

Testimony of the Alysia LaCounte

On behalf of the Honorable Jamie Azure

Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians

April 16, 2019

Field Hearing – House Administration, Subcommittee on Elections

“Voting Rights and Elections Administration in the Dakotas.”

Thank you, Chair Marcia L. Fudge and Representatives for coming to North Dakota for this field hearing. I am Alysia LaCounte, General Counsel to the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and tribal member. I apologize on behalf of the Chairman, Jamie S. Azure. Presently Chairman Azure attends a government finance meeting on behalf of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians reside in the North Central North Dakota on a 6 mile by 12 mile reservation. We have upwards of 36,000 members with 19,000 living on or near the reservation. Based upon the Bureau of Indian Affairs labor statistics our present unemployment rate hovers at sixty-nine point seventy-five (69.75%). Of course, with high unemployment, poverty ensues. Such great poverty, its reality escapes many U.S. Citizens' comprehension.

Because of this high poverty rate the community's access remains limited. Limited because those living below poverty do not have vehicles, Driver's Licenses, or other means of public transportation to various government service providers. So, the recent enactment of North

Dakota Bills which places requirements on the original citizens of the land tend to diminish, discourage, and repress the Turtle Mountain Tribal Citizen's right to vote and access to the poll. As you are all aware, the various States of the Union administer the Federal Elections. So in order to Vote for the President or any of the federal delegation to U.S. Congress, my tribal community must vote in a State Election. This is not our preference.

When the U.S. Supreme Court decision issued in mid-October upheld the law that requiring physical addresses, the youth demanded action. The Youth Came to the Tribe and asked what are you going to do to prevent disenfranchisement of our People. The Tribal Government enacted law to enable voters to receive free Tribal Identification Cards. Understand that the fee of \$15 is not exorbitantly high but \$15 is milk and bread for a week for a poor family. And as many of the Congressional delegation may be aware that we are not a wealthy Tribe, we have scrapped and scrimped to survive these past 200 years. With this understanding the government waived fees for Tribal Identifications to meet the requirements to allow our members to votes. Now our Tribal Identifications meet the same standards as the State of North Dakota's. The same weight, dimension, and appearance on 2,400 new Identification Cards.

Still with this mandate for free Identification Card mandate, things were not easy. The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians' reservation use of addresses and street names commenced recently. Uniform Addressing and Numbering of residences only occurred within the last ten years. Still we implement that law with street naming and house numbering, street signs do not exist. Most residences lack a house number. Myself growing up in a small town rather than on the reservation proper, if I may, placed a number on my residence when I moved to Belcourt.

Now, most private residences still lack a house number or fire number. Many of our public housing projects have house numbers, but those house numbers all start with the same number and a separate unit number applies to the individual. So such system confuses our first responders, because the 911 system fails to enumerate the Unit numbers.

Furthermore, to get the 2,400 ID's issued, we experienced numerous technical difficulties. The first day of free tribal ID's our ID machine melted down the actual physical ID's because it became too hot. As a result, we sought assistance through any means necessary, social media, news outlets, and moccasin telegraph. We received an outpouring of support and donations to further our cause. The Turtle Mountain Tribal College created a help line which the students volunteered manning. We purchased new machines to produce ID, and set them up at numerous locations throughout the community. Our dedicated Motor Vehicle Department staff worked 14 hour days for the two weeks through the date of the election. We held get out the vote rallies.

While we do not comment upon the intent of law, but its practical implication acted to disenfranchise the people of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. We met the challenge and improved voter turn out from the 2016 presidential election by 42%. But please understand this took a great amount of financial and times resources. The Tribe organized like never before. The Tribe's Youth lead the charge. So much so the Students lead a march from the High School to the Poll on election day in a snow storm with wind chills, luckily it was mostly down hill.

The Subcommittee clearly sees Tribe's and Tribal members as vulnerable populations with limited resources, access to education, healthy food, and opportunity. So that we as a Tribe and a

people vote, access to polls to include our few voices will forever be a priority for our Tribe and we ask that the Subcommittee consider our population in it work. The 2018 federal election is now part of cultural history and the Youth's movement provides hope and expectation for a better tomorrow for the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.