

McLeod attends NCAI events in Washington, D.C.



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DIRECTOR, UNIT I**

Aaniin, Anishnaabeg, last month, I attended the National Congress of the American Indian (NCAI) Executive Council winter session in Washington, D.C. It was one of the best NCAI events I have ever attended. The speakers consisted of elected federal officials, representatives from various federal departments and tribal leaders from across the nation. Our tribal board chairman, Aaron Payment, was elected as the NCAI board secretary, and it was a proud day for me to see a member of our tribe sitting at that big table with so many nationally known tribal leaders.

I participated in breakout sessions regarding Indian education and learned more about how the Bureau of Indian Education interacts with tribal schools (dependent upon how the funding is allocated). I was also involved in discussions regarding standardized testing of tribal students and the efforts of tribes to self-determine the curriculum of their schools. I am pleased to report that our school is so blessed in terms of resources, staff and students. The struggles of other tribal schools clearly showed that our issues back home are small,

comparatively. I was so happy to be able to share our school's successes, knowing that we are helping other schools as they seek to educate their children, in oftentimes very challenging circumstances.

I also attended a session on Homeland Security. Border tribes face unique challenges, and it was eye opening to learn the stresses faced by our brothers along the southern border of the United States. Immigration issues, drug and human trafficking and increases in other types of crime, create hardships for many tribes, the likes of which we (thankfully) have never seen. It is one thing to hear about these issues on the television, it is quite another to be in the same room with people who live with such dangerous threats. Although thousands of miles from our tribal territory, what happens in the south is a concern for the north. As a border tribe, it is especially important for us to be aware and to be involved. Border issues are not restricted to the south.

A segment of the Homeland Security breakout session was Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This was of particular interest to me as many of our members living on Sugar Island and along the St. Mary's River have recently been impacted by changes in the FEMA flood plain maps. No one was prepared for the sudden requirement for flood insurance! One woman reported an insurance quote of \$20,000 for just ONE YEAR! As a result, her home is now up for sale. The cost for flood insurance varies widely, but the cost of insurance is not the only problem. This has been a nightmare for many of our people and there is the potential that some may lose their homes as a result. This is UNACCEPTABLE! It is

a complex problem and I am not certain that we will be able to make much of a difference, but I am trying. While I was in this session, I made it very clear to FEMA that the manner in which this happened, the impact to ALL people in the "new flood zones," and the lack of consultation with our tribe needed to be addressed. I am happy to report that we have their attention and we will see what, if anything, can be done about it.

While in D.C., I had the unexpected privilege to speak on behalf of our tribe in the 17th annual Tribal Budget Consultation, one-on-one sessions with the Department of Health and Human Services. As the newly elected secretary of NCAI, our chairman needed to be in attendance at the NCAI conference, and so he asked me to speak in his place. It was the first time I was ever at a tribal consultation.

Our federal liaison, Meghan Starling, and I met with the Centers for Disease Control, Indian Health Service (IHS) and the Administration for Children and Families. I am grateful for Meghan's hard work, and the hard work of our staff back home. Together, they created talking point papers to guide me through the sessions. I addressed:

- Monitoring local fish and educating tribal members about fish consumption;
- Emergency preparedness;
- IHS appropriations;
- Funding formulas;
- Contract support costs;
- Special Diabetes Program for Indians;
- Climate change impact;
- Purchased and Referred Care;
- Issues with IHS grants;
- Behavioral Health;
- Dental services;
- Increasing tribal set-aside:

- Family Violence Prevention and Services Act funding formula;

- LIHEAP awards.

Our tribe was given 30 minutes with each agency in Health and Human Services. They listened intently, and I brought back their responses to our issues. Again, many thanks to Meghan and our tribal staff who work hard to prepare the "white papers" that make it possible for tribal leaders to present accurate, meaningful and relevant information. Working together, we successfully advocate for our people at the highest levels of federal government and agencies.

On the home front, we have many challenges in our own government, departments and enterprises, and I will not be traveling for the foreseeable future unless absolutely necessary. If matters can be handled by phone calls or letters, that is what I plan to do. Relationships developed over the past couple of years are such that I should be able to spend much more time at home. I believe that our work at the federal level is important, however, and I am not suggesting that other members of the board of directors should not travel.

It is no secret that tribal revenues have been on a decline, especially in the gaming sector. The board of directors have taken steps to improve profitability; however, there are no "quick fixes" and many things (like the national economy and federal grant amounts) are out of our control. I continue to push for our elected leaders to establish our priorities, to be prepared for the possibility that we will not be able to continue operating at current levels. I believe that it is in our best interest to be prepared with a well-thought out plan, rather than having to

make last minute decisions. I have addressed this in previous unit reports and still feel that it is imperative that the board of directors do this.

Also on the home front, I have been working diligently with our tribal school and am currently mentoring a middle school student. I am awaiting word on a high-school student who had expressed an interest in having a mentor, so I may have two! Plans are underway way for me to share culture, beading and other craft sessions with local kids. After a bumpy start (connectivity issues), my online self-guided language "class" is open, and available to interested tribal members. If you want to join this class or want information on other good language sources, just send me an email!

Currently, I am researching and developing legislation or procedure changes that will address domestic violence (VAWA), juvenile code, our tribal school and housing matters. Also, I have decided to complete my master's degree in school leadership. I have just two classes left and a thesis. Graduation is slated for May 2016.

Please feel free to contact me via phone, email, "snail-mail," texts or come visit me at my office (I rent an office in the Big Bear arena). For information regarding board of directors' meetings, please visit the tribal website at www.saulttribe.com and, as always, if I can be of any help, please don't hesitate to contact me!

Anishnaabe gagige (Anishnaabe for always),

Jen

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