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Office of the Chief

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ADMINISTRATION MEMORANDUM REALIGNING EXPECTATIONS FOR SPEAKER SERVICES

The purpose of this Administration Memorandum is to provide further direction on reforming the Speaker Services program, launched January 7, 2022, and realign it with my Administration's expectations following my memorandum of December 6, 2024, and the Language Department's Response of December 23, 2024. As Cherokee Nation celebrates the third anniversary of Speaker Services, we can look forward to the program continuing to perform impactful work and doing so on a sustainable basis to best serve our population of first language fluent speakers. Cherokee Nation leadership should work to implement this memorandum to the greatest extent possible by **February 17, 2025 (see Part III, "Implementation Team," below)**.

I. Background

Speaker Services formally launched with my "Memorandum Setting Expectations for Cherokee Nation Language Department Speaker Services Unit," of January 7, 2022. The central directive of that memorandum was that the new program:

...engage directly with fluent Cherokee Speakers on a one-on-one basis as close to their homes and communities as possible, assess their needs and

work to improve their quality of life by utilizing the resources of the Cherokee Nation...

The memorandum contemplated that the Language Department does not shoulder all of the obligations here. Therefore, I directed that:

[A]ll departments and entities should consider a referral or inquiry from Speaker Services to be of the highest priority for my office.

These twin directives are inextricably linked, and the one cannot be met without meeting the other.

In my December 6, 2024 “Administration Memorandum Realigning Expectations for Speaker Services,” I reviewed the extraordinary growth and demonstrable success of Speaker Services over the course of less than three years. In that time the program invested \$34 million across more than 1,700 unique projects, through the provision of a range of other services as well as department operating expenses. The department did so at lightening speed, standing up its first ever direct services department, building capacity that began with a single director and has expanded along the way. The memorandum acknowledged that the growth was largely fueled by an influx of one-time ARPA funds under our [Respond, Recover and Rebuild Plan](#).

Speaker Services’ efforts across three years has been positively life changing for many first language fluent speakers, has elevated the need to increase our care and compassion for first language fluent speakers in the public consciousness and has exposed a great deal of as yet unmet need among many members of this population. All of that is a great service to the Cherokee people and has given our language revitalization efforts a great boost. Quite simply I am proud of and greatly admire the work of Speaker Services.

All of this work not only created great outcomes but revealed opportunities to go further. The December 6, 2024, memo acknowledged challenges facing the program, opportunities to improve and challenged the Department to realign Speaker Services with the original vision and a sustainable budget and menus of services. The Department responded by its memorandum of December 23, 2024. The Department’s responsive memorandum substantially addresses the issues posed. It helps inform the renewed directive for the program outlined herein.

II. Realignment and Reform of Speaker Services

As it begins its fourth year, Speaker Services will realign and reform its operations. This means some aspects of its operations must change and that its budget will change. These changes will be implemented across the remainder of fiscal year 2025 but will substantially be implemented over the course of the next couple of months with much progress expected by February 17, 2025.

What will not and cannot change are the two core directives outlined in the memorandum of January 7, 2022, cited above, and summarized here:

- Speaker Services will directly engage with our fluent Cherokee speakers as close to them as possible to assess and address their needs to improve their quality of life.
- All departments should consider a request from Speaker Services to be the highest priority of Administration.

The Implementation Team identified in Part III of this memorandum should use the outline below to implement necessary changes.

a. Addressing the backlog

The program has a substantial yet not fully defined backlog of applicants (which are primarily if not exclusively applicants for housing related assistance). The highest priority of the department is to fully examine this backlog, precisely identifying the unmet priority needs of each applicant. **The department must determine a written action plan for each of the more than 327 pending applicants, a time frame for action and this plan must be communicated to each applicant by phone and in writing prior to March 1, 2025. This backlog remediation plan must be in place by February 17, 2025.**

The challenge as it relates to backlog is in both data management and budget. The insufficiency of data management by the program was identified in my memorandum of December 6 and the department provided blanket assurances that it will be addressed using the Salesforce application, a development project that is ongoing.

