

Session: Aligning with Our Communities

Speaker: David LaSarte-Meeks, Senior Attorney, Northwest Justice Project

Community: Native American and Tribal Communities

- 1. Briefly describe the work you and your organization do to advocate for this population/issue.*

The Northwest Justice Project's (NJP) Native American Unit (NAU) offers community education and legal assistance to the Native American population, as well as coordinating broader advocacy efforts and providing technical assistance to related organizations. The NAU provides legal representation and advice in tribal, federal, and state court matters. General priority areas include at-risk youth, benefits, housing and other tribal and federal Indian programs, tribal jurisdiction, Indian trust property and estate planning, and other matters relating to Native American status and tribal sovereignty.

The NAU also oversees the collaboration and coordination of NJP's field offices and Native American Task Force in better addressing the needs of Native populations across diverse geographical areas and subject matter.

- 2. What challenges is this population/issue experiencing? Have these challenges changed over the last year with the election and new administration? If so, how?*

Native American populations historically face dramatic disparities in the areas of education, quality of healthcare, substance abuse, violence, and suicide rates. Most of these issues can be directly or indirectly attributed to violence and trauma associated with the attempted destruction of Native society and culture beginning at initial contact with Europeans and continuing through over 300 years of destructive government policies.

In addition to the effects of this historical and multi-generational trauma, one of the most significant challenges facing the Native population is its lack of visibility in mainstream society and the resulting lack of awareness of its continuing challenges or representation in governmental institutions. Native Americans make up less than 1.8% of Washington's general population, with much of that concentrated on and around rural reservations. While most people have some awareness of historic injustice perpetrated against Native people, that awareness tends to focus on the distant past. Outside of casinos, offensive sports mascots, or the occasional negative movie stereotype, most people have little awareness that Native Americans exist in contemporary society.

As a result, despite the dramatic disparities faced by Native populations, far too few resources are ever dedicated to addressing them. Although this has been historically true, regardless of which presidential administration happens to be in power, any reduction in already inadequate Federal funding levels for various agencies working with Tribal governments has a serious cascading impact on Native populations, and the potential for future cuts is a source of anxiety and concern. The most recent budget proposals from the Trump administration include total cuts of over 10% in federal Indian country appropriations, including reductions of:

- Over \$50 million for HUD's Native housing programs and \$8 million from BIA housing programs.
- Approximately \$150 million from Indian Health Services.
- \$64 million from Indian education programs and \$58 million from Indian school construction.
- \$21 million from Indian law enforcement at the BIA.
- \$30 million from the Department of Justice for Indian assistance.
- \$27 million from Tribal natural resources management programs.
- \$23 million from human services programs, including Indian child welfare.

3. *How has your organization been responding to the challenges you describe above?*

In addition to its general priorities, the NAU recently introduced two new initiatives to address (1) the needs of Native American victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other crimes, and (2) the specific issues facing Native American youth and families related to the educational system, including cultural responsiveness in the classroom, discriminatory discipline, special education, and foster and homeless student issues. These were identified as areas with serious direct, indirect, and long-term impacts on Native families. Dedicating staff and attention to these areas will leverage resources to hopefully address root causes and break a cycle of inter-generational issues.

4. *In your opinion, how is this population/issue and related challenges similar to the other issues represented on the panel?*

I can imagine that other populations addressed by the panel would face some common challenges related to the lack of understanding and awareness regarding historical and multi-generational trauma, both on a personal and cultural level, as well as a general lack of visibility and awareness for certain populations. Also, proposed major cuts to Federal funding would certainly have serious direct and indirect impacts on programs and services for all of these populations.

One important issue that is frequently misunderstood, even by allies and potentially aligned communities, is the dual nature of discrimination facing Native people. Natives face racism and prejudice on an individual basis as they navigate the institutions and fabric of everyday society, but Native Americans are not solely a race or ethnic group. Tribal nations are also sovereign governments with rights and powers that give them a seat at the table with federal and state governments. Tribal nations have robust laws, institutions, programs and judicial systems. As citizens of both governments, the individual rights and struggles of Native people are inextricably intertwined with the broader collective struggle for self-determination, cultural survival and sovereignty facing Tribal nations. Despite historical and contemporary struggles, Native people take tremendous pride in the fact that their nations have fought, overcome, and endured so many challenges to continue preserving their culture, identity and traditions for future generations.

While recognizing and leveraging our commonalities, it is also important to respectfully recognize and build awareness of the differences and unique aspects of our aligned communities and populations. This will allow us to more effectively advocate for each other in an aware and respectful way, without unintentionally undermining the standing of our allies.

5. *Are there other resources you would recommend to the audience members to help us deepen our understanding of this population/issue beyond the information you provided in the panel? (articles, books, trainings, movies, etc).*

For non-Native people interested in understanding the contemporary Native experience, I often recommend works by the Northwest author, Sherman Alexie, including his work intended for young readers. *The Round House*, by Louise Erdrich, is a phenomenal novel that also manages to explain the jurisdictional maze and barriers to justice for a Native woman who has been the victim of sexual assault, and the ways that it impacts her family and community. Vine Deloria, Jr's, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest* provides a history relevant for any resident of the Pacific Northwest. It also elucidates many details of ancestral lands and the essential connection to the aboriginal waters and fishing that underpins many of the battles, legal and otherwise, that Indian Nations continue to fight today.

The University of Washington and other organizations have trainers who can present on historical and multi-generational trauma. There are conferences and training opportunities organized by the Affiliated Tribe of Northwest Indians (ATNI), National Indian Education Association (NIEA), and the American Indian Bar Association. Often, with minimal research, you can find events organized by local tribes or Native organizations that are open to community. Even in urban areas, there are often community powwows (traditional dancing and singing) and there is an annual canoe journey that typically traverses Puget Sound. For anyone with particular interests, our staff at the NAU would be happy to answer questions or make recommendations if contacted.