



Forest County Potawatomi Community

P.O. BOX 340 • Crandon, WI 54520

2020 State of the Tribes Address

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Ned Daniels, Jr.

Chairman, Forest County Potawatomi Community

My name is Ned Daniels, Jr. and I am the Chairman of the Forest County Potawatomi Community.

Good afternoon Governor Evers, Lt. Governor Barnes, Speaker Vos, Majority Leader Fitzgerald, President Roth, members of the Senate, members of the State Assembly, Constitutional Officers, Cabinet Secretaries, Justices of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, Fellow Tribal Leaders, esteemed elders, veterans, and other honored guests.

I stand before you in honor and respect for the elders, veterans, leaders and public servants who have come before me. Our Tribal Nations are well-represented, as we have among us:

- President Marlon WhiteEagle, Ho-Chunk Nation
- Chairwoman Joan Delabreau, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin
- President Shannon Holsey, Stockbridge-Munsee Community
- Chairman Tehassi Hill, Oneida Nation
- Chairman Garland McGeshick, Sokaogon Chippewa Community
- Chairman Rick Peterson, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Council Member Thomas Fowler, St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin
- Chairman Louis Taylor, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin
- Chairman Mike Wiggins, Jr., Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians
- President Joe Wildcat, Sr., Lac Du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians

I am thankful we have the opportunity and desire to come together to celebrate and strengthen the cooperative relationship between the state of Wisconsin and its 11 Native Nations.

As we begin, I want to recognize someone whose work embodied the purpose of today's address. Our Chief Judge, Eugene Whitefish, passed away in December. Fugie – as we called him – was the first judge elected when Potawatomi established our court system. He dedicated his career to ensuring a strong relationship between the state and tribes, and it is because of his efforts there is better coordination between the state and tribal courts.

We are in a better place because of Fugie, and I know he is looking down on us smiling right now.

While the Forest County Potawatomi today have reservation lands in the Northwoods of Wisconsin, that is not our traditional treaty land. Like the other tribes in Wisconsin, the Potawatomi were forced off-of their lands. The Potawatomi's traditional home in Wisconsin stretched from the Potawatomi Lighthouse and the Potawatomi State Park in Door County, south along Lake Michigan through Milwaukee, and just west to Walworth County near Big Foot Beach State Park - which is named after Potawatomi Chief Bigfoot. And our deep ties to those areas can still be seen today. Cities like Kenosha, Muskego, Waukesha, Sheboygan and Manitowoc are all derived from the Potawatomi language. So, when the Potawatomi talk about our "home", that is what we mean.

And something even more important than recognizing a tribe's traditional treaty land – is the recognition of tribal sovereignty. Through our status as individual sovereign nations, tribes are empowered to make decisions and act in ways that best serve our people. Tribal sovereignty is not something we have been granted, but something we have always inherently held. While sovereignty is now expressed through treaties, court decisions, Congressional acts and other documents, tribes have been governing how their own people live, act and rule for countless generations. This inherent sovereignty is what we will work to preserve, protect and enhance for our future generations.

Like many of you sitting here today, I also know what it means to be an elected official and to serve as a representative for my people. As elected officials, we all share the same feelings of responsibility and duty. We pursue the best interests of our constituents, act as role models for future generations and serve in a variety of other ways too numerous to list. In these roles, we sacrifice considerable amounts of time, energy and resources. Thank you for your dedication in advocating for the public good. It is not easy. I am thankful for your efforts to champion solutions to address our various challenges, and for your dedication to improving our state. I know that it is easy to give up when faced with difficult problems. But we must not give complacency a home in which to grow and spread the poison of inaction.

The success of not only Wisconsin's Tribal Nations but of all residents of our state depends on our resilience in continuing to tackle critical issues. We must maintain a sharp focus on improving the lives of those we represent in this new decade as we grapple with the responsibility of addressing the complex challenges before us.