With respect to budget, the data management issue slows our effort to identify the funding needed to address the backlog. The highest estimate is \$13 million, but that assumes replacement homes for every applicant which is highly unlikely to be the case. For reference purposes, though, this is an amount that exceeds a single year of housing funding for all housing programs under the Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act. It is likely that the backlog investment will be much less than \$13 million.

Whatever the investment required for data management and clearing the backlog, Speaker Services cannot afford to be mired with the reputation of a program that promises much but fails to deliver. More importantly, the first language speakers counting on assistance have needs that must be met. For all these reasons Speaker Services must make addressing its backlog the highest near-term priority. Part of this effort must be informed by and will be impacted by the other reforms addressed in this memorandum.¹

To ensure the program is on track to meet the March 1, 2025, backlog deadline it should present its backlog remediation plan to the Implementation Team (see Part III, below) by February 17, 2025.

b. Expectations as to type of volume of services: A return to the primary mission of serving as a conduit to first language speakers.

The priority service areas speaker services do are unchanged and are as follows:

- Housing
- Water and Sanitation
- Healthcare
- Human Services

Two things must change, however, if the program is to find a sustainable path.

First, the program must balance the need to serve all of the approximately 1,500 first language fluent speakers while also prioritizing those in this population who are most in need. The program should ideally avoid becoming bogged down in overly bureaucratic examination of household budgets. Instead, the program could develop flexible policies which *prioritize*:

- Low-income households, tied to a specified level of national median income (eg, 150%) based on a threshold examination of:
 - Self reported income
 - Auto eligibility based on receipt of existing income-based programs (eg, SSI, food distribution, TANF, etc.)
 - Elder status of 62+ years old.

¹ In some cases Speaker Services and HACN may determine that an applicant in the backlog could be best served by a direct HACN program. In that case HACN should, to the extent permitted under prevailing legal authority, grant the applicant “time of application credit” among other HACN applicants based on the date of Speaker Services application.

Second, the program must return to the original vision. *Speaker Services was never intended to be primarily a direct services department.* The program was intended to primarily be a program to perform outreach to first language fluent speakers and to bring existing services to the first language fluent speakers.²

To be sure, the program will continue to have a role in providing direct services. Those direct services should *ordinarily* include:

- Housing rehab projects estimated to be less than \$10,000
- Emergency appliance replacements.
- Burial services per the extant policy, ie, provision of to the prevailing non-contract rate for fluent speakers who do not qualify based on income, assets, or residency.
- Health and human services related transportation
- Behavioral health services in close partnership with Cherokee Nation Health.

In returning to its original intent of outreach and service facilitation, the program must:

- Develop a single application for all services that is recognized by assisting departments.
- Maintain “ownership” over all applicants, irrespective of the role of the assisting department. This means, among other things: communicating regularly with the applicant, advocating for the applicant, and maintaining a database of all applicants to track progress and run reports.

The program’s primary focus will continue to be housing rehab and replacement. Though Speaker Services has developed some capacity for managing large projects, improvements at HACN warrants shifting the primary management of substantially all Speaker Services housing projects to HACN, with Speaker Services retaining “ownership” over all such applications.

In the typical scenario, Speaker Services will approve an applicant for a housing rehab or replacement service based on application of policies (including priority standards) mindful of Speaker Services budget. HACN will manage the project on the high priority bases required by Administration pursuant to this memorandum. HACN will quickly determine whether the project should be charged to Speaker Services budget or an HACN budget based on the program that best fits the applicant.

