



Tribal Consortium Travels State on Public Engagement Tour

Thursday, November 21, 2019

The **Nebraska Consortium of Tribal, State, and Federal Courts**, co-chaired by Judge Patrick Runge (Winnebago and Ponca Tribe Chief Judge) and Judge Andrea Miller (District 12) traveled to four locations around the state to engage in initial conversations with Nebraska's Native American communities. Various Consortium members as well as Chief Justice Michael Heavican joined facilitators Ret. Judge Bill Thorne and Jenny Walter for sessions in Omaha, Niobrara, Macy and Winnebago in early November.

Judge William A. Thorne, Jr., a Pomo/Coast Miwok Indian from northern California, was formerly a judge on the State of Utah Court of Appeals and in the Third District Court. He has served as a tribal court judge in 10 states and is the former president of the National Indian Justice Center, a non-profit that trains tribal court personnel around the country. Nationally known as a leading expert on policies and programs to support

children, particularly Native American children and their families, Judge Thorne is currently chair of the Board of Directors for Child Trends, Inc., a non-profit, child-centered research group.

Jenny Walter assists tribes, courts, local governments, and organizations on social reform issues. Ms. Walter's experience includes over twenty-year career as a lawyer for the California Judicial Council where she led a statewide tribal needs assessment, obtained funding for and launched a unit focused on tribal/state relations, initiated and consulted on the documentary, *Tribal Justice*, served as lead counsel to the California Tribal Court-State Court Forum, and developed statewide policies relating to children, youth, families and concurrent jurisdiction of tribal and state courts.

Attendance was robust, with the conversation reaching over 200 members of Nebraska's Native American communities over the four locations. Jonathan Seagrass of Legal Aid of Nebraska provided a 'Know Your Rights' presentation, Runge and Miller presented on the purposes of the Consortium, and Thorne and Walter led participants through an open dialogue regarding feelings about the court system. Participants filled out surveys to measure their trust and confidence in the court system and the hope is that by engaging in sessions like these, community members will grow greater confidence in the system. At each location, participants and Consortium members shared a meal and were welcomed by a local community leader through a traditional prayer.

Attendees aired grievances and frustrations with state, federal, and tribal courts as they have experienced them. The exchange also included information and possible shortfalls of the Indian Child Welfare Act and jurisdictional issues. This is the first of two planned engagement tours and other activities to involve Native peoples in the conversation to help improve relations between tribal, state, and federal courts and the communities they serve.

This public engagement tour was funded by a grant from the National Center for State Courts and is being evaluated by the UNL Public Policy Center. Another public engagement event is being planned for the Scottsbluff area at the time of publishing.

KTIV: Nebraska Courts hosts series of public engagement sessions for Native American community

Photo: Judge Andrea Miller addresses participants in November public engagement session, photo by: Tarik Abdel Monem- UNL Public Policy Center, Senior Research Specialist