

American Indian Reservations See Record Voter Turnout
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By Brad Swenson, The Bemidji Pioneer, Minn.

Nov. 16--Stepped-up voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts on area American Indian reservations saw record voter turnout on Election Day.

"This year we did exceptionally well because of the fact we had,, for the first time, funds to do the work," Sally Fineday, executive director of Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota, said last week.

Staff was available to help with voter registration drives and get-out-the-vote efforts -- much of it supported by the tribes, she said.

NAVM "board members did all the work previously; we never had any money to pay organizers," Fineday said Thursday. "That was something that made this year's (effort) quite a success, that there were funds available to actually hire native American organizers on the reservation -- Mille Lacs, Red Lake, Fond du Lac, Leech Lake and White Earth,"

A non-profit, non-partisan group, Fineday said NAVM received not only tribal support but also funds from Take Action Minnesota, Minnesota Civic Engagement Table, Minnesota Council of Non-Profits and the National Congress of American Indians.

The Minnesota Council of Non-Profits helped fund candidate forums on reservations, she said.

"There is a huge voting bloc, and that's what we're all about," said Fineday. "We want to build that voting bloc so that we have a voice. It's been known in the past that a lot of legislation has gone forward without consulting tribes.

"Tribes, even though they're semi-sovereign -- a lot of tribes -- there's still a need," she added. "We all live in rural Minnesota and we all understand that we have difficulties because of the fact that we don't have the economy."

Turning out at the polls shows state and federal legislators that "we've got a huge bunch of people here at Leech Lake that actually get out and vote, and a lot of them are native American. Oftentimes, at Leech Lake and in this election, they happened to be the swing vote. If those voters hadn't voted, certain people wouldn't be elected."

While voting is diluted at most reservations -- Fineday is looking at polling places where at least 50 percent of the population is American Indian -- the best example is perhaps at Red Lake, one of only two closed reservations in the nation.

It's assured that nearly all voters on the Red Lake Reservation are native, she said.

In a separate report, the Red Lake Political Education Committee reported the highest voter turnout ever on the reservation, with 2,249 members casting ballots, an increase of 125 over the last presidential election in 2004 and an 800-voter increase over 2000.

Efforts at Red Lake began six months prior to the election, ending with the hiring of four drivers with one in each reservation district to drive members to the polls on Election Day.

"These included those who did not have transportation, were homebound, or just plain didn't have enough money for gas," said Michael Meuers, Red Lake government and public relations spokesman. "RLPEC feels no one should be disenfranchised from voting. Four people also staffed phones at the Juvenile Center in Red Lake, fielding calls from people needing rides to the polls. When not fielding those calls, the group was making calls to members reminding them to vote and asking if they needed rides to their polling place."

Meuers said RLPEC's goal "is the building of political power within the Red Lake community by registering and educating potential Red Lake voters. The group is made of Red Lake members who feel strongly about this issue, and then volunteering many hours to attain this goal. This year the group registered more than 250 new voters. They held a political fair to meet the candidates, wrote articles for the Red Lake Nation Newsletter and Red Lake Net News, and finally did a large get-out-the-vote effort on Election Day in addition to other activities."

The Red Lake group worked with the Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota, as well as Take Action Minnesota and the National Congress of American Indians.

NVAM has been incorporated since 2006, Fineday said. "We're still so very new at this. ... This time some of the goals that were set by Red Lake and Leech Lake was to register in the very late month of October ... 250 new voters on each reservation. They have met that and exceeded that in both Red Lake and Leech Lake."

It can also be noted that more than 95 percent of the vote at Red Lake was for Democrats, but Fineday said any inference from that should be addressed to tribal leaders at the reservations.

At Red Lake, the vote for president was 2,082 for Democrat Barack Obama and 123 for Republican John McCain. Similarly, in the U.S. Senate race, there were 1,983 votes for Democrat Al Franken and 146 for incumbent GOP Norm Coleman. Independence Party candidate Dean Barkley got 66 votes.

"Native Vote Alliance is non-partisan -- we don't tell people who to vote for," says Fineday. "We can't even in any way insinuate in different means. ... It's our mission at Native Vote to mobilize and empower native people in Minnesota as a collective voice, to use their civic participation, and also do it with our own cultural experience. We want them to get out and vote."

Fineday came on board in August, and built an initial \$20,000 with \$7,000 more with a September fundraising golf tournament.

"It was fast-paced," she said. NVAM "actually supported a lot of the get-out-the-native-vote effort, especially with communities like Leech Lake which did not have funding. Once we started working here at Leech Lake, we discovered that there were tribal members already working on the ground and provided a lot in different areas."

NVAM went door-to-door in Leech Lake's Districts I and II, which include Inger, Ball Club, Bena, Sugar Point, which have lost their polling site to mail balloting since the 2006 election.

"Our Secretary of State's Office really thinks that is a really good thing for rural Minnesota, and I think it is too," Fineday said. "But only if you're consistent with turning the ballot around. In our case, we thought it might hinder our progress. A lot of people get the ballot and say they'll look at it tomorrow. They put it away and then they forget about it. This is something new for our community, and we wanted to make sure our people knew the importance of that ballot, and how important it is if you got that ballot at your home to turn it around."

Fineday is already working on plans to increase voter turnout for the 2010 election, and hopes to remove barriers found in the 2008 election.

"There are still a lot of barriers against discrimination," Fineday said. "We found some of that this election period right here at Leech Lake. And we are investigating that. But further than that, in the future what we plan to do is be well coordinated. ... My concentration will be that next time around, we have a lot of planning ahead of us instead of just jumping in in September."

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