² “Speaker Services will provide both direct services to fluent Cherokee speakers and, *more often, be a conduit through which fluent Cherokee Speakers and various departments of the Cherokee Nation can connect.*” Memorandum of January 7, 2022 (emphasis supplied)

HACN must minimize the burdens upon the applicant and maximize the provision of resources and the speed of resources. To the extent that federal rules require obtaining more information from the applicant, HACN must engage speaker services in obtaining the minimum amount of information needed in the least intrusive and burdensome manner possible. In this regard, Speaker Services cannot be a department that merely refers the applicant to HACN (or any other assisting department) and considers its work done. Likewise, HACN (or any assisting department) cannot receive a Speaker Services applicant and lump the applicant in with all other applicants or place the Speaker Services in the usual queue for follow up.

The availability of *all* housing services is critical: Without due care, Speaker Services could become a program that inadvertently segregates first language fluent speakers away from non-program resources. We must remember the thrust of this policy: First language fluent speakers should receive priority treatment through access to all relevant resources on a priority basis.

A similar approach is appropriate across all departments. My “firm expectation” remains that all departments and entities understand the objective of the Speaker Services program and treat request for services with the highest priority. Likewise, my firm expectation is that Speaker Services work well with other departments as it returns to its primary role as a conduit and resource for first language fluent speakers to navigate the sometimes-challenging world of Cherokee Nation programs and services.

c. Budget

In its FY 2025 budget request the Language Department sought and received \$727,961 in general revenue funds for Speaker Services. As noted, the program spent over \$34,000,000 across three years substantially all of which was ARPA funded. In its responsive memorandum of December 23, 2024, the Language Department recommended a budget in excess of \$10,000,000 annually.

At present it is unclear how to meet the more than \$10,000,000 budget target set by the Language Department against the backdrop of a \$727,961 budget request and the recent expiration of opportunities to obligate ARPA funds for the program through the end of the ARPA period in calendar year 2026. Remaining *general fund* sources include:

- [Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act.](#)
- [Public Health and Wellness Fund Act.](#)

It is presently unclear whether the Language Department can reallocate any of its current general funded revenue spending from elsewhere in the department to Speaker Services.

With respect to HJSCA, the Act provides \$34 million for “housing programs.” The Act identifies “Speaker Services and “Speaker Villages” as authorized spending areas at an unspecified amount, to be *potentially* specified along with any other authorized areas in a three-year housing plan. Consistent with the Act, Administration recently designated HACN as the administrator of all housing funds under HJSCA.

On December 31, 2024, I approved HACN’s three-year housing plan prepared pursuant to HJSCA to outline spending for FY 2025, 2026 and 2027 and submitted it to the Council for review and comment. The plan provides the following for the Language Department:

- Speaker Services: \$3,000,000
- Speaker Villages: \$3,000,000

These funds amount to a fraction of the Language Department’s annual Speaker Services budget recommendation of December 23, 2024. Yet, the earmarked HJSCA funds amount to 17.6% of the total housing program spending under the first three years of HJSCA, revealing that first language fluent speakers are highly prioritized under the three-year spending plan.

A review of PHWFA suggest opportunities to supplement funds for Speaker Services and perhaps supplant some HJSCA funds. Broadly, PHWFA funds can be used for “wellness” infrastructure. PHWFA is funding by two sources, 7% third party health collections and opioid settlement funds, both of are available to Speaker Services and which could be enhanced in the future. The two funding streams available to Speaker Services are:

- **Behavioral Health Capital Fund:** Opioid settlement fund for behavioral health capital projects.
- **7% fund:** Recurring revenue for wellness initiatives (capital, equipment or operations) authorized by PHWFA.

The Behavioral Health Capital Fund could be tapped for housing projects, ideally impacting multiple first language fluent speaking households on a transitional basis, where the provision of housing has a strong nexus to behavioral health. For example, a housing cluster that relieves those recovering from addiction of the often-attendant housing burdens that come with recovery would qualify. Likewise, a housing cluster which enabled a fluent speaker elder a means of relocating from overcrowded and therefore

unhealthy household conditions, or perhaps behavioral health issues within that household, would qualify.

