

STATEMENT OF LIANA ONNEN
PRAIRIE BAND POTAWATOMI NATION
SENATE FEDERAL AND STATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
Regarding 2018 HOUSE BILL 2498
ORAL PROPONENT
March 5, 2018

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members. My name is Liana Onnen and I am the Chairwoman of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. I want to thank you for allowing me to come before you today to testify on HB2498, An Act concerning Native Americans; prohibiting the wearing of tribal regalia and objects of cultural significance. I would also like to thank Representative Victors for introducing this bill.

I come before you today in the traditional regalia of my tribe. This is what we wear for special occasions to show honor and respect and to celebrate. We wear them for ceremonies, weddings, funerals, graduations and other celebrations. I felt it appropriate to wear my regalia today for this hearing as this is a bill that will protect my rights and the rights of all Native People to be who they are and express themselves and their culture freely. This is not a costume. These are my clothes; one of my tribal elders made the skirt and satchkin (top) and another made these moccasins for me. They cannot be bought at a store. They must be made, by hand and even that is one of our cultural traditions.

As we are all aware, there have been hundreds of years and numerous federal policies to eradicate Native Americans or solve the “Indian Problem.” One of the most devastating was the assimilation policy that resulted in Native children being forcibly taken from their homes and families. Their hair was cut and they were forbidden from speaking their language and practicing their culture in any way. In many cases, the “Indian” was literally beaten out of those children. The result of this assimilation policy is that languages were lost, traditions were lost, and in some cases, the desire to be Indian was driven out of those children, and they later shunned their culture in favor of assimilation. Nevertheless, I stand before you today, living, breathing and wearing my culture in spite of all of those things.

I am not only honored to represent the Prairie Band Potawatomi People and Native American Kansans, I am also compelled to speak on behalf of our youth, our future. I want to do what I can to ensure that these outdated policies and the effects of those outdated policies, do not live on. Our youth should feel as proud to wear their cultural regalia and items as I do standing before you right now. When these youth celebrate the milestones of their lives or go to public meetings to represent themselves as Native people, they should never feel the shame of being told their clothing, beadwork, eagle feathers and jewelry are not allowed or acceptable. This sends the message that they are not acceptable being exactly who they are. I feel when that is allowed to happen it suppresses free expression, one of the basic tenants of our democracy.

Without that freedom of expression, without that ability to be who we are, whether Native, or non-Native, we cannot have a dialogue. I know from personal

experience with USD 337 Royal Valley, that embracing culture encourages conversations about culture. Conversations often lead to sincere dialogue and dialogue leads to a better understanding. Native Youth across the country are experiencing some of the highest suicide rates of any demographic in this country and often it is associated with feeling alone or as if who they are does not matter to the larger society. I believe firmly, that this lack of a sense of belonging contributes to the desperation and hopelessness these youth feel. I believe with all of my heart, that our people and especially our youth need to be able to express who they truly are without censure or censorship.

This is not a costume. This is who we are. I ask that you consider strengthening the state's recognition of the distinct and unique cultural heritage of Native Americans and your commitment to preserving our culture and vote send this bill to the floor.

I thank you sincerely for your time and consideration and I am open for any questions you may have.

Igwien (thank you)