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Housing Issues and Solutions for the Residents on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota

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This position paper details the poor housing and living conditions of American Indians in Pine Ridge Reservation and proposes some solutions to the problems. These include training for home upkeep and repair and owner education classes.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The main purpose of this paper is to document different housing issues affecting Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. Secondary purposes are to highlight why these issues exist and describe ways to improve the housing on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Pine Ridge Reservation was originally part of the Great Sioux Reservation which was created by treaty with the United States Government in 1868 (AAANativeArts, 2005; 8). Pine Ridge Reservation is located in southwestern South Dakota on the Nebraska state line and approximately 50 miles east of the Wyoming border. Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is the second largest American Indian reservation within the United States (Durham, 2011). Pine Ridge Reservation is home to the Oglala Lakota Sioux tribe. There are approximately 40,000 people on the reservation and the reservation encompasses the poorest county in the United States (Pickering, 2000). The largest town on the reservation with a population of 5,730 is Pine Ridge. The unemployment rate is between 83-85% and can be higher in the winter months (Schwartz, 2006). There are no banks, discount stores, or movie theaters. The primary language is Lakota and the secondary is English. The land area is over two million acres (Durham, 2011).

HOUSING OCCUPANCY

The Oglala Sioux Tribal Housing Authority manages the public housing on the reservation. The Tribal Housing Authority has constructed housing for approximately 43% of the approximately 2,300 families living on the reservation (AAANativeArts, 2005). The majority of the current Tribal Housing Authority homes were built from 1970 to 1979. Some of the larger homes on the Pine Ridge Reservation that were built for six to eight people have up to 30 residents living in them. Most families never turn away a relative no matter how distant the blood relationship. If they run out of room in the house residents may use tents or use old cars for shelter (Press, 2011).

QUALITY OF HOUSING

Many houses do not have adequate insulation to protect the residents from the outside elements. Many families live in old, dilapidated mobile homes. “26% of the housing units on the reservation are mobile homes, often purchased or obtained through donations as used, low-value units with negative-value equity”(Press, 2011; p. 104).

Weather in South Dakota is very windy and in the winter extremely cold, in January with an average temperature low of 11 degrees Fahrenheit and a high of 35 degrees Fahrenheit (The Weather Channel, 2012). Electricity is not a common amenity on the Pine Ridge Reservation which makes having adequate heat in the homes difficult. “Federal and tribal heat assistance programs (such as LLEAP) are limited by their funding. In the winter of 2005-2006, the one-time only payment to a family was said to be approximately \$250-300 to cover the entire winter. For many, that amount did not even fill their propane heating tanks one time.” (Schwartz, 2006; 20).

Summers are usually hot and humid. The average high temperatures in July and August are 87 degrees Fahrenheit. (The Weather Channel, 2012) Many houses on the Pine Ridge Reservation are infested with black mold and stachybotrys. These can cause health issues. These infestations can cause fatal conditions in infants, children, elderly or those with immune systems that are compromised. They are also dangerous to people who have lung and pulmonary conditions. Exposure to black mold can cause cancer or hemorrhaging in the lungs and brain. (Schwartz, 2012) In 1990, over 18 percent of the American Indian households on the Pine Ridge Reservation did not have a complete kitchen. In order to have a complete kitchen, the house needs to have a refrigerator, cookstove or range and a sink with piped water. (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995).

HEALTH ISSUES EFFECT HOUSING

The Native Americans living on the Pine Ridge Reservation may have their health decline because of living in infested houses but their health may be affected by other issues, such as poor diet or malnutrition. Health insurance is rare, so adequate health care is also rare. Those living on the reservation have to travel a vast distance in order to receive care. Some medical facilities are underfunded or under staffed. Others may have outdated or non-existent medical equipment (Schwartz, 2012)

Poor diet may cause diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and lack of food causes malnutrition. The lack of fresh fruits and vegetables on the reservation is due a three month growing season, harsh weather, pests, and poor soil. A number of gardening programs at Pine Ridge Reservation have had a high failure rate (Oglala Lakota Cultural and Economic Revitalization Initiative, 2012). Having poor health and no health insurance can prevent residents from keeping up with maintenance on their homes.

