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## TESTIMONIAL OF BERNARD STEVENS

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As a representative of Copper Lake/Lincoln Hills Juvenile Detention Facility and in my capacity as the Vice-President of the Wisconsin Inter-Tribal Alliance for Justice, I am honored to have this opportunity to share the collective vision of the eleven Tribal Nations in Wisconsin.

My insight into Tribal safety and my ability to speak candidly on behalf of our communities has grown over time through both my personal and professional experiences. It is my intent in this testimony to share this knowledge on behalf of those members of our communities who may not yet have the ability to speak in this forum, but whose voices must still be heard.

Our vision for the safety and wellness of our people is the culmination of decades of collaboration, productive communication, and the individual efforts of many community members—contributing in their respective roles as Elders, Tribal leaders, parents, service providers, and other dedicated Tribal members.

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### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The 1970 United States Census estimates suggest that Native Americans accounted for *less than half of one percent* of the state's population. Yet, in 1971, *nearly half* of the youth population detained at the Copper Lake/Lincoln Hills Juvenile Detention Center in Irma, Wisconsin was comprised of Native Americans. At one point in the early 1970s, there were as many as 80 Native American youth detained at the center.

Recognizing the struggles of the Native American youth and the apparent disparities in Wisconsin's detention rates, the Indian Tribes of Wisconsin formed an alliance, the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, and made a collective call for action. This effort created a new position at the detention center which was to focus solely on the unique needs of the Native American youth in residence. The position was created, but in order to do our work, many obstacles needed to be overcome.

At that time, the facility did not provide any means for Native American youth to participate in cultural practices, such as sweat lodges, which support healing, balance, and the restoration of spirit. Youth had virtually no access in those days to the spiritual and cultural connections they needed in order to effectively handle anxiety, stress, and anger. Frustrated by these obstacles, the position was plagued by turnover and the resultant services to youth were inconsistent.

When I took the position in the mid-1980s, my goal was to significantly reduce the Native American population held at Copper Lake/Lincoln Hills by reconnecting our youth to their communities and culture. I conveyed the importance of creating points of access in which native youth could restore this connection and explained that was vital to their successful recovery. In time, I persuaded the administrators to incorporate cultural activities and practices into our programming and, by the end of my first year of employment, the number of Native American youth detained at the center decreased by half.

Today, Native American ceremonies, drums, pow-wows, and other significant traditions are still made available for our Native American youth. Our communities strengthened or built new paths of communication with the center to improve this access and in my role as coordinator/social worker, I have

had the pleasure of working with all of Wisconsin's eleven Tribes over these past 26 years.

## TRIBAL JUSTICE BEGINS WITH SOVEREIGNTY

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Shortly after, I began to think that Tribes could do this for ourselves; why couldn't we build our own correctional facility?

Further, mental health, addictions, historic and other traumas have served to separate native youth from their self-awareness and mission in life. Our goal through our culture is to restore the native self and awareness of one's meaning in life. So, better yet, why couldn't we create a place of healing that adheres to our own methods for restoring sense of purpose and self—the methods we know to be most effective for our members?

At present, there is no residential, culturally-based facility in existence which addresses the treatment needs of dually-diagnosed Native American youth in Wisconsin. There are several other state correctional facilities; but most lack the respect for the healing process that we've been able to initiate at Copper Lake/Lincoln Hills.

Some of these facilities have respected Native American displacement and attempted to integrate tribal culture into their programs. However, any future change in the administration of those facilities, including Copper Lake/Lincoln Hills, could not guarantee continued Native American representation to meet the unique needs of Tribal youth in prison.

Some tribes have tried to independently establish their own facilities in the past. Group homes, halfway houses, and residential plan facilities were among the outcomes of these efforts. But these initiatives were thwarted by a number of barriers. In particular, the cost of establishing a sustainable and culturally-appropriate facility is too high for any one Tribe to sustain.

It became clear that an *inter-tribal place of healing* was necessary in order to address the overrepresented teenage Native American populations who have presented unique mental health needs. The strengths and unique attributes of the Wisconsin inter-tribal initiative is one that is born from Tribal thinking and processes—one that respects Native American sovereignty and culture as the foundation of tribal wellness and extends healing beyond after-care and post-sentencing requirements in order to sustain the continuum of care.

## WORKING IN UNISON

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In 1998, community members from all of the eleven Tribes began to meet and merge our ideas, thoughts, and goals. The group continued its efforts, drawing in both Tribal Leaders and State agents for support and guidance.

This created new possibilities for not only incorporating our traditional ways into contemporary methods, but bringing the traditional ways out of the background to become the primary focus of the treatment and restoration of our people.

In early 2007, a collaborative tribal visioning session was held to assess needs, identify goals, and establish a broad action plan for an inter-tribal healing center. At this gathering, the tribes agreed to support the WIAJ purpose and to advance its development through a coordinated data collection effort that would illuminate the scope of the problems faced by youth and their families in Indian Country.

To begin, the data collection process specifically focused on the number of out-of-home placements pertaining to tribal youth and adults located in various facilities within the State of Wisconsin necessary to assess treatment needs.

