

Kwai Kwai Judiciary Committee,

I want to thank you for your consideration of house bill H.659 which will allow Native American Indian Tribes to solemnize marriages. I know that this bill may not be of the highest priority for the legislators when you are all faced with awesome responsibilities like the budget and health care. However, I would like to tell you why it is important to the Native Community and should not be a controversial item.

Our people just want to practice our religious traditions like any other religions are allowed to do. Currently, the people who perform our ceremonies in our tribe do not meet the criteria's of those eligible under the current marriage statute to solemnize marriages.

The State of Vermont recognized our historic and cultural contributions when they granted us official recognition in 2011 and the need to help us protect and strengthen our heritage. As Chief, it is my job to make sure that I partner with the State of Vermont to address our needs in State policy. In 1978, Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. It was enacted to protect and preserve the traditional religious rights and cultural practices of American Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts, and Native Hawaiians. These rights include, but are not limited to, access of sacred sites, freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rights and use and possession of objects considered sacred. The Act required policies of all governmental agencies to eliminate interference with the free exercise of Native religion, based on the First Amendment, and to accommodate access to and use of religious sites to the extent that the use is practicable and is not inconsistent with an agency's essential functions.

I am asking you today for your cooperation in the protection of our religious freedoms and to pass this bill out of your committee favorably.

Waolowzi (Be Very Well),
Don Stevens, Chief
Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk - Abenaki Nation
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