On the basis of availability PHWFA Behavioral Health Capital Fund funding, the Language Department should consider whether the proposed Speaker Village in Adair County could meet such needs, in which case some of the \$3 million earmarked under the current HJSCA housing plan could be reallocated to meet other needs in the context of what we know is a \$1.75 billion housing deficit across Cherokee Nation for a population of over 140,000 spread across 7,000 square miles and dozens of communities.

The 7% fund within PHWFA also creates opportunities. A forthcoming Administration Memorandum on an annual PHWFA spending framework will allocate some funds on an annual basis to housing to meet serious emergent housing needs that direct imperiled individuals or public health. Once these funds are available and administered by HACN and once the Language Department has made headway on understanding the Speaker Services backlog, these funds may be brought to bear to address those needs. Likewise, maintaining Speaker Services' innovative peer counseling program for first language fluent speakers may require some PHWFA 7% funding.

Federal funds administered by HACN should always be available to assist fluent speakers. Increasingly HACN has tapped the Homeowners Assistance Fund to perform housing rehabilitation work for projects of less than \$50,000. Such funds could be brought to bear to address housing rehab needs among fluent speakers.

As with all Cherokee Nation departments, the Language Department must aggressively pursue federal funding opportunities to support the department. The Language Department fully embraced this directive in its responsive memorandum of December 23, 2024.

Plainly, leadership across departments will need to work together to assemble appropriate funding sources to reasonably meet Speaker Services in its new mission. It bears repeating: *The new mission is in reality the original mission- Speaker Services' primary mission is to be a conduit to bring services to first language fluent speakers and focus secondarily on direct services.* On that basis a budget relatively modest to the annualized spending over the last three years must be accommodated. **Leadership implementing this memo should submit a budget outline by February 17, 2025.**

The Finance Department must, of course, embrace and adhere to the dictates of this memo while also adhering to the dictates of all applicable laws, rules and financial management standards. This means Finance must efficiently process submissions from

the Language Department, immediately flagging any deficiencies. For example, the Language Department should expect Finance to ordinarily deny an expenditure that is not tied to an approved policy. To the extent that Finance is inclined to bar an expenditure that reasonably implicates a category of services and therefore implicates broader policy concerns, such action must be immediately elevated to Administration for review. My expectation is the maturity of the program and policy aims coupled with stable and predictable funding sources and sound Speaker Services policies will make financial processes for the program smooth and efficient.

Finance cannot adequately play its role in effectuating the directives in this memorandum without the cooperation of the Language Department. It is vital that relevant staff in the Language Department build and maintain capacity in all areas of Cherokee Nation Finance rules and processes. As noted, below, this is an area where Finance and Speaker Services can further collaborate to build program capacity.

d. Interdepartmental coordination and cooperation

As emphasized in the memorandum of December 6, 2024, and discussed above, cooperation and collaboration between Speaker Services and the assisting department. To reiterate the observations in my memorandum of December 6, 2024:

- Each assisting department must have a designated point of contact.
- Each assisting department must adjust their policies and practices to coordinate with Speaker Services and to prioritize fluent speakers consistent with Administration's expectations, within the limits of program rules.
- Speaker Services staff must be trained in relevant assisting department programs.
- Speaker Services and the assisting departments should develop a single "Speaker Services Application," used by Speaker Services staff, which captures sufficient *threshold* information to evaluate eligibility with any given assisting department. The assisting department should not ordinarily require a separate application. Speaker Services should not ordinarily make a mere referral to the assisting department.³
- Speaker Services and the assisting department must take care to avoid inadvertently segregating fluent speakers into a class of citizens who are only served by Speaker Services. Fluent speakers are eligible for all Cherokee Nation services,

³ A troubling, albeit short lived, practice of the program in early FY 2025 was requiring fluent speakers to independently bear the burden of obtaining a denial from another program before accessing Speaker Services resources. This practice is wholly at odds with the entire purpose of Speaker Services.