Data collection of such a sensitive nature required both time and intense communication within and between tribes. Over a period of two years, results were realized and an inter-tribal treatment facilities workgroup emerged, further defining the purpose of the proposed facility, reassessing needs and, perhaps most important, clearly reinforcing the cultural need expressed during the visioning session. The efforts of this workgroup resulted in a draft business plan in alignment with the needs identified in years previous for an inter-tribal treatment facility. Specifically, to address multiple unmet cultural, addiction, and behavioral health needs.

The State of Wisconsin and the Tribal-State Collaboration for Positive Change have also contributed to this project by providing multiple opportunities for tribal input regarding the role and expansion of treatment services for native youth and particularly those involved in the criminal justice system in Indian Country. Several of the participants of this collaborative effort have also been directly involved with the WIAJ. The inclusion of state resources and support has also served to further the collaborative nature of the project.

The WIAJ is committed to developing assets and resources to support projects that strengthen the role of treatment services for tribal youth subjected to out of home placement type systems. The WIAJ adheres to the following values:

*We believe that given the right opportunity, every individual can change in a positive way through effective, evidence-based treatment, utilizing a broad range of services. These services may result in a long term cost savings that are consistent with the health, safety and wellness of the community.*

*We also believe that effective communication is a key to strengthening the impact of quality treatment services that are specific to Indian Country. This communication between WIAJ representatives and our Tribal leaders is supported by another distinct inter-tribal resolution.*

*We value every individual in our community. In preserving Native American culture and individual and spiritual values in a treatment setting, we share the belief that all human beings are inherently good and are entitled to programs and services that concentrate on restoring them as productive members of their communities.*

*We believe in the importance of collaborating, networking and sharing information and expertise to build capacity and strengthen resources for those individuals needing treatment services. In addition to building this capacity, we recognize the need to strive for solutions that ensure professional, ethical and competent practices in Indian Country.*

At present, WIAJ is significantly involved in a strategic planning process to develop an inter-tribal Continuum of Care for the youth requiring treatment services. WIAJ is also in the process of organizing

as a 501(c)3 non-profit entity. With the help of our Tribal Communities, we have begun to raise capital and also worked with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to obtain funding which will support the development staff needed to raise seed money for the treatment center. We are also putting mechanisms in place to secure sources of long-term funding which will serve to facilitate a sustained initiative over time.

## HONORING OUR DIFFERENCES

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Being a Tribal member means that one has a distinct purpose within (and connection to) the community as a whole. Everyone has a mission and a meaning in life. We are meant to be loved within our families; our clans; our Tribes. People can take this sense of purpose, identity, and connection anywhere they go and find strength in it in all things they do. It is a great part of who we are and a critical factor affecting our ability to understand our actions and find balance in our lives.

Thus, central to our plan is a mission to honor and implement the specific teachings and practices of each of the eleven Tribes. This includes a community-led recovery plan that transitions members back to their communities and extends from 2 to 5 years post-detention/treatment.

The eleven Tribes are working in unison for these goals to become realized. The Ho-Chunk are building a detention facility in the southern portion of the state, while WIAJ is leading the treatment center effort in the northern portion of the state. Both groups have worked together over the past decade, have representation on each other's board/committees, and will continue to work in parallel through the construction of the facilities and on forward.

Together, we are changing the meaning of the words, "justice", "treatment", and "detention" for our people. We are restoring our traditional values, regaining our identities, healing our people, and revitalizing our communities.

## WE ARE THE EVIDENCE BASE

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*Section 202(b)(3) of the Title II Tribal Law and Order Act states that it is a central purpose of the Act "to empower tribal governments with the authority, resources, and information necessary to safely and effectively provide public safety in Indian country".*

As the federal government continues to implement the Tribal Law and Order Act, this purpose *must* be at the core of its programming and funding initiatives. If grant programs diminish sovereignty or discourage healing in any way, the programs need to be redesigned before the grants are ever announced. These types of "opportunities" are merely a façade that serve only to pit us against each other and redirect our paths on a course that will likely lead to failure.

Please understand that many of our Tribes are reluctant to seek funding, even when it is desperately needed, because of federal requirements that fail to respect sovereignty. These programs have requirements which mandate "evidence" of effectiveness and "tested core curricula" that simply do not work for all Tribes or individual Tribal members.

We *know* that there is much work to be done. We *know* that many of our people will need assistance in our first few years of operations at both facilities. We *know* that WIAJ's placement data supports a sustained need for many years to come. But, we also *know* that this plan—our collective vision—is

effective.

We will draw on the strengths of our current tribal leaders and glean wisdom from our Elders. We will utilize the time-tested “methodology” developed by our ancestors long ago and adopt a “curriculum” that has been shared across generations by our Elders. We *are* the “evidence base” that should be replicated and supported. Our culture, traditions, stories, and spirit will guide us and we know what is best for the safety and wellness of our own people.

Respectfully,

Bernard Stevens  
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Vice-President, Wisconsin Inter Tribal Alliance for Justice