



# *Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians*

AUSTIN LOWES KNOWS THE VALUE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN FORGING COMMUNITY BONDS AND SERVICES

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

The Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians is located in Sault Ste. Marie. We have a service area that comprises most of the Upper Peninsula and a total membership of about 50,000 people, making us the largest tribe east of the Mississippi. We have a thriving economy that includes several casinos, an EDC, and other businesses, and all they exist to create revenue that pays for services for our members. The services include health care, behavioral health services, law enforcement services, housing, dental services, and more.

Our tribe has historical roots in this community. We call Sault Ste. Marie 'Bahweting,' which means 'The Place of the Rapids,' because before the Soo Locks came, in the St. Mary's River there was a set of rapids that our fishermen

would catch white fish in. We're a fishing tribe with the most commercial fishermen out of all the tribes that were signatories of the 1836 Treaty of Washington.

We share the natural resources with the state of Michigan and we do a lot of good things to be good stewards of those resources. Right now, our natural resources department is actually trapping wolves in the Hiawatha National Forests. They're taking blood samples, hair samples, stool samples, they're collaring them with GPS devices to monitor their tracking.

We're also pretty proud of the health care services that we provide. Native Americans are disproportionately impacted by a lot of health ailments and behavioral health issues, so for

us to be able to provide those services to our members free of charge is something that we're definitely proud of. We're also unique in that we're the only tribe in the state of Michigan that will be offering homeless shelter services to its members. We just purchased a motel that will provide emergency and transitional housing services for our members that are experiencing housing insecurity. We're the only tribe in the state of Michigan that does that and there's 12 tribes.

We also provide a lot of different jobs throughout the community. We're one of the top employers in Sault Ste. Marie, and 2% of the revenue that's collected from slot machines goes to enhance the community.

Our tribe also creates cultural diversity for Sault Ste. Marie. We have pow wows, not just in Sault Ste. Marie, but in other locations. We have one in Newberry, one in Kincheloe, and one in Hessel. We just try to implement our culture in everything that we do.

And of course, no one planned that a global pandemic would take place. But the pandemic provided us with a lot of funding that we used to help meet our citizen's needs. We used it to build houses and to create revenue replacement for our businesses so we wouldn't have to lay employees off. We provided tens of millions of dollars in direct payments to members so that if they were out of work, they could meet their needs.

We exist to provide services and protection for our members. My background is that of a social worker and I worked as a therapist before I was elected to our tribal council, then later elevated to the position of Chairman. So, for me to be in this role, I get to wear a macro-level social work hat. Every single day, I try to identify what my community's needs are and then try to link and create services to help meet them. It's an honor to be able to have the resources to take care of our people.

I ran for election in 2020. I've always had an interest in politics, and my undergraduate degrees in political science and my master's degrees in social work. My grandma, Shirley Nolan, was heavily involved in tribal politics and was a strong advocate for her people. So when I won, I was elated, but I also thought heavily about her.

It's a lot of responsibility and I don't take it lightly, and every day I give it my best. I feel like I was put here for a reason and I'm trying to make the most of it. It's been an absolutely fantastic experience, and it's truly been the honor of my life.

– Austin Lowes, Chairman of the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians

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