And there is no challenge more complex than that of the opioid epidemic. We are all well-aware of this problem as it has impacted every corner of our state. It has no regard for age, race, gender or income. It has likely impacted many of you sitting here today. Unfortunately, I also know first-hand the pain and suffering this epidemic is causing families. And consequently, my wife and I are now raising some of our grandchildren.

Sadly, my story is not unique. Native communities across Wisconsin have been hit especially hard by the opioid epidemic. There are hundreds of other families like mine who are now caring for the young ones of relatives because of opioid addiction. Opioids are tearing apart our communities. One by one, they are killing our people. They are leaving our families devastated and our young ones without parents. It should not be this way. We need to continue to work to stop this devastation.

That is why we are thankful Representative John Nygren and others who have been tenacious in their work supporting and advancing the HOPE Agenda. This series of legislative efforts has provided new tools for combating addiction for those who need it most. Several new HOPE Agenda bills have been making their way through the legislative process this session, and we look forward to seeing how they will continue to help address and combat addiction in our communities.

We also want to thank you for recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach does not apply to substance abuse.

For Native communities, it is important that we provide treatment to our people while also healing them according to our cultural beliefs. Unfortunately, there are few places which can provide the treatment that our people truly need. So, for many years Wisconsin's tribes have been working to develop a youth wellness and treatment center. This facility is planned to be located centrally among our Native Nations and be a hub for children from all of Wisconsin tribes to receive treatment for addiction. We are grateful that the Legislature and Governor have come together to support this proposal by allocating gaming funds to continue the advancement of this project. This facility has the potential to do great things, and we hope that you will continue to work with us on this endeavor. Miiigwetch.

We want to assure you that Wisconsin's Tribes take the struggle with opioid addiction in their communities' very seriously, and many are taking their own steps to address it.

For example, the Forest County Potawatomi Community has brought together key stakeholders from state and local agencies to share information and discuss ways to curb the trends of opioid addiction. We have provided additional funding to several law enforcement agencies to support their drug detection and enforcement efforts. And we have enhanced our own addiction-related services, so we can provide more resources to not only our tribal members, but the community at large.

And our investments haven't stopped at enforcement and treatment. We have made a conscious effort to focus on our tribal youth to make sure they are receiving a good education. We know that equipping children with a strong knowledgebase will help them to make better decisions in the future. This has been done by working more closely with our local school districts, hiring additional tutors and guidance counselors, and getting our parents more involved in their children's education with better communication.

Ten years ago, the high school graduation rate among our tribal youth was around 60 percent. Today, I'm happy to say that now more than 90 percent of our tribal youth graduate high school, and in recent years we have even reached 100 percent.

But not all tribes have the same ability to provide this level support or treatment, so we encourage and ask that you to continue to invest in innovative strategies to provide both the needed enforcement and treatment for our Native communities. Our children and grandchildren will remember and thank you for the things you do on this issue today.

Unfortunately, opioids are not the only issues plaguing Native communities. Native women and girls are being exploited, trafficked and subjected to violence at disproportionately high rates.

This is a serious issue and something we cannot afford to turn our eyes from. The harm caused by these devastating acts leave lasting impressions on not only the victims, but also their families and their communities. We need to address the threat and problems posed by human trafficking.

In fact, in an acknowledgement to the severity of the issue, President Trump recently launched a White House task force lead by Attorney General Barr to quote "address the issues that underlie this terrible problem, and work with our tribal partners to find solutions, raise awareness, and bring answers and justice to the grieving."

On the state level, we are thankful for the efforts of Senator Janet Bewley and Representatives Jeff Mursau, Amanda Stuck, Beth Meyers to create a state taskforce on murdered and missing tribal women and girls. Thank you for your work and advocacy on this important issue.

We encourage you to include missing and murdered Native women and girls when advancing any human trafficking legislation. Please know that Wisconsin tribes stand ready and willing to work with you to help tackle this critical issue.

