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July 17, 2018

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SOS Toulouse Oliver Shares Success of Native American Voting Task Force at U.S. Senate Roundtable

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver shared the success of her Native American Voting Task Force and their efforts to improve election outcomes in tribal communities at a roundtable discussion in Washington, D.C. In addition to Secretary Toulouse Oliver, the discussion included members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, and Native American voting rights experts from across the country. Among those in attendance were U.S. Senator Tom Udall, the Vice Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

“Our tribal nations are sovereign nations. They deserve to be treated with respect and at a government to government level,” said Secretary Toulouse Oliver. “What we are trying to find out is how to develop voter information and participation programs in a way that is both culturally sensitive and language appropriate for those communities.”

“For centuries, discriminatory practices in this nation have denied and suppressed Native Americans’ fundamental right to vote and make their voices heard in U.S. democracy,” Udall said. “My grandfather, Levi Udall, served as Chief Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court in 1948, when he authored the opinion ruling that Native Americans living on reservations could vote. At the time, he said that ‘To deny the right to vote . . . is to do violence to the principles of freedom and equality.’ But to this day -- more than five decades after Congress passed the Voting Rights Act -- many states and local jurisdictions have found new, more insidious ways to impose barriers on Native access to the ballot box. These undemocratic and anti-American barriers come in many forms: from Voter ID laws, to inadequate polling and registration sites, to availability of Native language ballot materials. Today’s roundtable was a productive discussion about how Congress can help to end voter suppression in Native communities, and I look forward to working on legislation to help ensure that Native Americans can fully exercise their right to vote. And I thank Chairman Hoeven and Senator Klobuchar for their partnership in moving this important conversation forward at today’s roundtable.”

Today’s roundtable discussion, “Voting Rights, Access, and Barriers in Indian Country,” gave Native American voting rights experts an opportunity to share policy ideas and best practices about challenges faced by Native American voters throughout the United States. Secretary Toulouse Oliver updated the other participants on her Native American Voting Task Force, which she created last year to improve voter registration, voter education and

election participation in tribal communities. Among the recent successes she shared was a resolution passed unanimously by the All Pueblo Council of Governors supporting the work of the task force and data collected on the number of Native voters who participated in New Mexico's 2018 Primary Election, which will be used to identify communities where voter outreach is most needed.

Native Americans were one of the last ethnic groups to get the right to vote. It wasn't until 1948, when World War II veteran Miguel Trujillo of the Pueblo of Isleta won a federal lawsuit that secured the right to vote for all New Mexico Native Americans. Historically, Native Americans have some of the lowest voter turnout rates of any ethnic group in the country. The discrepancy in turnout between Native American voters and other voters is noticeable in New Mexico. In the 2016 General Election, about 62 percent of all registered New Mexico voters cast a ballot, while only 56 percent of voters from predominantly Native American precincts cast a ballot.

Secretary of State Toulouse Oliver's task force is made up of representatives from pueblos and tribal communities across New Mexico, including one urban Indian. The task force is charged with identifying ways to boost voter registration, education and election participation in tribal communities, and will make recommendations to Secretary of State Toulouse Oliver and other elected officials. Since the task force was created, its members have been meeting with tribal leaders around the state and working to develop educational materials to help Native American voters understand the importance of elections.

Below is a list of participants in today's roundtable discussion:

- New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver
- United States Senator Tom Udall
- Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye
- Fon du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Chairman Kevin DuPuis
- Jacqueline de Leon, Native American Rights Fund
- United South and Eastern Tribes Chairwoman Cheryl A. Maltais
- National Congress of American Indians President Jefferson Keel
- Jim Tucker, Native American Voting Rights Coalition
- Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration

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