



The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development

Making Native-2-Native connections.

By Nadine S. Bartholomew

The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development—better known as the National Center—is definitely connected. Since its inception more than 40 years ago, the National Center has worked with approximately 80 percent of the 565 federally recognized Native American tribes. The organization has assisted more than 25,000 American-Indian enterprises and trained more than 10,000 tribal members in business development. In total, the National Center has helped clients obtain more than \$6.3 billion in contracts and financing.

Based in Mesa, Arizona, the non-profit National Center is the oldest and largest American Indian-specific economic and business development organization in the United States. Led by President and CEO **Eric S. Trevan**, the organization runs nine offices and employs more than 50 people who supply management and technical assistance to Native American businesses and tribes nationwide.

Trevan, a citizen of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, is a strong proponent of the native-to-native (N2N) business model, one of two key



Eric S. Trevan

focuses of the National Center. Trevan knows that a dollar spent within the Native American community on Native-owned businesses will circulate at least six times before it leaves the community. “From one dollar, you can create \$5 to \$14 in value within the local economy, and that is good business,” says Trevan.

The Reservation Economic Summit & American Indian Business Trade Fair (RES) is the National Center’s premier annual national event which promotes N2N connections. Nearly 3,000 individuals and 400 exhibitors attended RES 2011, including tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, Native enterprises, Fortune 500 corporations, and government officials. Trade delegations from Can-

ada, Turkey, and China also attended. RES is the largest and longest running American-Indian business conference and trade show in the country.

Every year, more Native-owned companies and entrepreneurs participate in RES to connect with Native- and minority-owned businesses for contracting opportunities. According to Trevan, “Working with tribal nations is just good business. They can help reduce or eliminate tariffs, fees, and taxes for many large corporations. And many tribes have gained the confidence to approach big business on their own terms.”

RES 2012, being held at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, from February 27 to March 1, will feature a two-day trade fair, providing opportunities for American-Indian suppliers to connect with corporate and government buyers. Additionally, business information and training will be delivered through more than 24 one-hour sessions over three days. A robust lineup of educational sessions is designed to cover an array of topics, including energy, construction, tourism, entertainment, international trade, and technology. In fact, the importance of technology will

be a theme interwoven throughout many sessions.

Gaining greater connectivity through technology for tribes is the other key focus of the National Center. Less than 10 percent of families and businesses on tribal lands have access to broadband Internet (compared to 95 percent of other Americans), according to the National Congress of American Indians. In addition, 32 percent of American-Indian and Alaskan Natives have no access to phone service.

Lack of connectivity is a problem that **Margo Gray-Proctor**, a citizen of the Osage Nation, knows about firsthand. Gray-Proctor is the first woman to be appointed chairman of the board in the National Center's 43-year history. She is also a business owner herself and acutely aware of the importance of technology to business.

Gray-Proctor is president of **Horizon Engineering Services Company** in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She moved her business from rural Pawhuska, Oklahoma, in part because the community lacked access to telecommunications and high-speed Internet service which were essential to growing her business locally and nationally. Proctor notes that access to the Internet, transportation, infrastructure, and financing of all sorts are absent in regions with the fewest Native-owned businesses and highest rates of unemployment among American-Indian and Alaskan Natives.

The National Center and its clients are determined to improve connectivity on reservations. For example, National Center board member **Michelle Holiday** has been working with the **Navajo Tribal Utility Authority** to deploy 550 miles of new aerial fiber-optic cable and 59 new or modified microwave towers covering 15,000 square miles in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico.

This job-creating project is expected to bring broadband Internet service to about 30,000 households, 1,000 businesses, and 1,100 institutions in the Navajo Nation. The **Tulalip Tribe**, another National Center client, used federal stimulus funds to bring high-speed Internet to many other



Margo Gray-Proctor

tribes' reservations and rural communities in Snohomish, Whatcom, and Skagit counties in Washington state. The Tulalip Tribe connected its broadband network to a Seattle-based exchange that offered cheaper and faster Internet, and generated many technology jobs.

The National Center provides assistance to tribes and businesses both on and off the reservation in the areas of market research, marketing assistance, financial analysis, loan preparation, procurement assistance, minority certification assistance, and business plan development. Consulting services are offered to tribes, Indian businesses, corporations, foundations and government agencies in the areas of event management, strategic planning, and group facilitation. Trevan and his staff make a point of reaching out to all tribes, helping to establish the dialogue and collaboration needed to recognize and promote the competitive advantage of Native-

owned business enterprises.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 237,000 companies owned by American Indians and Alaskan Natives generated \$34.4 billion in gross receipts and employed 184,000 workers in 2007. And in 2009, the American-Indian population had an estimated buying power of \$64.7 billion. While these numbers are impressive, the American-Indian and Alaskan Native business community has yet to realize its full economic potential. Trevan looks to the rich commercial trading history shared by Native Americans and often refers to the pre-Columbian economic hub known as Cahokia Mounds.

Once situated in the area of St. Louis, Missouri, Cahokia Mounds was the largest and earliest pre-Columbian settlement north of Mexico. Records show it was occupied primarily during the Mississippian period (800–1350), when it covered more than 3,950 acres, and had an estimated population of 10,000–20,000 at its peak. Many historians consider it the pre-eminent example of a cultural, religious, and economic center for Native Americans, an exceptional model of pre-urban living and international trade. "Cahokia Mounds was a huge market and world trade center for Native Americans," says Trevan, "We designed the Reservation Economic Summit to reflect that economic legacy." ♦

Nadine S. Bartholomew has more than 12 years of experience developing and facilitating corporate engagement in such issues as supplier diversity and community relations.



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