But I'm not here to only tell you about the concerns of our Native communities, I also want to make sure you know about the MANY great things that are happening because of Wisconsin's tribes.

We are far more than just the operators of casinos. We also own and operate a multitude of successful businesses that provide unique and important benefits for people across our state and country. This includes:

- Construction management and engineering companies
- Cybersecurity firms
- Industry-leading forest products companies
- Telecommunication companies
- Data centers,
- Financial institutions

- And agricultural businesses.

We are among the state's largest employers. We employ thousands of Wisconsin residents, and are the largest employers in many of the counties where we are located.

Our enterprises help bring millions of dollars and thousands of residents to different parts of Wisconsin. We provide real careers for the residents of our communities and provide them with family supporting wages and benefits.

But we also face the same struggles as many other businesses across Wisconsin. While the state is enjoying a historically low unemployment rate, there is also a workforce and housing shortage that is having a significant impact on our businesses and government operations. The supply and affordability of housing has become a challenge for tribes to attract and expand our businesses. We are pleased that the Legislature and Governor are working to address this issue and hope to see those efforts continue.

While it can be hard to get people to move to and provide services in rural Wisconsin, connecting them can help. Broadband is one of the tools driving development and one of the most effective ways to build opportunity. Internet access can drive innovation and growth in Wisconsin's rural areas.

Thank you for recognizing this and investing in broadband expansion. We applaud those efforts and encourage you to be diligent in finding more ways to encourage expansion. We need to give our future generations every advantage in developing solutions to the problems of tomorrow, and ensuring reliable broadband access is one key to achieving that goal.

I cannot leave here today without touching on a subject that is central to the beliefs of my people and all of Wisconsin's tribes. Our traditional values teach us to respect all living things, to take only what we need from Mother Earth, and to preserve the air, water, and soil for our children and grandchildren. There might not be anything more important than ensuring the sustainability of our most precious and valuable natural resources for future generations.

In the words of our elders and leaders before us:

“I pray to the Creator that we look back so that we may see ahead. Let us examine our lives so that we are respectful to our fellow human and to nature. Let us respect our children, and above all, let us live our lives in accordance with our beliefs.”

These words guided the Potawatomi on our two-decade effort working with both Democrat and Republican Presidents and Governors to provide increased protections for the quality of air in and around our reservation lands. And because of that, we KNOW that our children are breathing the cleanest air possible.

But we must do more to ensure a sustainable future for the next generation - we must take steps to address the effects of climate change. It is something that cannot be ignored.

Thank you, Gov. Evers, for establishing the Task Force on Climate Change. We look forward to working with Lt. Gov. Barnes, Senator Mark Miller and Representatives Mike Kuglitsch and Greta Nuebauer and all the members of the Task Force to help find meaningful strategies to help mitigate the effects of climate change.

We are also glad that you have highlighted the importance of clean water by declaring 2019 as the Year of Clean Drinking Water and acted through the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality. Ensuring clean, safe water is not a partisan issue but something that people from both sides of the aisle can agree upon. We are thankful for the work that was done by Representatives Todd Novak, Katrina Shankland and all the other legislators who worked on the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality.

However, there is more – ALWAYS MORE - to be done to ensure there is clean air, water and soil for future generations.

As we begin this new decade, let us look to the future with hope, optimism and a steadfast determination to continue the pursuit of progress. The good news is that you are not alone in your efforts to shape the future. You have partners in Wisconsin's Tribes. We must work together and collaborate on solutions to the problems of today. There is common ground between us, we just need to act with a mindset of communication and understanding to find where it is. By doing so, we will continue to move Wisconsin Forward.

Thank you for all that you have done and will continue to do to help not only Native communities, but everyone in Wisconsin.

It has been an honor addressing this body. I am appreciative to have had the opportunity to give my perspective on the struggles, fears, opportunities and triumphs experienced by Wisconsin's Tribal Nations. The actions we take today will ensure future generations have the tools they need to thrive in tomorrow's society.