility in a Majority Non-Native Environment:** Feeling unseen and unacknowledged within the broader society.
3. **Lateral Violence:** Experiencing conflict and aggression within the Native community itself.

These findings underscore the critical role that cultural connection plays in health and well-being. Community members expressed that a disconnect from their culture contributed to feelings of unwellness. In response, Native American LifeLines has prioritized Indigenous cultural practices as fundamental to healing and well-being—a concept often referred to as "culture as prevention."¹

¹ Masotti, P., Dennem, J., Bañuelos, K. et al. The Culture is Prevention Project: measuring cultural connectedness and providing evidence that culture is a social determinant of health for Native Americans. BMC Public Health 23, 741 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15587-x>

Main Office: 1 East Franklin Street • Suite 200 • Baltimore, MD 21202 • 410-837-2258 • FAX 410-837-2692

Boston Office: 2077 Centre Street • West Roxbury, MA 02132 • 857-203-9680 • FAX 857-203-9653



Challenges in Educational Settings

My work with the Title VI Indian Education Program in Baltimore City revealed similar themes among Native students. They reported that a lack of accurate representation, prevalent misrepresentations, microaggressions, and unsupportive environments contributed to lower educational attainment and increased rates of dropout and truancy.²

The Impact of Invisibility

As a community health professional, I have observed that the failure to see ourselves reflected in the society in which we live—especially when that society is seated on our traditional homelands—creates a dissonance that is not easily understood or overcome. This sense of invisibility contributes to health disparities, including higher burdens of poverty and disease among AI/AN populations compared to Non-Hispanic Whites.³

The Significance of House Bill 794

House Bill 794 proposes the creation of the Indian Heritage and Culture Grant Program and Fund, which would provide resources to preserve Indian tribal history and culture. This initiative is not only crucial for the well-being of Native people but also serves as a step toward reconciliation and fostering a right relationship between Native and non-Native communities.

By supporting this legislation, the state acknowledges the importance of cultural preservation as a means to promote health, education, and social cohesion. It recognizes that the well-being of Native communities is intertwined with the recognition and celebration of their cultural heritage.

I urge the committee to pass House Bill 794, affirming Maryland's commitment to honoring and preserving the rich cultural heritage of its Native communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kerry Hawk Lessard, MAA
Executive Director
Native American LifeLines

² Eason, A. E., Brady, L. M., & Fryberg, S. A. (2018). Reclaiming representations & interrupting the cycle of bias against Native Americans. *Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, 147(2), 70–81.

³ American Psychological Association. (2023, October). Healing tribal communities: Addressing mental health and resilience in Native American populations. *Monitor on Psychology*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/10/healing-tribal-communities-native-americans>