

**Statement of
Patrice H. Kunesh
Nominee for the Position of
Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Commission
Before the
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate**

September 18, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as President Biden's nominee for Chair of the National Indian Gaming Commission.

I grew up in a small town in central Minnesota. I am the 7th of 13 siblings, the mother of two daughters, and an *unci*, a grandmother, to the delightful Lucy Wintermoon. They and their families are my pride and joy.

Two strong influences have shaped my three-decade career in federal Indian law and policy. One was my grandfather and the other was my father.

My grandfather was born in 1902 on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, home of the Three Affiliated Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Tribes, and spent his early years in Fort Yates on the Standing Rock Reservation. He was enrolled in the Standing Rock Tribe, as was my mother. Like most Native families at the time, he was impacted by painful separations of his siblings sent to Federal Indian boarding schools.

It wasn't until 1924 that Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act to confirm United States citizenship status to Native people, including their right to vote and own property. By then, having faced decades of deprivation and near destitution, my great grandmother made the courageous move to Minnesota in hopes of a better life. My grandfather eventually found work on the Alaskan Canadian Highway and sent his wages home to his wife in St. Paul to provide for their children. He remained very close to his family on Standing Rock and his mother was buried there.

During the rare quiet times when my grandfather visited us, he would tell us stories from his summers at Standing Rock, his love for the prairie and his family, but also of being discouraged for not being there. It feels remarkable to me that his granddaughter was confirmed by the Senate in 2023 as Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans at the Department of Health and Human Services by a bipartisan vote of 57-35.

My father's work for local government as county and city attorney involved cases in the social services and the criminal justice systems. He was a strong advocate for Native youth and

Native men who found themselves homeless or incarcerated due to the federal Indian relocation and child removal policies.

Their narratives, my grandfather's devotion to his homelands and my father's pursuit of justice, as well as my mother's ardent love for family, instilled in me a strong sense of vocation to become an advocate for Native American rights.

I studied federal Indian law at the University of Colorado School of Law and worked at the Native American Rights Fund, a public interest law firm whose mission is to protect Native rights, resources, and lifeways. As in-house counsel to the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation in Connecticut, I helped the Tribe establish a judicial and regulatory infrastructure that continues to support its economic development, primarily centered around its gaming operations.

As a professor, I taught courses on federal Indian law and gaming at the University of South Dakota School of Law. President Obama appointed me to serve as the Deputy Solicitor for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior, and later as the Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development at the Department of Agriculture where I focused on housing, broadband, and other community infrastructure investments in reservation communities.

At the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, I led the Center for Indian Country Development, an economic policy research initiative that supports the prosperity of Native nations. And in my current role as Commissioner, I have the great privilege of making vital investments in Native communities to enhance the social and economic well-being of Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians, and indigenous people of the Pacific Islands.

Indian gaming provides indispensable financial resources to catalyze reservation economies and contributes to essential services for the health and well-being of Native peoples. Importantly, it also promotes nation building and good governance.

If confirmed, I would focus my attention on three main areas. First, fulfilling the mission of the NIGC in promoting tribal economic development, self-sufficiency, and strong tribal governments, as well as maintaining the critical integrity of the Indian gaming industry. Second, I would endeavor to mitigate risks within the influx of new technologies and gaming formats, including on-line gaming and artificial intelligence. Third, I would be committed to good governance practices, which include ensuring the NIGC has sufficient resources to fulfill its mission and that it operates in the most efficient and cost-effective manner.

It would be an honor to extend my service to Indian Country as the next Chair of the National Indian Gaming Commission and help lead this agency into the new era of Indian gaming.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to your questions.