Alcoholism is very prominent on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The reservation is a dry community, meaning it is against the law to buy or sell alcohol on the reservation. There are four off-site beer stores located in White Clay, Nebraska. White Clay has only a dozen residents but sold nearly five million cans of beer in 2010 (Schulte, 2012). It is likely most of their customers come from the Pine Ridge Reservation. In February of 2012, the Oglala Sioux Tribe of South Dakota filed a 10 page lawsuit alleging that the beer makers and stores sold to Pine Ridge's American Indian population knowing they would smuggle the alcohol in the reservation to drink or sell (Schulte, 2012).

MOBILITY

In 1990, almost 22% on the American Indians living on the Pine Ridge Reservation were without a car. Even though most had a car the 1990 census did not stipulate if it was a vehicle in working order (U.S. Census Bureau, 1995). Some vehicles are nonworking and used as places to sleep (Press, 2011).

Most of these individuals could not call for a ride, since almost 60% were without a telephone (U.S. Census Bureau, 1995). Recently the Oglala Sioux Tribe has issued basic cell phones, commonly referred to as commodity phones (Schwartz, 2006). These phones do not operate off of the reservation. Storms or wind may cause the phones to not operate while on the reservation (Schwartz, 2006).

SOLUTION TO HOUSING ISSUES

The Oglala Sioux Tribal Housing Authority Council estimated a need for at least 4,000 new homes in order to combat the homelessness situation (Schwartz, 2007). With new construction these houses would come with a complete kitchen. A housing organization needs to work with families on the reservation to enable them to be part of the home construction process. Many homes will need to be larger than current homes since they may need to house multigenerational families. Advancements in the construction materials can prevent black mold and Stachybotrys. Habitat for Humanity, a homeownership program, encourages individuals to put "sweat equity" into their home. Sweat equity refers to the hours of labor the homeowner spends on the house (Habitat for Humanity of Broward, 2011). This is important since by doing the work themselves the Native Americans will have a sense of pride about their homes. This will keep labor costs down and show the residents what they can accomplish. This will also develop community pride. They may also realize that they have these skills and may put them to use in the future (Habitat for Humanity of Broward, 2011).

When the people receive their new home from Habitat for Humanity, it comes with the stipulation of homeowner education classes. These classes could teach them

how to make simple repairs to the house. Classes could be simple trouble shooting, or more advanced skill development instruction. Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity requires 250 hours of Sweat Equity Hours per adult and 35 hours of classes (Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity, 2011)

The gardening programs need more funding in order to grow fruits and vegetables indoors. The Oglala Lakota Cultural and Economic Revitalization Initiation (2012) states it spends \$21,350 on startup for the purchase of plants, planting, irrigation system, equipment and bio-shelter. This could extend the three month growing season, and weather, pest, and poor soil would not be an issue. Having fresh fruits and vegetables ready for consumption on the Pine Ridge Reservation would allow residents to improve their diet and improve their overall health. This could allow them the skills to grow and sell fruits and vegetables to their neighbors for income.

Local public policy needs to address the overabundance of liquor stores in White Clay to limit the alcoholism problem among the residents of Pine Ridge. With the absence of readily available alcohol, it would be more difficult for individuals to consume it. Limiting the alcohol further away from the reservation may prevent some residents from obtaining it at all.

Developing the programs that will fix the housing issues may also create jobs. Creating jobs on the reservation where the individual is able to pass on skills will allow money to flow and may fix other issues. Having a plan where individuals can sell extra fruits and vegetables they grow to earn money, will allow them the one main resource needed to pay for the upkeep and expenses on their house. They will have the skills needed to better the community, and the pride to keep up with maintaining their homes.

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