

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

March 27, 2025

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Maxine Dibert, Chair
Representative Ashley Carrick
Representative Robyn Niayuq Burke
Representative Andi Story
Representative Rebecca Schwanke
Representative Jubilee Underwood
Representative Elexie Moore

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: LAYERS OF GOVERNANCE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

'LÁAGANAAY TSIITS GIT'ANEE, Co-Founder and Director
Ginga and Igniñ Collective
Kake, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Complexity in Motion: Alaska Native Governance, Protocols, and Understandings."

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:26 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Representatives Moore, Underwood, Carrick, Burke, Schwanke, and Dibert were present at the call to order. Representative Story arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION: Layers of Governance

8:05:24 AM

CHAIR DIBERT announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on the layers of Alaska Native governance.

8:05:54 AM

'LÁAGANAAY TSIITS GIT'ANEE, Co-Founder and Director, Gínga and Igniñ Collective, provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Complexity in Motion: Alaska Native Governance, Protocols, and Understandings" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She introduced herself in Haida and explained the meaning of her name. Speaking in Haida, she shared a greeting and her family history, followed by an explanation in English. She explained that the Gínga and Igniñ Collective is a nonprofit serving Native people, and she pointed out the complexity of the Native community in Alaska. On slide 1, she pointed out the picture of a beach from her home where she "draws strength and understanding." She shared a short video [link provided on slide 2 of the presentation], making the point that, as humans, "oftentimes we don't see what we don't know," and this can change and shape the world. In the context of what is unknown by most people about Alaska Native peoples, she asked the committee members to try to understand things they may not have known before. She suggested that committee members look for opportunities to partner with Alaska Natives, as they are represented by many diverse organizations and types of governance.

8:16:35 AM

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 3 and outlined the goals of the presentation, pointing out that the complexities of Alaska Native governance are not being taught to the public. She reiterated the diversity represented by Native peoples. She moved to slide 4 and gave a land acknowledgement to the A'akw Kwáan and Taku people who have lived on the land around Juneau since time immemorial. She retold the Native oral story of the Aas Kwaani, or "tree people." The story emphasized the history and process of Native peoples working together, and with nature. She explained that the story is an example of how Native Alaskans have always governed themselves. She skipped the video on slide 5 because of a technical difficulty.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE transitioned to slide 6 and pointed out the size of the state, reiterating that it has been built on diversity. She explained that because the geology is different across the state, Alaska Natives differ from each other. She asserted that this leads to strength. She discussed the timeframe that people have lived on the land, and she pointed out that she would be considered a 600th generation Native since the time of the Ice Age. She explained that her Haida and Tlingit names do not belong to her, as they are traditional names that belong to the clans.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE discussed the general knowledge that non-Natives have of Native Alaskans, and she compared this to the surface of an iceberg, as depicted on slide 7. She stated that these would be aspects like dance, food, music, and language; while the other unknown aspects of Native culture are beneath the surface, such as the concepts of family, ways of communication, notions of courtesy, concepts of age, concepts of fairness and justice, and approaches to decision making. She stated that the presentation would focus on current-day governance, and the interplay between Alaska Native governance and Western governance. She expressed the importance of understanding that Alaska Native peoples are not a "monolith," as there are 12 to 14 distinct nations. She added that the term "Alaska Native" has only come about recently, as Native Alaskans would refer to themselves in terms of their tribes. She acknowledged some of the commonalities of Alaska Natives.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 8 and pointed out that Alaska Natives have three sovereigns: the 229 tribes, the state government, and the federal government. She expressed the opinion that these entities do not have to be averse to each other; rather, they could be thought of as "exponential," as each would be providing support to citizens. She said that these systems could work together by government-to-government consulting, compacting, contracting, collaborating, co-creating, and co-managing.

[8:36:30 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE skipped the video on slide 9 because of a technical difficulty. She moved to slide 10, which displayed a table clarifying the creation and designation of tribal entities, and the constructs that come out of state and federal law. She stated that Alaska tribes have an inherent power, which predates the United States; however, because of the diversity of Alaska Native peoples, there is not just one-way of expressing

this. She explained that Native governance structures have traditionally been reflected in the different Native social structures. In example, she pointed out that the Tlingit and Haida have clans, and these clans govern identity, relationships with other clans, relationships with the land and water, and ceremonies. She added that the clans also govern disputes. She reiterated that this would look different for other tribes in the state.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE, addressing the table of tribal entities, pointed out that the modern construct of tribal governance was formatted and designed by the federal government. She stated that this was done using a template constitution created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She explained that the 229 tribes recognized by the federal government are organized into traditional councils, which are sovereign governments. In serving their citizens, tribal governments are able to undertake the agendas themselves, or they could create organizations to delegate the authority. She discussed different nonprofit organizations that have this delegated tribal authority. She added that this authority can also be removed, which would remove a nonprofit's ability to govern the tribal citizens; however, the nonprofit could still exist under state or federal law, but not on behalf of the tribe. She noted instances where entities with tribal authority could collaborate with federal law and policy, such as compacting. She stated that tribal compacting with health care would be one example of tribes deciding to act with each other, while acting with the federal government.

[8:53:01 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE, in response to a committee question, confirmed that she had been discussing Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISEDAA). She expressed the understanding that the state is now involved with education compacting, and this would be similar to its involvement with Native child welfare services.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE acknowledged that there could be confusion concerning the construction of Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs). She explained that the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) is the federal law that implicates state law and Alaska Native peoples. She stated that while ANCSA has created 12 regional Alaska Native corporations and around 200 Alaska Native village corporations, it was "silent on tribes." She pointed out that Native corporations create their own "nonprofit

arms," which look different for each corporation, [and this could cause confusion]. She acknowledged that the unclear correlation between federally recognized tribes and ANCs could cause further confusion. She continued that understanding where these entities derive their authority could help lawmakers better understand the different relationships.

[8:58:09 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE, in response to a committee question concerning the complicated tribal-governance system, expressed uncertainty on the existence of any document that would break down all the organizations in a visual manner. She referenced resources that possibly could provide this information, including the Alaska Federation of Natives and the First Alaskans Institute.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 11, which displayed a map of the 229 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. She expressed the understanding that Native villages in the state have an average population of around 300 people, and she explained that these villages would be the responsible body for providing the local government services needed by citizens. She emphasized the amount of work it takes for these small communities to compact and communicate with federal and state governments, as this is done without revenue from taxes. She pointed out that the funds to run these communities would come from grants and from the federal government. She moved to slide 12, which displayed a breakdown of the different tribes in Alaska. She stated that the population of Alaska Natives in the state has increased from 19.5 percent to 22 percent, per the 2020 United States census. She expressed the understanding that, from her research, it was found that Alaska Natives actually make up around 33 percent of the state's population.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 13 and slide 14 and discussed the concept of race in the country and Alaska Natives. She explained that tribal citizenship and Native status are not race-based; however, as citizens of the United States, Alaska Natives would fall in the protected class of citizens under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. She further explained this in terms of the inherit system of governance of Alaska Natives. She discussed the Indian Child Welfare Act as a politically protected status.

[9:12:38 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 15, which provided a brief review of Alaska Native organizations in the state. She explained that some are statewide in nature, while others are community specific and regionally specific. She moved to slide 16 and pointed out the map of ANCSA corporations superimposed with a map of Alaska Native languages. On slide 17, she stated that while tribes and corporations are autonomous, independent, and interdependent, Alaska Natives would be related through the cultural context. She explained that this cultural relationship does not mean there are legal obligations; rather, tribes and corporations would work together using this cultural context. She reiterated that the tribes and corporations are different entities with different authorities; however, this does not mean these entities would be in conflict. She stated that no law requires corporations and tribes to work together; rather, "people have to want to work together." She pointed out that communicating with a corporation would not be the same as communicating with a tribe, and she acknowledged that this can be difficult to understand. She explained that the federal government does not give sovereignty to tribes; rather, this would be derived from the tribes' inherent existence, as they existed before the United States. She continued that [ISDEAA and ANCSA] are ways of federally recognizing tribes. She recommended speaking directly to the corporations and tribes to understand the relationships better.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE pointed out that this conversation does not only concern the federal government, as the state has also recognized its government-to-government relationship with tribal entities. She suggested that the committee, as part of the state government, could work to build relationships with Native corporations and tribes. She spoke about the relationships between the different corporations and tribes, and she explained the concept of "concurrent community care," noting that these entities have responsibilities to each other. She pointed out that because of the geographic distinctions in the state, municipalities have been formed in unique ways, and they have different ways of working with tribes. She discussed the variations of these relationships.

