

State of the Judiciary Address January 10, 2023

Boozhoo. It is my duty and privilege to deliver the State of the Mille Lacs Band Judiciary Address today. Biidahbanookwe, ndizhinikaaz, Sylvia Wise, from District 3 from the St. John's family. My mother was Beatrice St. John Taylor.

The Court of Central Jurisdiction strives to be a place where problems can be solved, wrongs can be righted, and lives can be healed. It should constantly evolve and try to be more accessible to the people and more reflective of Band values and culture.

Today I will share with you a few important milestones that the Court can celebrate. Some of these milestones took years, and others had to come about quickly. With this year's appointment of Associate Justice Rhonda Sam, we have a complete Court of Appeals bench. Justice Sam joins Associate Justice Brenda Moose and me. Richard Osburn returned to the position of District Court Judge for the Band in 2020. He continues to hear most of the trial-level cases and administrative appeals. Will the Justices and Judge Osburn please stand and be recognized?

The Court has statutory authority to appoint law-trained individuals to hear cases when there is a high caseload, if there is a conflict on a particular case for a judge or justice, or if a case involves complex litigation. B.J. Jones, Joe Plumer, and Tammy Swanson serve as our Special Magistrates. Tammy Swanson also serves as the judge in our Family Healing to Wellness Court.

About five years ago, the Court saw that Band families involved in Child in Need of Protection or Services cases were not successfully reunifying with their children and were falling between the cracks. Service providers and Band departments were operating in silos and not collaborating. Over the past five years, the Court has worked hard to develop a solution: the Family Healing to Wellness Court program, also known as Noojimo'wiigamig Inaawanidiwag, or Healing Journey. The planning process brought together all three branches of the Band government. As a result, the Family Healing to Wellness Court was established in April of 2022 with the passage of Chapter 4 of Title 5 of the Mille Lacs Band statutes.

The Band successfully applied for a competitive 5-year Department of Justice grant to plan and implement the program. It is a pilot program, so it will work with five (5) Band families in its first year. Then, as the program grows, it can work with additional families.

It is a rigorous four-phase program available to caregivers of Band children. Its purpose is to use a team approach to bring together healing services, cultural resources, and substance use disorder treatment to reunify families faster and prevent future child protection cases.

A dedicated case manager, Theresa James, works with each program participant to ensure they receive the services they need and follow drug testing and other program requirements. The program became operational on November 1st of this year, has already admitted two participants, and is considering the admission of a third. Vanessa Weyaus, a Peer Recovery Specialist and Healing Journey Team Member, said this about the program. "The Family Healing to Wellness Court is a great opportunity for our Relatives to come together again after facing challenges with Substance Use Disorder. As a Mother and Community Member in Recovery, it is rewarding to see the healing and growth each family experiences. I am humbled and honored to be a part of this team."

The Court continues to hear many other civil and criminal cases. The caseload dropped due to COVID in 2020 and 2021 but is again steadily rising. In 2022, 1,089 cases were filed, 1,118 cases were closed (including cases carried over from prior years), 1,444 hearings were held, and 2,710 orders were issued. The Court is highly fortunate to have a competent and hard-working court staff on the front line moving the cases along. The court staff prides itself on being helpful and compassionate to all those in need of judicial services. May I please have the court staff stand and be acknowledged?

The Court facility had been in dire need of renovation for many years, and finally, the work was completed in October 2022. Many of you attended the Open House and could see the new professional space for yourself. The renovation also allowed us to make the court space more reflective of Band culture. For example, a new courtroom can be used for regular hearings and converted into circle seating for Wellness Court and peacemaking.

With the advent of COVID, court operations had to adapt and implement technology that allows for remote hearings, such as video-teleconferencing. As restrictions have been lifted, the

court can again conduct in-person hearings. But some persons may still need to appear remotely, so hybrid court sessions can be conducted. Chief Justice Order 56, which can be found on the court's website, details which proceedings must be in person, and which can be attended remotely.

For the past sixteen years, Gilda Burr has done an outstanding job as Court Administrator leading and guiding the Court through these challenging years. In large part due to her hard work, the Mille Lacs Band tribal justice system is one of the most respected in Indian Country. In October, the National American Indian Court Judges Association awarded Gilda its Court Support Excellence Award. We thank her for her enthusiasm and dedication. Gilda, please stand and be recognized.

It was gratifying in 2022 to see so much growth and improvement in the Court of Central Jurisdiction and to mark these significant milestones. But the journey must continue. We must persist in striving to be the most effective tribal court we can be while demonstrating our Band values in all that we do.

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