



Notes from the Chief

What I'm working on for You

Osiyo -

For Cherokee Nation, like most tribes in America, language is the vital thread that holds our heritage together. Our language is embedded with unique concepts and knowledge that are purely Cherokee and do not exist in other cultures. That's why we continue to aggressively develop programs and educational opportunities for all our people, so that they are able to connect with and learn the Cherokee language. We know strong language programs help boost Cherokee identity and ensure our citizens have a chance to be culturally connected.

One of the most popular efforts is the Community Language Program, an effort spearheaded through Cherokee Nation's Language Department. The Community Language Program has three full-time staff members. In addition to those full-time staff, about 15 fluent Cherokee speakers are contracted annually to teach language classes throughout the tribe's 14-county jurisdictional area. All of the instructors have been certified and have passed the Cherokee Language Teachers test. Today, we have more than 60 instructors certified to teach for the Community Language Program, and they are contracted with as needed. Many elders who serve in this capacity are teaching Cherokee cultural knowledge just as much as they teach the words and pronunciations.

Community participation is the biggest challenge in maintaining a vital and thriving tribal language. The Community Language Program typically hosts 30 to 35 classes annually, and they are scheduled according to community demand across the 14 counties. All classes, which are 10 weeks long and follow a fall/spring schedule that lines up with the public school calendars, remain free of charge and open to the public.

If a northeast Oklahoma community desires a Cherokee language class, organizers contact our staff, and a schedule determined by the availability of instructors is set. Most of our classes are hosted in partner spaces like community buildings, schools and churches.

We teach about 1,000 citizens per year in the Community Language Program. They come in all ages, from youth to elders. Additionally, the Community Language Program hosts online Cherokee language classes throughout the year. The tribe's at-large community is served through the online classes. Online class attendance reaches about 2,000 per year but the completion rates vary, and we often get international students. Additionally, the online classes are archived so some people sign up and watch all the archived lessons.

Keepsake certificates, which feature Cherokee syllabary, are given to students who attend at least 80 percent of the class's meetings. These certificates of completion are also issued to online students. Last year we issued more than 130 certificates.

We allocate funding and hire elders and traditional teachers, and we have developed an award-winning curriculum to help ignite the desire to learn the Cherokee language. We are using modern technology to the best of our abilities to share these lessons, and our ultimate desire is to ensure the Cherokee language will never be lost. In fact, these efforts mean it is thriving, growing and being used every day.

For more information about the Cherokee Language Program, email language@cherokee.org or call (918) 453-5420.

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