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FEATURED

Pine Ridge selected as federal 'Promise Zone'

Seth Tupper
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Nick Tilsen, executive director for the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, shows the first home under construction at the Thunder Valley community on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation last fall. Because of Pine Ridge's new designation as a Promise Zone, VISTA workers will help Thunder Valley carry out a regional sustainable development plan that includes a model community housing project.

Sean Ryan, Journal staff

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The Pine Ridge Reservation will get five free workers and preferential points on federal funding applications through a new Promise Zone designation announced Tuesday.

Tom Vilsack, secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, announced the addition of Pine Ridge and seven other impoverished areas of the country to the Promise Zone roster, which already included the original five communities designated last year.

Pine Ridge suffers 22 percent unemployment and a 49 percent poverty rate, according to information provided with the announcement.

“There is probably no other place in America that needs the focus, the coordinated effort, the additional points and the personnel more than the Pine Ridge area,” Vilsack said on a conference call with reporters.

In Promise Zones, various departments of the federal government partner with local leaders to increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investment, reduce violent crime, enhance public health and address other priorities identified by the community.

Promise Zones receive extra points on federal grant and loan applications, increasing their chances to win approval of such financial aid. In addition, five full-time members of the AmeriCorps Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) program will be assigned to the zones.

AmeriCorps is part of the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that coordinates the service efforts of 5 million Americans. Members of the AmeriCorps VISTA program make a year-long, full-time commitment to help create or expand programs designed to bring people and communities out of poverty.

VISTA members receive a living allowance and health benefits from the federal government during their service. AmeriCorps has spent about \$1 million so far on the VISTA members stationed in the first five Promise Zone communities.

In Pine Ridge, VISTA members will work with the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation. Nick Tilsen, the corporation’s executive director, said the VISTA crew will help carry out a regional sustainable development plan that already has been developed. The plan includes a model community housing project for which Tilsen hopes to conduct a groundbreaking on 21 new units this summer.

“We view this as an ability to give us an extra boost and implement this project,” Tilsen said.

Also on Tuesday’s conference call was Ryan McMullen, Oklahoma state director of USDA Rural Development. The Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma was the first tribal Promise Zone designated last year, and McMullen said the Promise Zone assistance has resulted in a 30 to 40 percent increase in USDA funds flowing to the tribe.

“Even more important than that has been the ability to tie all those individual investments together in a single vision,” McMullen said.

He and others on the media call said the Promise Zone mission of pulling vast resources together to focus on a plan developed at the local level is what will make the program different from previous, longstanding efforts to improve life at Pine Ridge.

“So,” Vilsack explained, “no dollars today, but a significant opportunity in the future, and then also additional personnel.”

The other new Promise Zone designations announced Tuesday are in Camden, N.J.; Hartford, Conn.; Indianapolis; Minneapolis; Sacramento; St. Louis and St. Louis County, Mo.; and the South Carolina Low Country.

The new Promise Zones join five others designated in January 2014: San Antonio, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, the Southeastern Kentucky Highlands and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

A news release accompanying the Tuesday announcement cited the George Gervin Youth Center in San Antonio as an example of the work underway in those communities.

San Antonio received a \$1.1 million YouthBuild grant from the Department of Labor to establish an education and training program for at-risk youth. The Gervin Center also received a \$2 million Training-to-Work grant from the Department of Labor to help young men and women participating in work-release programs gain job skills.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julian Castro told the Associated Press that administration officials will be monitoring to see if the Promise Zone program is paying off.

"We're getting better in public service about measuring outcomes," Castro said. "So we're not just looking at the inputs. We want to see, at the end of the day, what is the outcome that you're getting through the expenditure of resource."

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