

OPENING REMARKS OF THE HONORABLE RUBEN HINOJOSA
NATIVE FINANCIAL EDUCATION COALITION POLICY BRIEFING
APRIL 27, 2006

Thank you for your kind introduction. I appreciate everything that you and the Native Financial Education Coalition are doing to promote financial literacy in the diverse Native communities throughout the United States.

As Co-Founder and Co-Chair of the Financial and Economic Literacy Caucus, my goal, first and foremost, is to inform my colleagues and constituents and everyone across the United States about the importance of becoming financially literate.

To attain this goal, I have collaborated with my Caucus co-founder and co-chair Congresswoman Judy Biggert from Illinois on National Financial Literacy Month which falls in April each year. So, I want to wish all of you a very Happy Financial Literacy Month in the hope that you have taken time to improve someone's life by bringing them the gift of financial literacy in some little way. Congresswoman Biggert and I have taken the lead by collaborating on two Financial Literacy Day fairs, the National Teach Your Children to Save Day, and a number of other projects all in an attempt to improve the financial literacy rates of individuals across the United States during all stages of life.

I hope that each of you has taken the time to put your own finances in order during this very special month. I hope that you have taken the time to teach your children, your brothers and sisters, perhaps your parents and/or other relatives and friends the importance of saving; to teach them how to open a checking account if they do not already know how to do so; and to teach them the importance of paying their bills and taxes on time in order to obtain a good credit score, which will allow them to buy a refrigerator, a computer.

And, taking good care of their credit will allow them to purchase a home – preferably not from predatory lenders.

We all need to work together to help individuals across the United States, especially minorities such as Hispanics and Natives, to improve their understanding of the financial world and the need to increase the savings rate of the United States.

Having read some of the material that your Coalition handed out at the Financial Literacy Day Fair on Tuesday, I have a better understanding of the difficult situation and the obstacles that face Native communities in the United States – the severe poverty, the dependence on public assistance, and the fact that Indian gaming has helped only a small number of tribes. Like many in the Hispanic community, your communities are also “asset poor” and lack the basic resources to protect your financial future. I agree with you that we need to increase funding for the CDFI fund at the Department of the Treasury and to increase the Native set-aside to support the important role of NCDFIs in delivering basic financial services and financial education in Native communities. More importantly, I agree with you that we need to provide adequate funding for schools and other programs to develop and implement youth financial education that is culturally appropriate and effective.

I could go on and on noting all of your issues and concerns with which I agree, but I hope you know from this speech and my appearance here today that I am here to help and am at your disposal when needed. Rest assured that your message, your concerns are not falling on deaf ears. I am all too aware of the need to improve financial literacy especially in the marginalized communities.

I want to tell you that I was recently honored by Jump\$tart with the Financial Legislator Award for Financial Literacy. During the event, the winner of the Odom Award, Jan Shoeheart, mentioned three areas in which all of us involved in the financial literacy cause need to focus; and I completely agree with her. We need to focus on strengthening partnerships between all the many organizations with financial literacy products in order to achieve better results.

We need to learn what programs and tools really work and really change people's financial knowledge and behavior. I was pleased to learn yesterday that certain corporations and associations are evaluating all of the many programs intended to improve financial literacy. It is this type of activity in which we need to engage. There are too many financial literacy products out there right now.

We need to narrow them down using a performance-based standard and begin implementing them in the appropriate arena at the appropriate stage of life of each individual. Finally, we need to increase the demand for financial education curricula in the classroom. My home state has enacted several laws that will introduce financial education into our state's high school curriculum, and I hope that more states will do the same.

I think you now know where I stand. If you don't, contact my staff Greg Davis with any other concerns and we will see what we can accomplish together.

Again, thank you for your kind invitation and welcome. I look forward to continue working with all of you to improve financial literacy not only in Native communities but throughout all communities in the United States.