

**Testimony of Oneida Nation of Wisconsin  
Vice-Chairman Brandon Stevens**

To the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
May 9, 2018

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to represent the 17,000 members of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin today.

I'd also like to thank the Committee for its commitment to Indian Country, which we saw demonstrated by significant increases in federal funding for many tribal programs in the omnibus bill passed earlier this year.

In my testimony today, I will identify three priorities to the Committee which impact not just the Oneida Nation, but other tribes and communities:

1. Protect Self Governance funding and expand the types of programs which are eligible for Self Governance.
2. Ensure that Indian Country has access to funding to fight the opioid epidemic, particularly through diversion and mental health programs.
3. Allocate adequate funding toward the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which has a demonstrated success in improved environmental and water quality across the Great Lakes region.

We were pleased to host Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke in March when he joined our Business Committee for a discussion of these topics and expressed support for our objectives, with a particular emphasis on the opioid crisis. We look forward to working with the Secretary and this Committee to strengthen and improve tribal programs in the coming year.

### **Self Governance**

Self Governance, or tribal administration and delivery of programs, funding, and services previously managed by the Department of the Interior, has been a success across Indian Country and serves as a recognition of the sovereign status of tribes.

The Oneida Nation has assumed increasing levels of responsibility over the nearly 25 years we've been a Self Governance partner with the Department of the Interior and now administers nearly 40 programs and services, ranging from social services and law enforcement to job training and scholarships. This means that our government, the most accountable to those affected, makes decisions about how to manage these programs and services, not the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It also means that when we need to adjust to new challenges we can do so rapidly, without waiting for Washington to act.

Self Governance not only ensures that scarce federal funds are used as efficiently as possible, but it also helps to build the capacity within tribal governments to address many of their members' needs. However, of the \$4.5 million that we at Oneida direct to Self Governance activities, only \$1.2 million is federally funded. That's why we find it particularly concerning that the President's budget proposes a reduction in Self Governance funds, which would harm the progress we've made and prevent other tribes from beginning their own Self Governance programs. We urge the Committee to reject this proposed cut and continue supporting this successful, cost-effective program.

We also encourage you to support additional Self-Governance Agreements between Tribes and both BIA and non-BIA agencies. Title IV of the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act currently provides Tribes the opportunity to enter into agreements with non-BIA agencies, but some DOI agencies and offices have made those agreements difficult to negotiate, set unrealistic expectations, or fail to allocate appropriate funding for Tribes to assume additional responsibilities. Furthermore, in the Office of Self Governance, just 15 staff are available to process and negotiate annual and multi-year agreements with the 350 tribes which participate in Self Governance programs. We ask that you encourage and, perhaps, incentivize non-BIA agencies to enter into Self-Governance Agreements with Tribes and direct additional resources toward the Office of Self Governance.

One particular Self Governance success story I'd like to highlight is our Indian Child Welfare Department, which serves over 100 children and provides a full spectrum of services to ensure that child are raised in safe, supportive environments. In a recent instance, after learning that a mother was in an abusive relationship, abusing opioids, and unable to safely care for her child, the Department stepped in with intensive support. We provided wraparound services including counseling, substance abuse assistance, transportation to and from appointments, and coordinated with her family to provide cultural ceremonies that aided in her recovery. The combination of traditional practices with clinical treatment was very successful, and within six months she was again able to care for her child.

It is the close alignment of the tribal government and community programs that has allowed us to provide overlapping, coordinated services that lead to positive outcomes like this, but it could not occur in the absence of Self Governance.

## **Opioid Epidemic**

This leads me to my next topic, increased federal support to address opioid issues in Indian Country.

Sadly, Indian Country has not been immune to the opioid abuse epidemic sweeping the nation. I've just identified one instance in which opioids negatively impacted an Oneida family, but this crisis is impacting tribes across the nation. A study by the National Congress of American Indians found that as many as 31% of Indian youth in the Great Lakes region had misused prescription opiates, a startling figure that will lead to a plethora of negative impacts in the future unless we take action.

To address this challenge, the Oneida Nation conducted an assessment within our own community and launched a Tribal Action Plan to address opioid and other substance abuse. We've conducted interviews with a broad spectrum of our membership and worked to develop a strategy that doesn't focus solely on law enforcement, but provides supportive services and treatment to help our members regain control of their lives.

While law enforcement is certainly part of the formula for success against the opioid crisis, at Oneida we believe that mental health treatment and addiction support must be part of the equation. We hope that as you consider funding for the coming year, you will recognize that those impacted by opioids need federal resources to help break the cycle of addiction and include mental health, addiction support, and diversion program eligibility.

We were pleased to see the FY18 omnibus include significant funding to address the opioid crisis, within \$50 million directed specifically to Indian tribes for opioid treatment, and this down payment will help many tribes build the capacity to address the challenge.

However, we remain concerned that Interior and other agencies will focus on competitive grants, which mean some tribes receive funding and some don't. We would instead urge that Interior award base funding increases, allowing tribes to build the internal capacity and comprehensive programs needed to meet these challenges over the long term.

## **Great Lakes Restoration Initiative**

Oneida Nation's creation story teaches us that everything is connected, and that there must be balance for the environment to thrive. The belief that all living beings are important is instilled into the conscious of our Tribe, and we are committed to environmental conservation and stewardship. It is this ethos that led us to our partner, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Among the most important long-term projects Oneida is working on with the EPA is the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Launched in 2010, the Initiative is designed to protect and restore the largest system of fresh surface water in the world--which happens to be in our backyard.

Over the last nine fiscal years, the Oneida Nation has been awarded approximately \$4.8 million for hundreds of Great Lakes watershed improvement projects. Some examples include:

- Creating adaptive management system in the Silver Creek Watershed to meet the new federal and State phosphorus regulations.
- Removing and replacing blocked culverts and dams at Brown County Golf Course and Pamperin Park, opening up 214 miles of streams for fish passage.
- Founding a natural resources technology program that has now trained and hired seven Oneida tribal members.

In short, the accomplishments of the program have been astounding. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has been the single most successful federal program designed to help restore our lands, yet these improvements benefit not just Oneida, but the entire region.

Given the enormous successes of the program at Oneida and across the Midwest, it is deeply concerning that the President's budget proposes to reduce federal funding for the program by about 90% in FY19. A funding cut of this magnitude would not only hurt our fishing, tourism and agriculture industries, but would jeopardize hundreds of millions of dollars of investments from state and local governments, as well as the private sector. The Oneida Nation of Wisconsin strongly urges the committee to reject the proposed cuts to this program and continue funding it at the level approved by the FY18 omnibus bill.