



While attention is often given to the noisy political environment in Washington, D.C., state legislatures are busy introducing bills and hashing out policy issues.

Indeed, sometimes state-level actions can have a more direct effect on Florida residents - including Tribal members - than what is being hashed out in Congress.

In Florida there are sure to be many big issues addressed in the legislative session that begins March 5 and ends May 3. And there's a new face in town - Gov. Ron DeSantis.



Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (Courtesy photo)

Lawmakers will grapple with the massive state budget, health care, education, the opioid epidemic, environmental issues, the economy and jobs, medical marijuana, voting laws, guns and school safety, and perhaps even a ban on texting while driving.

While none of those issues will likely mention Florida's Native population specifically, Kathy Atkins, the executive director of the Florida Governors Council on Indian Affairs, said she's got a big goal for the upcoming session.

"We want to work with new governor and create the awareness that there are two federally-recognized tribes [in Florida] and partner with [the executive branch]," Atkins said.

"The awareness and partnerships has diminished and seems to be going away," she said.

Atkins recently moved from Tennessee to Florida to take the helm at FGCI. She's worked as a consultant and has planned conferences on Native American issues for more than two decades.

Atkins is a full-blooded Tuscarora, a tribe that is part of the Iroquois Confederacy in New York.

She expects DeSantis to focus a lot of attention on education, jobs and producing a skilled workforce. She hopes on a macro level his focus will create a more welcoming environment for young Tribal members in Florida to perhaps stay in-state after high school or college, instead of moving out-of-state.

### **Missing, murdered**

Elsewhere in the U.S., lawmakers in at least seven states have introduced legislation to address the unsolved deaths and disappearances of many Native American women and girls.

Data from law enforcement and other sources has shown a disparity in missing and murdered

Indigenous women and girls compared to the rest of the population.

A recent Associated Press review of bills found that lawmakers in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, New Mexico and Arizona have recently sponsored measures on the issue.

Policymakers in South Dakota are creating guidelines for investigating cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

And in at least two cases - in Nebraska and Washington State - lawmakers are moving to designate a day to honor murdered and missing Indigenous women. Similar efforts are being pushed in Utah.

### **Child sex abuse**

Michelle Dauphinais Echols of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa is an attorney and advocate for child sex abuse survivors from Native American boarding schools.

She is the founder of "9littlegirls" and the author of Senate Bill 196 which would "eliminate the statutory and judicial statute of limitation precedents for Native American [sexual abuse] survivors in South Dakota."

Echols said she created 9littlegirls to honor nine sisters who attended Native American boarding school and suffered "horrific physical, mental, and sexual abuse."

Echols, who spoke on a recent Native America Calling radio program, said their stories are not uncommon and the abuse suffered in the boarding schools has caused "lifelong and generational trauma for Native Americans."

If the bill passes it would mean allowing for a time for healing, and for reconciliation with the respective churches that ran many of these schools.

Other similar issues being looked at in state governments include policies on stalking, domestic violence and family violence.

### **Indigenous Peoples Day**

There has also been an ongoing movement to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day.

While many individual cities and towns have passed resolutions, states are now acting, most recently in Kansas and New Mexico.

State Rep. Derrick J. Lente, D-NM, who is of the Isleta and Sandia Pueblos introduced a bill to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day in the state.



Derrick J. Lente

"It's simple really," he recently said on Native America Calling. "Eliminate Columbus and put Indigenous Peoples in state statutes. Make it a state paid holiday as well."

Lente said he realizes the move to change Columbus Day is an emotional one, whether you're for it or against it.

"It's more of a debate than I expected. Some want to keep Columbus Day and add Indigenous Peoples Day. It's not a wedge to divide a state or a country, but an attempt to help define who we are as Native people to show our resilience."

Lente said it doesn't make sense to celebrate and honor the true history of Columbus.

"His legacy is one that speaks for itself: the murder, rape and torture of Indigenous People," he said. Lente added that it's not an attempt to rewrite history.

"[It's] an extinguishment of celebrating someone with that type of legacy," he said.

Both Albuquerque (in 2015) and Santa Fe (in 2016) have passed proclamations declaring Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples Day.

### **Native voting**

Some states are also trying to get funding to help develop strategies for ways to motivate Natives to become more involved in the voting process.

Lente is involved in trying to advance Native voting rights. He said states need to include Native American people in more of the political process and in "get out the vote" efforts.

"We need to come up with ways we can be more of a participant and be heard in the political process," Lente said.

He's proposed a Native American Voting Task Force in the New Mexico Legislature.

Bills have also been filed in New Mexico to address Native education. Another bill seeks to rename a statue on Pueblo land that features a Spanish conqueror.

"Native Americans have always been playing defense," said Lente. "Now it's time to play some offense. It's a different time."

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*Originally Printed by The Seminole Tribune*