

Members' needs should be tribe's top priority



**JENNIFER MCLEOD, DIRECTOR,
UNIT I**

Greetings, Anishinaabeg!

This unit report has been a difficult one for me to write. I sat and wondered what would I share with you this month? Certainly I've been busy. I have attended many, many meetings (some were quite heated). I've met with the elders, served on the Drug Court Committee, chaired the JKL Fiduciary Committee, attended board of directors workshops and meetings, Health and Housing trainings and spent days meeting over the "new Constitution."

I've come to know and appreciate program directors and

staff, and have enjoyed the many opportunities I've had to chat with members wherever we happen to run into each other. I want to assure you that your board of directors is a good board. Although we do not always agree (which can be a good thing), I have found my fellow directors to be respectful, patient and helpful to me as a new board member. During the election campaign, I asked you to "put a teacher on the team!" Well, looking back over the past five months as a board member, I am here to say that THIS teacher is not satisfied.

As a professional educator, I've been trained to be "results oriented," to prioritize and do first things first, to understand that meeting the needs of the students is the reason for my work. Now, however, instead of students, I serve tribal members. YOU are the reason for my work. Meeting YOUR needs comes first. In my humble opinion, we have spent much of the last five months meeting the needs of government, not the needs of the people. I am not saying that our government does not need work, I'm simply disagreeing with it being such a high priority right

now. Throughout my years as a teacher, one of the greatest skills I learned was to "reflect," to look back at my activity, think about what took place and find a way to improve my teaching for the benefit of my students. I have applied these same concepts to my work as your Unit I director.

Truthfully, I have difficulty spending so much time and thousands of dollars on creating a new Constitution, when there are tribal families living in campers instead of warm, safe homes. I understand why we need constitutional change, I do. I helped author that document. However, I've already spent two years of volunteered weekends, the tribe has already spent over \$400,000 on it and we are still spending more! I understand the need, I've heard all about the corruption and abuses that occurred in the past, but looking at the time, money and energy that we are spending on re-writing our governing document, I have to ask, "What should come first, a new Constitution or emergency housing, a new Constitution or new businesses and jobs, a new Constitution or real pay raises for our employees?" I am not saying "no" to a new Constitution, but I

am saying it can wait.

We need to focus on what matters to our people. I think five months is more than enough time to "figure out" staffing in the administrator's office. I think five months is more than enough time to "hammer out budget issues." I think two years, and \$400,000 (and growing) is more than enough time, money and other resources devoted to the Constitution, when we still have tribal members who need a safe place to live, who don't have enough to eat, who can't afford their medications and who are affected by drug, alcohol and other abuses.

I've said before that I am not a very good politician, especially when it means sitting in meetings that do not directly result in perpetuating our way of life or the welfare and prosperity of our people. I can't defend our actions when a tribal member tells me, "Look how far we've come with the old Constitution in 40 years. Leave the Constitution alone." They raise a good point. I cannot agree to spend MORE time and money making our government better when our people are cold, hungry or sick. I can only speak for myself, but I know that I am

not the only director who feels this way.

I expect to receive some harsh criticism from those who are very "pro" Constitution, and that's okay, it's part of the job, right? But if you feel like I do, that people come first and government last, that we need to take care of even the most basic of human needs (food, clothing, shelter and health) before we fine-tune a government that has taken us from "dirt poor to casinos" in less than 40 years, speak out! Let me know, let the other unit directors know, let the chairman know! I do believe there needs to be some constitutional change, just not right now. **FIRST THINGS FIRST!** You have a good board of directors — let them know what you want them to do.

Miigwech niibowaa (Thank you very much), and I look forward to hearing from you,

Jen

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P.S. I wish all of you a safe and joyous holiday season, from my house to yours. Happy belated Thanksgiving, merry Christmas and happy New Year!