



National Congress of American Indians

2021 Mid Year Conference

Virtual Event - NCAI Alaska Region | June 20 - 24, 2021

WRAP-UP REPORT

Last week, tribal leaders and partners from across Indian Country gathered for the first-ever virtual National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) 2021 Mid Year Conference. Attendees had the unique opportunity to connect through a dynamic environment and watch presentations; convene with committees, sub-committees, and caucuses; and network with others to work on critical issues facing Tribal Nations directly in their respective homelands.

SUNDAY, JUNE 20

The 2021 Mid Year Conference officially kicked off on Sunday, June 20, 2021 with an afternoon of meetings, including an NCAI Fund Board meeting and an NCAI Executive Committee meeting.

MONDAY, JUNE 21

Monday morning opened with several NCAI task force meetings lasting throughout the day for tribal leaders, conference-goers, and allies to discuss and strategize on important issues to Indian Country including technology, climate action, violence against Native women, and more. Additionally, attendees were invited to join agency-hosted listening sessions and

consultations covering topics such as tribal justice and environmental review processes.

“Sovereignty is not a matter of state or federal law granting it. It is a matter of a Tribe possessing it inherently by being an Indigenous Nation.”

-Earl Evans (Haliwa-Saponi)

The NCAI Youth Commission began their week by participating in a Research Career Roundtable with the NCAI Policy Research Center team and sponsored by Lumina Foundation. After attending various task force sessions relevant to their areas of policy interest, the Youth Commission connected to provide updates, discussed the importance of having Native youth present to engage in meaningful dialogue, and attended a film showing and discussion on environmentalism.

To conclude the afternoon, NCAI committee and subcommittee chairs met with the resolutions committee to discuss the crucial responsibilities of the committees, including the best practices for ensuring a seamless process of resolution editing, voting, and reporting in a virtual setting.





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TUESDAY, JUNE 22

Bright and early on Tuesday morning, NCAI President Fawn Sharp called to order the First General Assembly, followed by a land acknowledgment from Aaron Leggett, President and Chair of the Native Village of Eklutna, and an Invocation led by Meda Dewitt (Tlingit).

After the assembly opening, local Alaska officials welcomed attendees and discussed the state's government-to-government relationship with Tribal Nations. Senator Lisa Murkowski, Vice-Chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, noted the anticipation of a collaborative in-person conference next year, commended the high vaccination rates across tribal communities, and spoke about the committee's priorities moving forward. Congressman Don Young then pointed out the need to "think big" and solve the widespread underfunding issue that plagues Indian Country.

"We have so much in common across the nation, some of those are positives, and some of them are areas that we know we have much work and healing to do," said Murkowski.

Co-Chair of the Rules and Credentials Committee Yvonne Oberly joined NCAI Resolutions Committee Co-Chairs Leslie Wheelock and W. Ron Allen to review the rules of the convention and the resolutions process. President Fawn Sharp then provided the President's

report. She touched on working with the 117th Congress through meaningful consultation to strengthen current legislation, secure COVID-19 relief funding for tribal communities, and combat climate change. Before concluding, President Sharp asked attendees to join her in a moment of silence for the Native children lost to boarding schools.

Next, Rob Sanderson Jr., 3rd Vice President of the Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska's Central Council, introduced NCAI CEO Dante Desiderio to provide the Chief Executive Officer's report. In his report, Desiderio discussed his vision for NCAI moving forward, reinstating the significance of the organization acting the way its founders envisioned—as a Congress that truly advocates for Indian Country as a whole. Desiderio commended recent legislative wins and the historic inclusion of tribal governments in discretionary funding before ending his remarks with an overview of the week ahead.



U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski during the First General Assembly.



"NCAI will be there at every turn to hold the federal government accountable for what it owes us and for what it will always owe us. Not just in terms of dollars, but laws and policies that affirm and advance tribal self-determination - not obstruct it."

-NCAI President Fawn Sharp



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Kristen Carpenter, Director of the American Indian Law Program at the University of Colorado Law School, provided a NARF-CU Law update on their collaborative project to implement the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the United States. Next, Dr. Yvette Roubideaux, Vice President of Research and Director of NCAI's Policy Research Center, discussed current COVID-19 infection rates, variants, vaccinations, and projections. Dr. Ian Record, NCAI Vice President of Tribal Governance and Special Projects, then previewed the forthcoming "Building Tribal Economies Toolkit."

