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National Native American Human Resources Association (NNAHRA) Marks 30 Years, Honors Tribal HR Leaders at Annual Conference

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians recognized for achievements in workforce development and leadership

WASHINGTON, DC — Nov. 17, 2026 — The National Native American Human Resources Association (NNAHRA) marked its 30th anniversary during its annual HR conference in Honolulu, Hawai'i, recognizing outstanding achievements in Tribal workforce development and human resources leadership. Held at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort, the conference brought together Tribal HR professionals to discuss workforce development, leadership strategies and organizational growth across Native nations.

During the conference, NNAHRA presented the Sam Henny Award to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in recognition of its leadership development and succession planning initiatives. Twauna Williams, Senior Director of Learning and Development and submitted the nomination on the Nation's behalf. NNAHRA also named Charles Walters, Vice President of Human Resources for the Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians, as its 2026 HR Leader of the Year.

"When NNAHRA established the Sam Henny Award in 2012 and the HR Leader of the Year Award in 2014, our goal was to recognize the individuals and Tribal organizations whose leadership, innovation and commitment to people make a lasting difference in our communities," said Judith Wright, President of NNAHRA. "The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma demonstrates the importance of investing in future leaders while preserving Tribal culture and knowledge. Charles Walters reflects the same commitment through his leadership, dedication to developing people and ability to show the value of human resources as a trusted partner in Tribal operations. Both recipients represent the very best of our profession, and we are proud to recognize their contributions and the example they set for others across Indigenous Country."

This year's Sam Henny Award recognized the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's Leadership, Mentorship and Successor Development Ecosystem, a comprehensive initiative designed to prepare Tribal employees for leadership roles while preserving Choctaw culture and institutional knowledge.

The initiative features four culturally grounded leadership programs: Toksalechi for supervisors, Apesanchi for managers, Atohnochi for directors and I Shvlihchi for executive successors. Together, these programs create a structured pathway for professional advancement, integrating Choctaw language, cultural values and mentorship into leadership development. Since fiscal year 2022, the Nation has filled 23 of 32 executive-level positions with internal successors, achieving a 71.9% internal hiring rate. In 2026, its successor development program supported 78 active participants, including 59 Choctaw Tribal members, demonstrating its commitment to developing future leaders from within the Nation.

“We are honored to receive the Sam Henny Award and proud of what it represents: our commitment to investing in our people and preparing future generations to lead,” said Williams. “By creating meaningful pathways for Tribal Members to grow, we are strengthening leadership while carrying our culture and values forward for generations to come.”

NNAHRA also recognized Charles Walters as its 2026 HR Leader of the Year. A retired U.S. Marine with more than 25 years of leadership experience across Tribal government, gaming, hospitality and federal service, Walters was honored for his contributions to workforce development, operational efficiency and employee advancement.

Through his leadership, Walters has helped reduce recruiting costs by nearly $1 million while strengthening internal advancement opportunities, with 40% of his HR team earning promotions over the past year. He has also advanced initiatives such as the FLEX Frontline Leadership Academy, expanded HR communications to improve employee engagement and employer branding, and strengthened risk management efforts to support the Tribe's workforce and operations.

“I've always believed that one of the best things you can do as a leader is help someone see potential they may not have recognized in themselves yet, then give them the opportunity to prove it,” said Walters. “I've been fortunate to experience that kind of support throughout my own career, and I try to pass that on. Being recognized by NNAHRA, an organization that has meant so much to me professionally and personally, makes this

especially meaningful. I'm proud of what we've accomplished together, but even more excited about the people we're developing and where they'll take us next."

As NNAHRA celebrates three decades of supporting Tribal HR professionals, this year's honorees demonstrate the impact of investing in workforce development, mentorship and leadership opportunities that strengthen Tribal organizations and the communities they serve.

For more information on NNAHRA, please visit NNAHRA.org. For more information on the annual conference, please contact NNAHRA at info@NNAHRA.org. For media inquiries, please contact PR@InnovisionMarketingGroup.com.

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ABOUT NNAHRA
The National Native American Human Resources Association is a nonprofit organization, with a membership comprised of HR professionals and tribal leaders working for a Native American Tribe. Association business is conducted by an elected Board of Directors who serve four-year terms, in a volunteer capacity, and all of whom work directly for Human Resources or tribal enterprises.

Historically, the association started out as a grassroots effort with four tribes meeting to network and share personnel issues and challenges 30 years ago. The meetings evolved into conferences, and the membership grew into a formal northwest and then national association. What started with four members is now over 2,000 strong. For more information, please visit NNAHRA.org.

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