Speaker Services direct services and assistance from Speaker Services in accessing all services.

The Language Department, in its December 23, 2024, responsive memo, fully embraced the idea of improving inter-departmental cooperation and posed some excellent ideas. The leadership responsible for implementing this memorandum should take special care to embrace those ideas, found at page 5 of that responsive memorandum. The suggestion of a liaison in each assisting department and routine periodic meetings should receive particularly close attention.

In its responsive memo of December 23, 2024, the Language Department also provided a rough draft of a universal application for Speaker Services. The draft is a sound start, but I encourage the Language Department to consult with the most common assisting departments, particularly HACN, in preparing a final draft. The current draft exceeds my suggestion of a single page, but multiple pages may be necessary to capture the minimum amount of information.

The final form of the application is far less important than other directives. First, the applicant must almost never be left on her own to fill out a Speaker Services application. If a Speaker Services staff member is not shouldering the burden of completing the form for the applicant to review and sign, we are missing the central purpose of Speaker Services. Second, Speaker Services must also embrace and internalize a related concept: Once the application is submitted to an assisting department, Speaker Services still “owns” and is responsible for the application from intake to completion. Finally, these applications must be promptly entered into the program’s data management system so that the application can be tracked, shared and reports generated as needed.

e. Staff capacity

Within the current fiscal year, Speaker Services shall undertake a schedule and well funded program of capacity building in the following areas:

- Financial management (Via Financial Services)
- Asset management (Via Financial Services)
- Personnel management (via Human Resources)
- Housing programs (via HACN)
- Leadership and team building (via internal training or external vendor)

The program should not wait for annual employee wide trainings for these subjects. Rather, the program should reach out to Financial Services, Human Resources and HACN

for immediate assistance. Likewise, those departments should be prepared to provide individualized training to the program's staff.

I acknowledge that Language provided a staffing and training budget in its responsive memorandum of December 23, 2024. As noted above, much of the training can be obtained in house at low or no cost. Some budget for outside training is appropriate, mindful of the present budget constraints and the realigned mission of the program. Likewise, the program should reexamine its staffing needs in view of the realigned mission outlined herein.

f. Data Management

As discussed in Section II.a, above, the program's backlog is inextricably linked to, though not completely attributable to, insufficient data management. The program must cure this insufficiency by **February 17, 2025**. The data must be sufficiently maintained to, at a minimum, make efficiently available and agreeable all relevant information as to each applicant and the ability to run relevant and useful reports. If the data management issues are not promptly and completely resolved by February 17, 2025, it is my intention to suspend the Speaker Services program indefinitely.

g. Policies and procedures

Every aspect of Speaker Services must be guided by clear written policies. The program has made great advancements on this subject across three years of development. In my memorandum of December 6, 2024, I requested that the Language Department provide drafts of all polices and procedures for Speaker Services for Administration review. Understandably the Department has requested additional time to submit those, which is granted to February 17, 2025.

III. Implementation Team

The following Cherokee Nation leaders shall form an ad hoc committee for the purpose of implementing the directions in this memorandum by February 17, 2025, to the greatest extent possible:

- Todd Enlow, Executive Director of Housing Programs and Senior Advisor to the Principal Chief (chair)
- Dr. Corey Bunch, Chief of Staff (co-chair)
- Janees Taylor, Treasurer (member)
- Canaan Duncan, Deputy Secretary of State (member)

- Howard Paden, Executive Director of Language (member)
- Jennifer Kirby, Executive Director of Human Services (member)
- Sammy Eagle, Manager of Speaker Services (member)

This “Implementation Team” is also encouraged to make recommendation for further reform. Following the implementation efforts achieved by February 17, 2025, Executive Director Enlow will recommend a sub-set of these ad hoc Implementation Team members to continue serving as the Speaker Services Support Team through the end of fiscal year 2025 for my review and approval. The Support Team will be designated by March 1, 2025.



Chuck Hoskin, Jr.,
Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation