

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JULY 23, 2020

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## **New COVID-19 Disaster Relief Program established, supersedes previous plans**

SAULT STE. MARIE, Mich. — On July 21, the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians Board of Directors voted to establish a new direct benefit plan for Sault Tribe members residing in the seven-county service area who have been impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Members residing in the tribe's service area who have been impacted by the pandemic will each receive \$1,000. Non-tribal parents or legal guardians of Sault Tribe minor children will be eligible to receive the benefit for their tribal child.

Sault Tribe Chairperson Aaron Payment and other tribal leaders pushed for the use of total tribal enrollment population as part of the formula for a tribe's share of the \$8 billion. Instead of the Sault Tribe's 44,000 enrollment, Treasury used 16,500, the Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) Statistic covering the service area.

To be eligible, tribal members must:

- Be an enrolled member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe as of July 21, 2020;
- Reside in the seven (7) county services area of the Sault Tribe as of July 21, 2020; and
- Encountered COVID-19 financial hardships from March 1st through July 21, 2020.

A mail out and response survey must be completed by each member receiving \$1,000 in order to comply with federal requirements. The forms are tentatively slated to be mailed out in August.

The tribe had originally established a program to provide assistance to COVID-19-affected tribal members in the seven-county service area. After much discussion, the tribal board of directors voted unanimously at its July 21 meeting that eligible members who complete a COVID-19 survey form would receive \$1,000. The current members who applied for the original program will receive a letter explaining the new program as this one has been eliminated.

While members in the service area will be excited to hear the news of the COVID-19 relief benefit for the service area, Payment acknowledged the downside to this decision. "I deeply regret and apologize that the benefit plan approved last night does not include tribal members outside of the service area," he said.

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