

August 13, 2018

National Congress of American Indians  
1516 P Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20005

**RE: NCAI DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS RESIGNATION**

Dear NCAI Executive Committee Member:

Today I have submitted my resignation to NCAI, effective August 24, 2018.

This letter is inspired by the courage exhibited by so many thousands of others this past year, including past NCAI employees, to speak up and come forward about wrongdoing they observe or experience in the workplace. I would be negligent in my duties as your Director of Operations, and to my own principles, if I could not summon the same bravery.

This letter is being sent to you as one of my last acts as a member of the senior management team, out of concern for the health and reputation of NCAI. I write to you to make it clear that I'm not being "drawn away" by a new opportunity. I searched out my next opportunity. Like so many other employees, I have chosen to leave a dysfunctional workplace created by an executive director with very poor human resource management skills.

The usual reasons for leaving a company - arising opportunities, openings with tribes back home, going back to school, or choosing another employer, for example - *always* exist. They become much more attractive when the organization being left is led by an autocratic executive who offers little consistency, equity, safety, or accountability when dealing with staff. When staff is told in an all-employee meeting by the executive director that "Loyalty to NCAI means loyalty to ME", it shows an alarming inability by that executive to place service to mission above self, or even to disconnect NCAI from her own interests.

The staggering rate that skilled professionals are leaving NCAI tells a stark story - of an unhealthy culture and failure to support, and thus retain, talent. Committed staff does not lightly leave an organization they love and a mission they are passionate about fulfilling. But when they see colleagues marginalized, disciplined, punished, and even terminated for trying to address issues of poor management - or bad actors not held to account for disrespectful behavior - and the oppressive culture of silence and lack of authentic process means they cannot speak with their voices, then they will speak with their feet.

In the past three years, 33 full time regular employees have left NCAI. This does *not* include the Fellows who come and go on an annual basis. NCAI has an average staff count (including the Fellows) of about 33-38 people, depending on current openings. Just since January of this year, 11 employees have left. Again, there are many reasons people depart. But the usual reasons cannot explain away the roughly 80% turnover I've observed in the past three years, regardless of what you are being told in meetings.

The average cost to replace an employee is 20-40% of their salary. With an NCAI payroll of approximately \$3.5 million, the impact to NCAI of such high churn is significant and lasting. As Executive Committee members, you are the governing body of final accountability with the ultimate duty of care to NCAI. You would be right to be concerned about the sustainability of the organization.

I raised issues of harassment and poor executive judgment in the workplace through the NCAI process that is outlined by policy, all the way to the prior President of NCAI, starting in April 2017. In these 16 months, there was no resolution to my written statements. The failure of the Administrative Board (the four officers of the Executive Committee) to follow a procedure that closes the loop with the originating employee is discouraging and disheartening. My documentation should be on file with the past Administrative Board if you wish to review those statements.

NCAI's outstanding work in promoting social, economic and cultural equality for tribal nations and their peoples is just one of the many things that attracted me to NCAI in the first place. The important work being done here makes me truly proud to call myself an alumna of this organization. The overwhelming majority of NCAI employees have been warriors for Indian Country, impassioned and committed to being of service to NCAI's members.

NCAI is marking its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. For decades, dedicated and talented staff have carried out the work that has been directed by NCAI's membership and given strategic focus by its Executive Committee. Even the executive director serves these higher authorities. In this year of reflection and celebration, please take a hard look at the direction NCAI is headed and consider if it is still on course with its mission, core objectives, financial sustainability, and company culture.

Indian Country deserves a national advocacy organization that offers deep expertise from longstanding support staff who build lasting relationships with tribes, partners, policymakers, and stakeholders. An organization that authentically values and develops its people will be able to foster and retain this kind of seasoned, talented team with wide networks and institutional history. The opposite is happening. Frankly speaking, I've never worked any place where the employees have been trying so hard to gain the attention of its governing body.

While my final two weeks of work for NCAI will end on August 24, I am available to you now and into the future if I can be of any assistance with any of the issues raised in this letter. My personal contact information is below.

Your leadership of NCAI is deeply appreciated. Good governance and due diligence can be a challenging road, but they are absolutely essential for any organization that strives to achieve true excellence.

*Gunalchéesh* for your time. Thank you for the privilege of working together with you.

Respectfully yours,



Nicole Hallingstad  
[nhallingstad@gmail.com](mailto:nhallingstad@gmail.com)  
907-209-1089

**Encl: Nicole Hallingstad Resignation Letter**