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Over half of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin lives off-reservation. Regrettably, the ties between the Menominee's reservation and urban populations, like those between the split populations of so many Indian nations, have been tenuous for decades. In 1994, however, a group of Menominee Indians living in Chicago reached out to the Tribe and the Tribe reciprocated. Now, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago is an official community of the Menominee Nation and its members are active participants in tribal culture and governance, strengthening and being strengthened by this renewed connection. Together, reservation and urban Menominee are reinforcing their respective communities by reuniting their nation.

Decades of federal policies of assimilation and forced relocation as well as inadequate economic opportunities on reservations have resulted in an increasingly urban Indian population. Approximately 60 to 65 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live away from their reservations while roughly 50 percent of this off-reservation population live in urban areas. The Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin is no exception. Its history of combating assimilationist pressures, federal relocation, and economic challenges was further complicated in the 1950s when the US government terminated its status as a federally recognized tribal nation. At that time, many Menominee families moved to urban areas such as Green Bay and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chicago, Illinois. Currently, over half of the eight thousand Menominee tribal citizens live beyond their reservation boundaries while six percent of these tribal members live in the Chicago metropolitan area.

Like other urban minority groups, these Chicago-area Menominee Indians suffer from myriad economic and social hardships commonly experienced by off-reservation Native communities. Studies reveal that urban Indians are disproportionately prone to experience socioeconomic distress when compared to their white counterparts. They are 1.7 times as likely to lack a high school diploma; they are 2.4 times as likely to be unemployed; and they are 3.9 times as likely to live in poverty as urban whites. Consistent with these statistics, the Menominee Indians living in the Chicago area experience high unemployment while those who are employed work mainly in the service sector. They have critical medical needs but oftentimes do not have access to major medical coverage. Additionally, single women head a very high percentage of their households. As a result, 84 percent of the Menominee Indians living in the Chicago area are at or below the poverty line. Only 6 percent are homeowners.

Despite these ills that urgently need to be addressed, the Menominee Indians of the Chicago

area, with other urban Indians, form part of Indian Country's forgotten majority. Historically, tribal, state, and federal policymakers have maintained a reservation-centric view of Indian needs and priorities despite the existence of significant off-reservation populations. As a result, urban populations struggle to address their needs alone. Most free or low-cost services available to Indians living off-reservation remain contingent upon their return to the reservation. For many, poverty prevents such travel. This is especially true for a majority of the Menominee Indians of the Chicago area who reside over 250 miles from their reservation headquarters located in Keshena, Wisconsin. Urban Indians also suffer from a severe sense of cultural dislocation. Many would prefer to return to their traditional lands and many attempt to maintain a connection to their cultural center, but distance and economic distress make these desires almost unattainable. Within the Chicago area, Menominee Indians have tended to get lost among the city's considerable Indian and minority populations.

Policymakers' neglect meant that urban Indians turned with increasing frequency to nonprofit urban Indian community centers that offer services such as employment training, health care, housing programs, and welfare. As important as these centers have become, they still struggle to meet urban Indians' needs. As non-governmental entities, they face obstacles in securing funds that are directed toward tribal governments. Further, given that most centers serve Natives from distinct and different cultures, these pan-Indian centers' are constrained in their ability to meet the cultural needs of any single population.

In 1994, the Menominee Indians of the Chicago area confronted this economic and cultural marginalization by forming a center of their own. This center diverged from typical urban Indian community centers in order to fulfill specific Menominee needs. It began, initially, as a forum for formalizing social and familial connections. Known as the Menominee Social Club of Chicago, its members hosted cultural gatherings and offered support services for Menominee individuals and families living in the greater Chicago area. By 1996, these events had generated political consciousness. The Club's members began to strongly identify themselves as Menominee and assert their status as citizens of the Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin. In turn, their growing participation in tribal events and political activism gained the attention the Menominee tribal government. In 1996, the Menominee Nation Tribal Council acted under the Tribal Government Plan Ordinance 95/04 to officially recognize the newly renamed Menominee Community Center of Chicago.

Today, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago (MCCC) is the institutional home of the only officially recognized off-reservation community of the Menominee Indian Tribe. The Center is identified as a nonprofit tribal program, making it eligible for tribal funding. The MCCC is governed by a five-member Board of Directors that oversees activities and reports to the Menominee Tribal Legislature. To sustain its numerous offerings, the Center relies on a ten thousand dollar annual budget and, more significantly, the generous volunteer efforts of its dedicated members.

The Center succeeds in strengthening the relationships of its Chicago-area members by providing a full spectrum of cultural engagements as well as information about and referrals to social services. The MCCC organizes and sponsors powwows, traditional fish feasts, and breakfasts for homeless Menominee. It has hosted language classes with the support of a Menominee Newberry Library Fellow and has worked with the Tribal Historic Preservation Office regarding Menominee artifacts held in the Chicago Field Museum. Additionally, the MCCC studies urban Indian issues and collects useful data for the Menominee Tribe as well as the general public. The Center's research on the status of urban Menominee housing conditions allows it to advocate for improved housing services and the Center has begun to develop programs for enhancing Menominee employment opportunities in the Chicago area.

In addition, the MCCC enhances social and political connections between the Chicago-area Menominee Indians and the Menominee Tribe. The Center organizes trips for Menominee individuals and families to go back home to the reservation for important cultural events such as the Sturgeon Feast and the Big Drum Ceremony. It also circulates information on tribal enrollment, the legislative election process, the tribal constitution, and tribal social services available to Chicago-area citizens. The Center even coordinates attendance to the Menominee Nation Annual General Council Meeting. Most importantly, it ensures, through the formal recognition of the Chicago-area Menominee as tribal citizens, biannual meetings of the tribal legislature in Chicago.

