

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN
AFFAIRS
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE REGULATION OF INDIAN GAMING
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SISSETON-WAHPETON OYATE OF THE LAKE TRAVERSE
RESERVATION
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify this morning specifically on how our Tribe has benefited from Indian gaming. My name is James "JC" Crawford and I am the elected Chairman of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the Lake Traverse Reservation. On behalf of our government I wish to extend our appreciation to the Indian Affairs Committee for holding this hearing. Such communication is essential to help us understand each other's responsibilities and needs and to gain a true, unfiltered sense of how Indian gaming has breathed new life into my Tribe and many like it.

Recently, the tribe commissioned an economic impact study to attempt to better understand the effect gaming has on the tribe and the region. We are not privileged to see the revenues that other tribes nearer to large population centers have, but Indian gaming has been the most useful tool in improving the lives of our members through education, employment and healthcare and it has allowed us to plan for the future and provide the basic necessities for our tribal members.

Although it may seem hard to believe, it has not been the dream of the majority of our tribal members to be farmers and ranchers, either now or when we were first limited to the lands we currently control. Yes, we have become fairly adept at agriculture, but unlike other Americans, our rewards came not from our innovation and individuality, but only inasmuch as we conformed to an economy and structure that was determined by "policy" made thousands of miles away.

Agreements were made; agreements were breached: the only items made readily available to us were contempt and an increased hunger for dominion over our land and even our lives. It may be difficult for the majority of our neighbors to empathize with our struggles because they are privileged to enjoy a “Midwest lifestyle”; for the Sisseton-Wahpeton however, Indian gaming means that we could finally have the basic and build houses, schools, roads, and sewer and water systems.

The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) came about in response to then-existing, but regional tribal gaming. It was designed to create a national framework for tribal gaming and was specifically designed to bolster the economic development of tribal governments and provide much-needed employment for their membership. For the first time, the government stepped away and allowed tribes to participate in the free market.

With the relatively greater scope that came on the heels of IGRA, Indian gaming has been instrumental in improving the quality of life of the Sisseton-Wahpeton. It has bridged the gaps that have often existed in funding the health care and education of our people and developed a strong, diverse economic base for the future of our children and grandchildren. Let me illustrate some of the ways it has benefited our Tribe.

Impact on Employment

In the last 10 years, the unemployment rate on our reservation has decreased from a staggering 59.5 percent to 30.7 percent. While these numbers are astounding in and of themselves, the tribe is still faced with an unemployment rate that is approximately ten times that of South Dakota. As a government, we have a strong desire to lower that rate even further and rely upon gaming to improve the welfare of tribal members. These improvements are directly attributable to the growth of the tribe’s gaming operation, which employs 826 people, 55 percent of whom are tribal members and is one of the largest employers in the region.

One way has been to implement an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) within the gaming enterprise, that aides employees in keeping and improving employment. This signifies more than jobs: it means that employees are in management, with tribal members comprising 59 percent of our supervisors, and 86 percent of our managers. Gaming revenues have also fully funded a Professional Empowerment Program, that helps tribal members find work and stay employed. The skills learned through working at the gaming enterprise have successfully been transferred to other industries as well as to tribal government administration.

In addition to employment, gaming employees receive an extraordinary benefit package that makes jobs attractive and competitive. It is one of the best in the area and we have heard that this has a positive impact on the continued existence of the small family farm, because one spouse can provide family health

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insurance coverage through the gaming facility. Tribal gaming represents a tangible benefit to both Indian and non-Indian employees, businesses and support services and our gaming facilities bring in tourists from many other states and even from Canadian provinces.

Impact on Education

Tribal gaming has also served to increase the educational level of tribal members, which has improved dramatically at all levels. The tribe contributes to post-secondary and graduate education at universities throughout the country and the world. The tribe has more high school graduates than it did ten years ago. The gaming enterprise has implemented the Career Path and College Course Program, that allows employees to receive time off from work and obtain tuition reimbursement.

Most importantly, tribal contributions from gaming revenues has permitted the Sisseton - Wahpeton College to flourish, providing the local match for additional grant funding. The success rate of these students, who are primarily Native American, is much higher at the Sisseton-Wahpeton College and the tribe's contribution allows almost 250 students to receive

higher education at no cost to the state of South Dakota. The Sisseton-Wahpeton College is instrumental in preserving Dakota culture, history and language and a unifying force in the community and throughout the Dakota community.

Impact on Housing

Tribal members have always had a lower rate of home ownership and lived in lower quality housing than the surrounding population. However, tribal gaming has allowed the tribe to create a first-time home buyers' program that provides down payment assistance, and about 161 homes have been purchased under the program. This has encouraged financial responsibility and permitted tribal members to partake in an aspect of American life that many people take for granted.

Community Impact

The economic impact of tribal gaming does not end there. The Tribe has fostered relationships with local communities that were not as robust as recently as only 10 years ago. As a result of tribal gaming, our government and gaming

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enterprise are working to improve conditions in the surrounding local communities, donating funds for improvement to emergency facilities, ambulance and emergency services, and for road maintenance and law enforcement. Because of gaming, we are the only tribe in South Dakota to have contracted to run its own Child Protection Program and we fund a Child Support Enforcement Program, assuring that the needs of our children are met, while reducing the load on local social and court services. Gaming also has a direct impact on the health of tribal members: we fund a group home for neglected and abused children, substance abuse treatment programs and transitional housing. Gaming revenues are also being used to fund a Health and Fitness center in an effort stem the tide of diabetes, heart ailments and other issues that cripple Indian country.

Conclusion

While considering the effect of Indian gaming, it should not be forgotten that tribes created and developed their gaming markets out of whole cloth, and with regulation that is rarely paralleled in other areas of the government. Our government has expended significant effort and resources to see these goals realized, and intend to continue to do what is necessary to improve the lives and futures of tribal members. Indian Gaming has been a significant mechanism in boosting economic development in areas with historically severe poverty and extreme unemployment. It also cannot be denied that Indian gaming has given tribes the resources to protect their citizens and to remind the United States of the duties and responsibilities it undertook long ago in exchange for lands that had once been the basis for tribal subsistence.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.