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### **Sault Tribe's executive team keeping tribe's head above water**

SAULT STE. MARIE, Mich. — The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians has continued to support and care for its many tribal members and team members, keeping pay and essential services in place since the tribe's March 23 closure due to COVID-19. In preparation for its reopening, the tribe has worked diligently to put extra safeguards and measures in place to ensure its membership and patrons continued health and safety. The tribe thanks everyone for their patience as it does its part in supporting the community's safety.

The monstrous amount of work is ongoing, but the tribe's executive team remains up for the challenge.

On March 17, the Sault Tribe Board of Directors declared a State of Emergency in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, in consideration of Sault Tribe members' and team members' best interests and to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The board included language to grant temporary powers to Executive Director Christine McPherson, Casino CEO Allen Kerridge and EDC Director Joel Schultz to "modify policies or procedures, order closures, cancel or schedule events, implement programs, and take all other appropriate steps that are deemed essential to the protection of the public."

The executive team was ready. Weeks of hard work has already been dedicated to emergency response planning and organizing preliminary response items with managers and directors. McPherson's team of Administrative Manager Stephanie Sprecker, Tribal Attorney Courtney Kachur, CFO Robert Schulte and tribal division directors have been working every day to ensure the tribe moves forward.

"My executive team is phenomenal. They are here every step of the way," McPherson said. "All the way through this process they responded to each ask and enable us to ensure safety of the team and members." The executive director added they are ensuring that all plans are being reviewed by Law Enforcement and Health to include their recommendations.

#### **State of Emergency**

Internally, tribal division directors began implementing safety precautions and guidelines. They were asked to prepare an emergency plan for the emergency stage levels. Tribal executives ordered a travel ban March 11 for staff air travel and car travel that included any large, congregate meetings. Division directors postponed larger-scaled community events. A work group began meeting on March 12 to work on a tribal-wide plan and policy with procedure recommendations for board review.

After a criteria for closures and essential services was developed for each division, the tribe announced a closure effective March 23. The first tentative reopen date was April 5. Buildings were closed to the public (with exceptions), but essential services were still provided. This was a paid closure, so staff were on call and available to work their scheduled shifts. Directors were encouraged to have staff work remotely to reduce the risk of COVID-19 exposure. Membership Services directors reviewed their program's eligibility requirements to see which ones could be waived during this time period. For example, proof of income and social security card verifications were processed electronically rather than in person. Tribal Medical Director Dr. Joseph Garlinghouse prepared an informational report to guide individuals on what steps they should take if they believe they have been exposed to COVID-19.

Internal Services divisions such as Management Information Services, Accounting, Payroll, Telecommunications, Communications and Facilities, along with efficiency analysis and legislative staff, had a tremendous amount of work to do. Analysis and implementation of the tribe's needs for remote work had to be in place quickly — everything from virtual meetings, to paying the bills, to sending out a monthly newspaper.

### **Moving Forward**

Since mid-March, the Executive office, staff and tribal leaders have held conference calls with tribal, local, state and federal agencies and officials. Tribal efforts had to be coordinated with local efforts, along with state and federal legislation and executive orders, for emergency policy and implementation and funding.

The tribal government, casino and enterprises continued to collaborate daily to coordinate operational plans and resources and make reports to the board of directors, apprising the board of financial status, essential services and closures. On March 24, the board approved the balance of the \$5.5 million Contract Support Cost Settlement Funds be used to back fill for cost of wages incurred during the casino shut down and governmental move to essential operations during the tribal state of emergency.

The governmental office closure was extended until April 13 on March 26. On April 7, the closure was extended to May 3, and, most recently, May 18. Individual divisions kept their plans updated. As of April 16, there were 480 essential staff working with the public — Health, Elders Services and ACFS in home workers, with safety measures in place for staff and clients.

Treaty harvest licenses are renewed in March. Law Enforcement worked to process fishing and hunting permits to our tribal members in a timely manner. March and April are always the busiest months for processing, but there has been steady increase overall since March during this crisis. So far, Conservation Licensing staff have processed five commercial captains licenses, a commercial helpers license, 17 general subsistence licenses, 61 subsistence gill-net licenses and 1,332 Inland Hunting, Fishing, and Gathering Licenses. Administration worked with Law Enforcement on mailing all of the permits out to the members.

Negotiations for a new Great Lakes Consent Decree, which expires this August, has also been

ongoing via phone and virtual meetings.

### **COVID-19 Funding**

On March 27, Congress passed the CARES Act for COVID-19 pandemic hardship, which included an \$8 billion relief fund for tribal governments. The executive team had to quickly interpret the Act and ensure the tribe apply for all needed monies for which the tribe was eligible. The Act also made tribes eligible for the Small Business Act Section 7(a) Paycheck Protection Program, allows Indian tribes to be reimbursed for half of their incurred unemployment benefit costs through Dec. 31, 2020, and contains over \$2 billion in emergency supplemental funding for federal programs that serve Indian Tribes, urban Indian health centers and Native families.

The tribe set up a CARES Act funding tracker based on the federal tracker to ensure the tribe applied for everything it could. To date, the tribe has applied for 27 grants. So far, eight grants have been awarded: a total of \$423,301 for ACFS, \$207,000 for Economic Development, \$179,020 for Elders Services, \$179,178 for Health, and \$347,765 for Transportation. The rest are pending.

In other funding, FEMA announced that tribal governments may be a recipient or sub-recipient for FEMA public assistance. The tribe has successfully registered itself into the system to receive this public assistance, which will help reimburse the tribe for COVID-19 related costs.

As of right now, division directors are working on re-open plans.

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