Four factors contribute to the existence and effectiveness of the MCCC. First, the Center and the Menominee tribal government have willingly worked together to redefine tribal citizenship. By officially recognizing the Chicago-area Menominee as a bona fide community within the tribal nation, the Menominee Tribe has acknowledged the citizenship of its off-reservation population. Through this recognition, the Tribe has embraced a portion of its population that many Indian nations simply do not include in the ongoing business of governance. While several other tribes offer services to their off-reservation constituents as individuals, the Menominee Tribe's recognition of an off-reservation community in its entirety is virtually unheard of in Indian Country. By establishing an inclusive definition of citizenship, the Tribe offers political, cultural, and economic support to tribal citizens far from the reservation center. The MCCC and the Menominee Tribe deserve recognition for their role in the critical and innovative work of integrating urban tribal citizens into the social and political life of an Indian nation.

Initially, not every legislator of the Menominee tribal government was open to the idea of an active off-reservation political presence. The second factor in the Center's success, however, was the Menominees' realization that the Tribe itself would be strengthened by the incorporation of these citizens and families into the civic and cultural affairs of the Tribe. Perhaps the Menominee Tribe began to learn this lesson after it was terminated by the federal government. Then, tribal citizens living in Chicago played a significant role in the restoration of federal recognition. Now, the Menominee Tribe is again welcoming the contributions of its Chicago-area citizens. In total, 45 percent of Chicago-based Menominee now vote in tribal elections and tribal leaders are already recognizing the benefits of drawing upon these citizens' unique perspectives. They also recognize the wealth of contacts that the MCCC offers. Some MCCC members hold leadership roles and advance Menominee tribal interests in the Chicago area in education, public policy, and economic development. Additionally, the MCCC offers opportunities for official interactions between the Menominee Tribe and various Illinois populations that might provide a natural springboard for interactions between tribal government and state leaders. With the increasing importance of tribal-state relations, tribes such as the Menominee do well to utilize the connections that their urban populations provide.

Third, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago and the Menominee Tribe recognize the importance of cultivating a distinctly Menominee cultural identity among its urban diaspora. Both the MCCC and the Menominee Tribe could benefit from partnerships with a number of Chicago's pan-Indian organizations. However, the MCCC and the Tribe now collaborate in their efforts to meet needs specific to Menominee Indians that are frequently overlooked by pan-Indian initiatives. For example, the Center educates Native and non-Native Chicago communities about the Menominee Tribe and its unique history. The MCCC's presentations in schools and other organizations portray an accurate image of Menominee culture and accomplishments. The Center's range of activities is also an important part of enhancing the

emotional health of its members. Many of these individuals were adopted out of the tribe or raised in foster care with little or no connection to their cultural heritage. Now, the MCCC offers them an avenue for establishing or reestablishing contact. Several MCCC members have been united with previously unknown family through the Center's Enrollments Office contacts and Center-sponsored trips to the reservation. The MCCC also encourages mentoring relationships, pairing older and younger MCCC members. These relationships, built on a common culture and a shared tribal citizenship, will sustain the Center's vibrancy and ability to serve Menominee citizens and families for generations to come.

A final factor that undergirds the Center's success is that urban and reservation Menominee have employed simple strategies to renew and strengthen their relationship. Together they rewrote a single line of the Menominee constitution, bringing biannual meetings of the tribal legislature to Chicago. Through these meetings, constituents come to know their elected leaders and stay abreast of social, cultural, and economic developments being pursued by the tribal government. Tribal legislators also benefit as off-reservation citizens communicate their needs and contribute their distinct perspectives and knowledge. Similarly, the Center's trips to the Menominee Reservation are an uncomplicated way to strengthen the ties of kinship and common culture. These simple and easily replicable acts have enabled the Menominee to strengthen the entire tribal population. Other Indian nations can learn a great deal from the outstanding example the MCCC and Menominee Tribe have set.

For too long, tribal governments have forgotten their off-reservation citizens. As recently as the 1990s, this was true for the Menominee community living in the Chicago metropolitan area. Regrettably, it remains true for urban Indians throughout Indian Country. To the credit of the Menominee Community Center of Chicago and the Menominee tribal government, the Chicago-based Menominee are no longer forgotten. Through an innovative partnership between an active off-reservation community and a forward-looking tribal government, the Menominee are redefining what it means to be tribal citizens. Their efforts are an expression of nation building that deserves the careful examination of other tribal governments and off-reservation Indian citizens.

Lessons:

- As Indian nations establish a definition of tribal citizenry that embraces their off-reservation populations, they offer a cultural homeland to those who frequently long for, but cannot return to, their traditional lands. Off-reservation populations benefit from the social, cultural, and political support such a definition of citizenship brings.
- Indian nations themselves realize substantial benefits from restoring relations with their off-reservation populations. Off-reservation citizens offer a rich diversity of perspectives on tribal governance while their political and economic connections at state and regional levels can advance tribal interests well beyond reservation borders.
- The mutual benefits of reuniting Indian nations and their off-reservations populations are too compelling to leave to chance. Formalizing these relationships through amendments to tribal constitutions, legislative mandates to hold meetings in urban centers, and other well-defined means not only clarifies off-reservation citizens' roles and responsibilities, but ensures that their relationships with their tribes will endure across tribal administrations.