

Colorado State Senator Suzanne Williams Is a Fierce and Creative Advocate for American Indians

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Suzanne Williams

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State Senator Suzanne Williams (D-Aurora) is the only registered American Indian legislator in the state of Colorado, but after serving 16 years with the Colorado General Assembly, she will soon be prevented by term limits from running for reelection. During her tenure, Williams, a registered Comanche and a former special education teacher, introduced numerous bills and resolutions that directly affected the American Indian community in the state of Colorado. Her recent Indian-

related bill, Senate Bill 12-057, A Bill for an Act Concerning Indigenous Language Instruction, was signed into law in April. Under its provisions, fluent indigenous language speakers will now be able to teach in Colorado schools.

Indian Country Today Media Network recently caught up with Williams to find out more about her plans and accomplishments.

What achievements are you most proud of from your 16 years in the Colorado state legislature?

I started out in my first year with the House of Representatives with a law that required [Colorado schools] to teach Indian education. So that was a good start—it was the highlight, really, of my whole 16 years. And then we did the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1999 that required Colorado to follow the national ICWA law, because they were not doing that. The law requires that an Indian child placed out of the home by the state must first be considered to be placed with relatives.

I don't know what year it was, but the American Indian scholars license plate has to be mentioned here, too. The initial reason for the Indian scholars license plate was to provide some extra income for college expenses so Native people could fulfill their dreams and get a college degree. It has been hugely successful. The first two years we were giving hundreds of dollars to individuals and after growing over the past decade, five \$2,000 scholarships were awarded in 2010–2011 plus eight copy,000 scholarships from other donors for Indian education supplemental funding. It took two years to get that license plate bill passed.

Which of your bills that didn't get passed would you most like to see become law?

The Indian mascot bill would've established a process to educate schools and communities about the Indians who used to live in their vicinity. When I was in the House, there were efforts to address the Columbus Day holiday, which actually began in Colorado. We had a fair amount of education about Columbus Day due to my bill [to repeal it]. Columbus is no hero to the Indians, but most of the population in the United States doesn't know or even care about that.

Would you encourage Native people to run for their state legislatures?

Of course I would encourage Native people to run for the state legislature. We need their voices. We need their history. We need Native people to be among the decision-makers. We need Native people to bring the problems of history, the problems of the current status. We need their ideas. I look forward to the day when I can come to the swearing in of the next Native American state legislator in Colorado.

The Interior Department has said it will likely not release a tribal jobs report this year. That report helps to identify poverty and plight in Indian country. Why should Interior release the report?

There's a specific connection between Native people, lack of jobs and their future. We've been looking at jobs and how joblessness affects a family and the whole economy for a couple of years now, and we have left out a significant portion of the population—the Native population. I would venture to say that if the government got into those statistics, they would find we have amongst us Third World countries—Third World reservations right here in the United States. That's not only going to be embarrassing when it comes out, but it will have to be addressed.

This administration should want to show the problem and show immediately what it's going to do to address the problem. There is so much to be done in addressing Indian needs and their situation resulting from historical roadblocks. If we're really going to address human needs, we have to have some better data and some better answers—or just keep the lid on the box, like they have always done.

On July 30 President Obama signed the Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribe Homeownership (HEARTH) Act into law. What is your opinion of that bill?

I guess this is one area that the House and Senate, the Democrats and Republicans, could agree on.... The Department of the Interior is so convoluted that it has gotten in the way of a major human and U.S. citizen privilege—to own a home. This is fine legislation. Now the individual tribes can develop their leasing regulations and their own rules and regulations.

I think the government is realizing that Indian reservations have a lot of capabilities to take care of themselves. The time has arrived that the United States government realizes that reservations and the Indian people have a right to take care of themselves and that the federal government has actually stood in the way of that happening. Many people's eyes are open now. This legislation is, I think, the beginning of many facets of legislation that can help Indians across the country to become self-sufficient, to take charge of their own lives and partake in the dreams that all Americans have. I think it's exciting.

What are your plans for the future?

I'm hoping I can use my experience of the past 16 years to work in some policy capacity for people. I don't know what that will mean at this point. I'm looking for my next opportunity to serve the people. I'm cut out to be a servant, and I'll always be one. I'm an oddity. I do not believe in retirement.