Following a short break, NCAI 1st Vice President Aaron Payment introduced Secretary Jennifer Granholm of the U.S. Department of Energy. Secretary Granholm discussed the department's tribal consultation efforts before answering questions from tribal leaders about the Tribal Energy and Loan Guarantee program. Secretary Pete Buttigieg, U.S. Department of Transportation, committed to upholding trust and treaty obligations by announcing the expectation of tribal consultations this fall.

"Let me be clear; none of this will be done by us without you. This administration is committed to bringing Indian Country to the table, and that is especially true of our transition efforts," said Secretary Granholm.

The First General Assembly concluded with a highly anticipated U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) update from Secretary Deb Haaland, Bryan Newland, and Anthony Morgan Rodman. Secretary Haaland acknowledged the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples' crisis, climate change, and the DOI's past assimilation policies before making the historic announcement of a new Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative.

At no time in history have the records or documentation of this policy been compiled or analyzed to determine the full scope of its reaches and effects. We must uncover the truth about the loss of human life and the lasting consequences of the schools.

-Secretary Deb Haaland



Bryan Newland, DOI Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, discussed his priority of uncovering the history of Indian boarding schools and answered questions regarding the DOI's intent to support tribally-owned businesses through the Loan Guarantee program. Anthony Morgan Rodman, Executive Director of White House Council on Native American Affairs (WHCNA), presented on his role and the importance of creating long-standing positive change in federal service for all of Indian Country.



U.S. Department of Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm during the First General Assembly.



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The NCAI Youth Commission joined Pen America on a session surrounding the importance of fighting disinformation through media literacy before completing their day with an open mic night reserved for cultural storytelling.

The day concluded with an evening of regional caucus and subcommittee meetings that allowed tribal leaders to discuss issues most important to their communities and to consider resolutions.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23

The Second General Assembly began with storytelling from Alaska tribal elder Shirley Kendall, a welcome from NCAI 1st Vice President Aaron Payment (Chairperson, Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians) and a moving invocation from Gregory Nothstine (Inupiak).

This year's Second General Assembly also included the 16th Annual Tribal Leader/Scholars Forum (TLSF), which featured several researchers presenting their data findings to tribal leaders, policymakers, and tribal citizens. This year's theme was Governance, Trust, and Culture in Research.

Following the Assembly opening, Dr. Yvette Roubideaux, Vice President of Research and Director of NCAI's Policy Research Center, shared important updates and data concerning COVID-19 vaccinations, new resources on juvenile justice data, and work to support tribal governance of research and data.

Following Dr. Roubideaux's update, Chief Marilyn Malerba, the first female chief of the Mohegan Tribe, spoke about tribal data sovereignty and the appropriate utilization of research for the betterment of Indian Country. Next, Dr. Angela Gonzales and Dr. Nathan

Martin with Arizona State University presented findings from the Arizona Youth Identity Project by highlighting the strength of Native youth in advocating for and protecting their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next was an Indian Health Service (IHS) IRB Update from Rachael Tracy. NCAI's Dr. Ian Record and Research Associate Coby Klar then overviewed NCAI's School Mascot Tracking Database and NCAI's initiative to ending Native "themed" mascots broadly before discussing recent school mascot changes.

[NCAI's School Mascot Tracking Database >>](#)

The final TLSF presentation was a research update from Dr. Denise Dillard from Southcentral Foundation (SCF), and she explained how SCF has built its tribal research capacity and expressed sovereignty through research.

All presenters who spoke on the future of the pandemic seemed hopeful about the road to recovery for Indian Country. As Dr. Roubideaux reminded us, "How we act as individuals and communities will determine how much the virus will be spreading by fall."



Dr. Yvette Roubideaux provides an NCAI Policy Research Center Update during the 16th Annual TLSF.



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The Second General Assembly concluded with 1st Vice President Payment introducing Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer and U.S. Representative Sharice Davids, Co-Chair of the Native American Caucus. Both discussed the need for transformative infrastructure, the inclusion of Tribal Nations in legislation, and the economic crises in the face of COVID-19.



Representative Sharice Davids during the Second General Assembly.

Rep. Davids spoke with passion to her community, saying, “I am committed to making sure that when it comes to the Native American caucus that we’re moving forward in a bipartisan way.” Sen. Schumer spoke of a similar commitment, declaring, “We will not falter in our commitment to take bold action that this moment calls for.”

