

Tuesday, February 18, 2025

**The Honorable Ben Barnes, Chair
House Appropriations Committee**

**Testimony in Support of HB 794 - Maryland Commission On Indian Affairs -
Indian Heritage and Culture Grant Program and Fund**

**Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs
Tiara Thomas, Chair**

Greetings Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and esteemed members of the Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for House Bill 794, the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs - Indian Heritage and Culture Grant Program and Fund. This bill is a crucial step towards preserving and promoting the rich history and culture of Indian tribes in Maryland.

The establishment of the Indian Heritage and Culture Grant Program and Fund will provide much-needed resources to support initiatives that preserve Indian tribal history and culture. By creating a special, non-lapsing fund and ensuring that interest earnings are credited to the Fund, HB794 ensures sustainable financial support for these important cultural preservation efforts.

Furthermore, the authorization for the Governor to include an appropriation of \$500,000 in the annual operating budget demonstrates a significant commitment to this cause. This funding will enable the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs to effectively manage and distribute grants to projects that safeguard our Indian heritage.

Supporting HB794 will also enhance the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) social studies frameworks for K-12 students. The funding provided by this bill will enable Maryland Tribes and non-profits to create and promote supplemental materials and educational experiences that accurately represent American Indian history and culture. This approach allows tribal communities to tell their own histories and highlight their cultural influences, ensuring that students gain a deeper understanding of the diverse narratives that shape our society. This is particularly beneficial for American Indian students within Maryland, as it allows them to see their heritage and contributions reflected in their education and communities.

Additionally, the bill will positively impact public education by promoting inclusivity and cultural awareness among all students. It will empower American Indian Marylanders to see themselves represented in their communities, fostering a sense of pride and

belonging. Seeing oneself represented in the community is crucial for holistic health, as it supports mental, emotional, and social well-being.

I also urge that preference be given to Maryland Tribes first when awarding grants, followed by non-profits that support American Indians and their descendants. This prioritization ensures that the resources are directed towards those who are most closely connected to and knowledgeable about the needs of the American Indian population in Maryland.

As an enrolled citizen of the Piscataway Conoy and as an educator, I have witnessed firsthand the importance of preserving our cultural heritage. The stories, traditions, and history of Indian tribes are invaluable assets that enrich our society and contribute to our collective identity. Supporting HB794 is not just about preserving the past; it is about empowering future generations to understand and appreciate their heritage.

I urge the Committee to pass HB794 and take a decisive step towards honoring and preserving the cultural legacy of Indian tribes in Maryland. Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,

Tiara Thomas