



Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indians

Executive Branch of Tribal Government

Office of the Chief Executive

Via E-mail

Virgil Wind
Chief Executive
Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
43408 Oodena Drive
Onamia, MN 56359

September 9, 2024

Angie DeLille
Interim Director | Office of Indian Policy
Minnesota Department of Human Services
540 Cedar St.
St. Paul, MN 55164

Re: Mille Lacs Band State Legislative Priorities

Dear Director DeLille:

On August 22, 2024, the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families attended tribal consultation on the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe reservation. We truly appreciated the opportunity to have candid conversations while discussing some of the issues we experience and potential solutions. As discussed, we are following up in writing with our priorities.

Mental Health Continuum of Care

Suicide rates among Native American populations are higher than any other population in the United States according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. This is a result of several things, including historical trauma, poverty, and high rates of substance use.

Often times tribal communities are located in rural areas, which leads to issues such as access to care and access to quality services. The Mille Lacs Band has struggled for years to retain and develop quality mental health practitioners. An even more arduous task has been recruiting practitioners who are equipped to deal with the high levels of trauma in our communities.

To meet the critical need of our members, our solution has been to contract for services. After entering a contract to provide psychiatric and mental health services across the Band's districts, we have run into further barriers.

We are asking the Department of Human Services ("DHS") to prioritize mental health services and funding for tribal communities and state agencies. There is a massively increasing need for access to Intensive Residential Treatment, tribally specific crisis response teams, and funding in

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general across tribes and the state. In order to best meet our community needs, we recommend that DHS increase funding to support the overall continuum of care, including access points, partnerships, and higher levels of care. These are just a few areas in dire need of solutions across Minnesota, especially in rural tribal communities.

The Band recommends that DHS focus on:

- Access to Intensive Residential Treatment
 - Adult and youth
- Direct funding to tribes
 - Crisis response teams
 - Mental health services
- HF4563 Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Education Center
 - Add tribal clause that further incentivizes building a career and remaining employed in tribal communities.

Four Winds Lodge Lease

The Band operates the Four Winds Lodge in Brainerd, MN. This program is a comprehensive, culturally infused, inpatient treatment program that has serviced 948 Native Americans since 2017.

When the Band took over the Four Winds Lodge, we received a grant from DHS for \$800,000.00. As one might imagine, those funds were expended rather quickly. From that time, the Band has paid a monthly lease that continues to increase in cost. The lease payment for August 2024 was \$47,483.15.

With the Band servicing Native Americans across the state of Minnesota, we are asking for increased financial support from DHS as follows:

- DHS should work with the Department of Administration to review, reduce, or eliminate the high costs of the Four Winds Lodge lease.
- DHS should direct funding to the Four Winds Lodge to offset the cost of the lease.

Detox and Withdrawal Management

According to the 2020 Substance Use Disorder Treatment Program Systems Improvement Legislative report, there are only 16 detox centers across the state of Minnesota. This poses many challenges to service providers across both tribal communities and the state. The powerful substances of today have created new challenges for those who provide substance use coordination and treatment services. The fact of the matter is, without access to detox and withdrawal management, those suffering from addiction are struggling to make it through

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treatment. To have effective outcomes, we need to look at the continuum of care. Without support through withdrawal, patients are less likely to complete their treatment programs.

The Band recommends:

- Increased funding for withdrawal management for tribes.
- Increased access to detox services across the state. Given the number of inpatient treatment centers, access to detox centers and withdrawal management must be included.
- Partnership with the Band on a detox center connected to Four Winds Lodge. DHS should financially support the startup cost.

American Indian Child Welfare Initiative

The Band has been in the planning stage of becoming an Initiative Tribe since sometime in 2017. Over that time, the Band has experienced multiple changes in leadership both internally and externally with DHS. In 2019, the Band decided to proceed with the planning stages of the Initiative. This included onboarding new team members, understanding the Initiative, and starting new planning. Soon thereafter, the COVID 19 pandemic hit full force, which further delayed progress.

From the fall of 2020 to fall of 2023, the Band's core Initiative team worked diligently to prepare for the possibility of becoming the next Initiative Tribe. As research continued, files updated, and new challenges arose, it became glaringly obvious that the Band was in no position to begin the implementation stage. Under the most recent contract, the Band was set to go live on January 1, 2025.

The Band recommends that DHS:

- Acknowledge sovereignty and self-determination.
- Re-negotiate the Indian Child Welfare Initiative funding to allow the Band to use the funding according to its own requirements, not state and federal requirements.
- Direct funding of no less than one million dollars (\$1,000,000) per year to the Band to support family preservation efforts.

Education

The state of Minnesota has one of the lowest graduation rates for Native American students in the nation. The latest data released by the Minnesota Department of Education shows that the rate has increased from 58 percent in 2021 to 61 percent in 2022. This is an improvement. But when compared to other student groups—such as Caucasians who graduated at a rate of 88 percent—Native American students face a gap of 27 percent.

There is convincing evidence that high-quality learning experiences that include culturally relevant curriculum and teaching methods provide Native American children with the tools they need to be successful when they begin kindergarten. Research also indicates that that these

programs have many benefits, including improved academic outcomes, reduced likelihood of grade retention, and increased high school graduation rates. Thoughtful and intentionally designed early learning programs aid Native American children in developing foundational cognitive skills and social-emotional competence. They further help establish engagement patterns in school and learning. Support for these programs is an investment in the future of Native American students.

The Band is asking the state of Minnesota to:

- Appropriate additional funding to recruit and retain high-quality Early Childhood and Head Start teachers in high-needs areas.
- Provide funding to expand access to both Early Childhood Family Education and Early Childhood Special Education within tribal communities.
- Designate state-appropriated funds to increase slots for Tribal Head Start and Early Head Start programs.
- Increase the universe of service providers to include tribal referral networks.
- Coordinated efforts to increase support for Native American students and communities.
- Appropriate 21st Century funding for the 11 tribes in Minnesota to develop after-school and summer programming for Native American students, focused on closing the 27 percent graduation gap.

Direct Funding Opportunities

The Band encourages the state of Minnesota to acknowledge and support tribal sovereignty and self-determination, affording tribes the opportunity to develop guidelines and program requirements internally where they have the capacity.

- Family Preservation is a model that focuses on supporting families to reduce out-of-home placement and keeps families together. The Band asks that the state increase funding for Family Preservation efforts through direct funding or block grants.
- Information technology modernization is crucial in providing services in rural areas. The Band asks the state to increase funding for the Technology Modernization Fund that will sunset in 2025.

Other

- Continued support and advocacy for billable telehealth services
- Fast-track Medicaid Waiver enrollments including State Medical Review Team disability determinations and MNChoice assessments. Wait times from beginning to end take anywhere from 6-9 months. With Medicaid waivers we cannot back bill for services which leads to a loss in revenue.

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- Decrease the qualifications to be an MN Choice assessor. Let the Band set our standards for who qualifies to be an assessor and allow us to be an assessor without becoming a Lead Agency.
- Policy changes to include drive time or mileage reimbursement for home care providers traveling to rural locations (personal care attendant, homemaking, etc.).
- Point of contact issues, such as DHS not having the ability to contact the correct people at the state or county level to assist with the Band's barriers

Thank you again for taking our comments into consideration. Also, please feel free to contact me at virgil.wind@millelacsband.com if you have any questions or requests for assistance.

Sincerely,



Virgil Wind

Chief Executive

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe