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Tribe Deprived of Rights

Indian Country Today — By Rob Capriccioso

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DEVILS LAKE, N.D. Tribal citizens are no stranger to having their rights trampled on. Now, members of the Spirit Lake Reservation say their right to vote is also being taken away to the alarm of some state and federal policymakers.

The Benson County Board of Commissioners, which oversees the county that includes reservation lands, decided this election season to close three polling places in the tribe three-precinct vicinity.

Commissioners rationalized their decision, saying there is a high cost to operating the polling places, including training and paying staff.

In response, tribal leaders offered to provide funds to recruit and train workers, and said the county could use facilities that would be rent-free.

The commission refused the tribe's offer, saying that costs would still be too high, and that mailed ballots would be cheaper.

Many tribal members would therefore have to travel longer distances to cast a vote in person, as only one polling location would be available in the county. Almost half of the total votes cast in the county in the 2008 presidential election were cast by Native American citizens.

In early October, the tribe filed suit against the board's decision.

Benson County State Attorney Jim Wang said in a local radio interview that the lawsuit would have to be resolved within three weeks. At the time of his interview, Election Day was three weeks away.

Whether this is intentional discrimination or not, the bottom line is that closing polling locations located within the Spirit Lake Nation will disenfranchise American Indian voters on the reservation, and this injustice cannot stand, said Myra Pearson, Spirit Lake Nation chairperson.

Tribal officials have noted that the county has previously tried to hamper Indian voter participation, pointing to statistics from the 2000 election.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., had asked that the county keep the polls open, and he now feels disenfranchisement is possible.

As a result of his concern, Dorgan has asked U.S. Attorney Tim Purdon to review the decision. His office noted that all other Indian reservations in North Dakota will have polling locations during Election Day.

"I think this decision by Benson County officials will disenfranchise American Indians" Dorgan said in a statement. "I want the U.S. attorney to review with the Justice Department the decision and determine whether there are actions that can be taken to compel the county to have a polling place on the reservation where people can cast their votes.

In addition, there are other areas of the state where people will find fewer opportunities to cast their votes with fewer polling places. I believe the state should reverse course on these election law changes and find ways to make it easier to vote rather than harder to vote."

Some state officials are also concerned, with the chairman of the North Dakota Democratic-NPL Party urging the Benson County Commission to open an Election Day polling place in Fort Totten, N.D., to make voting easier for residents of the Spirit Lake Reservation.



Founder's Message



This issue there will be no founder's message as Bob Kohel has undergone surgery. Please pray for a quick and successful recovery...

The Editor

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Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

Fetal alcohol exposure associated with a decrease in cognitive performance

New research indicates that attention processing and perception may be involved in fetal alcohol-related learning difficulties.

* Exposure to alcohol as a fetus has been shown to cause difficulties in memory and information processing in children.

* New findings indicate that visual perception, control of attention and demand processing may be involved in fetal alcohol-related learning problems.

* This information could potentially be used to help children affected with such difficulties .

It has been known for many years that drinking alcohol while pregnant can cause serious and irreversible damage to the fetus. However, new research exploring memory deficits in children diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) or fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) may be able to aid in the creation of new therapies and treatments.

The results will be published in the January 2011 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

Joseph Jacobson, one of the study's authors and Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at the Wayne State University School of Medicine, said that the mechanisms associated with the deficits in children with FASD and FAS are still not well understood. Therefore, the researchers decided to focus on the mental difficulties that the children experience to help determine the specific mechanisms that cause them.

"FASD is associated with learning problems in children, including having difficulties in response inhibition and

memory," says Jacobson. "Additional understanding of the nature of these problems has the potential to help develop more effective remediation programs for children with fetal alcohol-related learning problems."

"The deficits associated with FASD and FAS are varied" said Jacobson, "and the myriad of possible causes underlying these problems are still not widely understood. What is known," he added, "is that, prenatal alcohol exposure affects many different aspects of brain development, including brain size, neuronal development, and development of white matter tracts."

Data for this research was collected from 217 Inuit children that were placed in either the alcohol-exposed group, where mothers reported binge drinking while pregnant, or the control. The data was recorded using electroencephalography (EEG) to observe the changing voltage of the brain's electrical activity during the memory and coordination trials.

This allowed the researchers to explore the differences in the brain's electrical activity, called event-related potentials, which change in specific ways depending on what task was presented, between the alcohol-exposed and control groups.

The researchers discovered that the alcohol-exposed group, while similar to the control in accuracy and reaction time, showed a statistically significant decrease in understanding the meaning of a stimulus, attention dedication to a specific task, and memory processing.

"The study demonstrates that there are alterations in this group of children on their processing of information related to these functions," said Claire Coles, a Professor of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science and Pediatrics at the Emory University School of Medicine. "Hopefully, such information can be used to develop more effective teaching methods for children affected by prenatal exposure."

Jacobson agrees that this research is only the first step in helping the children affected by fetal alcohol disorders.

"These findings help specify in greater detail the deficits associated with fetal alcohol exposure, which can then be informative in the development of remediation programs for children with FASD."

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