[9:23:44 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 18 and acknowledged that Public Law 280 could also be confusing. She explained that this law allows the state to act as the federal government in terms of criminal and civil jurisdiction. Because of this, she pointed out that the State of Alaska has sued Native tribes many

times. She added that disparity can be seen in the way law enforcement and dollars are distributed in the state. In example, she discussed the problems with law enforcement in the villages and the lack of Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs). She emphasized the limited resources provided to villages for criminal issues. She expressed the understanding that there has been more interest in fish and game violations in the villages than in the cases involving missing and murdered Native Alaskans. She argued that the Native citizens deserve better. She discussed the working relationship between the tribal courts and state courts, as cases are transferred from the state to the tribes; however, the resources to support these cases have not been transferred. She shared stories of her father and uncle, who had both worked for their tribal government. She discussed how state and tribal law systems work together, and she suggested that the committee could address issues in the same way, from a government-to-government position.

[9:30:36 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE, in response to a committee question, expressed uncertainty on the number of tribal courts in Alaska; however, she stated that the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 had triggered a study, and she offered to follow up to the committee with the link to this resource.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY commented on VPSOs in the state, expressing the understanding that these officers have had a pay increase. She pointed out that the gaps in this funding should be better understood.

CHAIR DIBERT commented on the committee's future schedule concerning this topic.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE shared a story of her participation in the first VPSO banquet. She also shared the story of Michael Gho, a VPSO from Fairbanks, and his involvement in helping save some community members who went missing in the middle of winter. Continuing with the presentation, she discussed the Native ways of knowing concerning the land and weather, as this knowledge has enabled tribes to provide for themselves. On slide 19, she pointed out a passage shared by a participant during the Protecting Our Ways of Life Summit, which was hosted by the First Alaskans Institute in 2020. She paraphrased from the slide, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Hunger knows no law... what we struggle to get through is our hunger in our minds, spirit and souls. That's what happens when we aren't able to get out on the lands and water, to harvest for all of our sustenance. Hunger in our stomach, mind, body and soul. When our people are oppressed and restricted in our ways of life, it creates a void, a hurt that our Ancestors went through.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE stated that the ability for Natives to live their ways of life is not just about food, it is about nourishing "who we are." She stated that this concerns Native government systems, arts, oral histories, kinship systems, relationships to nonhuman beings, and more. She paraphrased a quote from Paul Ontooguk, a retired Inupiaq professor, as seen on slide 20, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

We've lived in places with such efficiency and grace that later people who have come to our homelands have considered them to be empty of human beings; and they've called this a wilderness because they didn't see us in those places. They couldn't imagine that a people could live so well in a land that it would appear untouched by them. And we live with the dilemma of that to this day.

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE pointed out how long Native peoples' inherent sovereignty has allowed them to survive in places considered "inhospitable," and she argued for the realization of this concerning Native governance. She discussed the idea of "subsistence," in terms of the Native ways of life. She argued that Alaska Natives should not be considered "stakeholders," as this is their way of life. She pointed out that this is one of the most litigated matters between Alaska Native peoples and the state and federal governments. She expressed the importance in determining a method of co-management of these resources. She argued that the term "subsistence" is inadequate to describe the ways of life of Native peoples, which is a system of being. However, she acknowledged that "subsistence" has become a legal term.

[9:42:42 AM](#)

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE moved to slide 21, which listed some protocols that Alaska Native peoples and their organizations use for working together on a government-to-government basis. She

discussed each protocol and how they interrelate. Concerning the protocol of respecting tribes as co-equal governments, she said this concerns working together. She explained that this could be done by focusing on relationships that are not simply transactional, but enduring. She continued that addressing "hard things" together would create trust. She pointed out that often entities only know each other in the courts. She asserted that these types of interactions do not create enduring relationships. She opined that if there is a desire to be involved in the process of discussing difficult issues in the room together, trust could be created, as opposed to just saying "no."

MS. TSIITS GIT'ANEE suggested that to build "government-to-government muscle," the committee should meet with the tribes. She suggested that this would lead to finding solutions and innovations. She pointed out that the state, federal, and tribal governments have a shared responsibility to the same citizens. Continuing with the protocols, she stated that working with Native organizations would create a path. She pointed out that Native communities have expressed frustration that, when visiting, policy makers "fly in and fly out." She suggested that the policy makers might not be listening or learning about the communities. She discussed the Native concept of "visiting" and related this with her personal experiences. She urged committee members to visit with Native communities during the good and the bad times. She moved to the protocol of sharing resources, which includes funding, infrastructure, and time. She noted that humor is a shared value across all Native communities, as it can be medicinal and used as a learning framework. She expressed the opinion that when people are working together, "if you're not getting teased, if people are not trying to laugh with you and find a commonality with you ... that's a red flag." In conclusion, she stated that in Native communities the greatest gift a person can give is spending time with Native Elders.

[10:01:48 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT thanked the presenter and gave closing comments.

[10:02:49 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 10:03 a.m.