In addition to three TLSF breakout sessions on Juvenile Justice data, COVID-19 data, and Community Partnership data, the day concluded with other concurrent breakout sessions searching for solutions to contemporary issues in Indian Country. These breakout sessions discussed growing civic engagement, building

climate resiliency, and boosting tribal economies. The NCAI Youth Commission joined Madeline Gupta (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewas Indians) for a panel discussion on 2SLGBTQ issues. At the same time, Full Committees gathered to make recommendations on all resolutions for consideration.

THURSDAY, JUNE 24

The fifth and final morning of the 2021 Mid Year Conference began with Regional Caucus meetings, followed by a Youth Commission Roundtable discussion on cultural appropriation. The Third General Assembly opened with a traditional dance performance from the Inupiaq Region of Alaska. After an invocation delivered by Chief Mike Williams, Sr. (Akiak Native Community), NCAI Recording Secretary Juana Majel-Dixon called the closing General Assembly to order.

Secretary Majel-Dixon introduced Native American Rights Fund (NARF) Executive Director John Echohawk to provide a Tribal Supreme Court Project Update. NARF Staff Attorneys Joel West Williams and Dan Lewerenz informed attendees on the status of several U.S. Supreme Court cases impacting Indian Country that involve tribal police jurisdiction, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and more.

Next, NCAI Treasurer Shannon Holsey (President, Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians) delivered the Treasurer’s Report. During her presentation, Holsey provided up-to-date financial data on the current fiscal year and commended NCAI’s diverse sovereign members and nations for supporting the organization to carry out its mission of serving tribal communities.



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NCAI Treasurer Shannon Holsey giving the 2021 Mid Year Treasurer's Report.

"For nearly seven decades since its founding, NCAI has remained true to the original purpose of our organization and it is one of being a unified voice of Tribal Nations," said Holsey.

Following an intermission filled with compelling video highlights of Native youth performing Olympic feats amid the 2021 Olympic Trials, Patrick Anderson, Chair of the NCAI Elections Committee, swore in Governor J. Michael Chavarria (Santa Clara Pueblo) as Vice President Alternate for the NCAI Southwest Region.

Jacob Leibenluft, Counselor to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Treasury (USDT), began the USDT update by discussing the department's approach to supporting Tribal Nations in post-pandemic recovery. Leibenluft cited the American Rescue Plan's \$31 billion investment in Indian Country, five tribal consultation sessions, and the USDT's commitment to hiring employees based on the needs of Native communities.

Gene Sperling, White House American Rescue Plan Coordinator and Senior Advisor, directly addressed the importance of tribal leaders informing families about the Child Tax Credit, noting previous discrepancies in the government's support toward Native children.



NCAI CEO Dante Desiderio speaks with Gene Sperling (left) and Jacob Leibenluft (center) during a USDT update.

For the last presentation of the day, tribal leaders gathered to discuss community and economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. President Rodney Bordeaux (Rosebud Sioux Tribe), President Shelley Buck (Prairie Island Indian Community), and Chief Cyrus Ben (Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians) each shared personal anecdotes of their experiences while rebuilding their Tribal Nations. President Buck enforced the need for leaders to be proactive and prepare ahead for future situations; President Bordeaux shared unemployment and housing issues; Chief Ben discussed the importance of maintaining economic self-determination in the face of revenue loss as it pertains to tribal gaming. Each tribal leader vocalized the common need for federal infrastructure legislation and funding.



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To close out General Assembly, the respective Committee Chairs each gave individual committee reports, and a total of 20 resolutions were passed.

[View All of the Resolutions Passed >>](#)

NCAI's Youth Commission closed their 2021 Mid Year agenda with a day full of discussions on cultural appropriation and health before combining notes from the week and offering closing remarks.

Following a closing invocation by tribal elder Shirley Kendall (Tlingit), Secretary Majel-Dixon expressed her gratitude to attendees and all who made the 2021 Mid Year Conference a success, and the conference officially adjourned.

THANK YOU TO OUR LOCAL PLANNING COMMITTEE

Rob Sanderson, Jr.
3rd V.P., Central Council of
Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska,
Alaska Regional Vice President, NCAI

Michael Williams, Sr.
Chief, Akiak Native Community
Alaska Alternate Regional Vice
President, NCAI

Aaron Leggett
President and Chair
Native Village of Eklutna

Tasha (Jă kǝ sě) Hotch
4th V.P., Central Council of
Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes
of Alaska

Emily Edenshaw
Yup'ik/Iñupiaq
Executive Director
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Benno H. Cleveland
Iñupiaq
President, Alaska Native
Veterans Association

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