

# INDIAN COUNTRY CONCERNS

Native Americans want people to know that they have the same interests as everyone else—in improving health care, education and the environment.

By Sia Davis



The number of Native American legislators is on the rise—37 seats in 13 states.

Alaska and Montana have the most. Seven Alaska Natives serve in the House and Senate. Montana's numbers have been growing since 2001. Representative Carol Juneau, a Hidatsa Mandan Indian first elected in 1999,



REPRESENTATIVE  
**CAROL JUNEAU**  
MONTANA

says the Legislature now has eight Indian legislators who represent all seven Montana Indian reservations.

Indian lawmakers are often mistakenly pegged with having a “special constituency” with their own needs and interests. Nothing could be further from the truth, says Washington Representative John McCoy, who belongs to the Tulalip Tribe.



REPRESENTATIVE  
**JOHN MCCOY**  
WASHINGTON

“I wish I could get everyone to understand that Indian Country has the same issues as everyone else,” he says. “Society still believes we are mysterious and get special privileges. No matter what I do, it is perceived that I am only doing it for Indian Country. But if I fix something for Native Americans, then I fix it

for the general population,” he says.

High on the agenda for Indian lawmakers are health care, education, jobs and the environment.

Representative Reggie Joule would like to see the wellness of all Alaska's residents improve.



REPRESENTATIVE  
**REGGIE JOULE**  
ALASKA

“Alaskans suffer disproportionately from poor health,” he says. “Alaska has a serious drug and alcohol problem that costs the state millions of dollars every year.” His state has the highest rate of child abuse, children with fetal alcohol syndrome, suicide and tragic deaths. Programs to help must be comprehensive, Joule says, covering health care, safe homes for pregnant women to get help in a drug free environment, education to help children break the cycle of abuse and ill health and small group homes to make up for the shortage of foster homes. He recommends a task force that reviews needs and possible solutions, including an assessment of what other states are successfully doing. He says people need to be able to get health care when they need it. Many facilities in Alaska have up to a nine-month waiting list.

Joule says community wellness and education are key. “Education needs to be a link that helps our children gain positive self esteem, life skills and meaningful employment.” Westernized education doesn't always work for Native students, he says. He wants his colleagues to look at the issue from a different perspective.

In Montana, Representative Juneau, a former educator, is trying to do just that. She says only about half of Montana's Indian students graduate from high school. “We will never make economic progress in our Indian communities until we take action to find some solutions,” she says.

This session, Juneau proposed a dropout prevention program to keep at-risk students in school, but it was killed in the Education Committee. There are no statistics on why so many Indian students drop out, so Juneau wanted to track students and determine why they leave.

She says keeping kids in school or helping them graduate or get their GED is an economic strategy that would be good for Montana, but her bill's \$50,000 price tag probably hurt it.

She did get a bill passed in 1999 that calls for public school curriculums to teach Indian history, culture and government. It has yet to be funded.

Environmental issues, especially water conservation and protection, are important concerns for Representative McCoy and New Mexico Representative James Roger Madalena.

Madalena sponsored legislation last session addressing water conservation and McCoy is working in his state to revitalize a local water canal. McCoy will also focus on job growth this session.

## WORKING WITH STATES

The political relationship between states and tribal governments historically has been focused between the state executive-branch officials and tribal leaders. Today, through increased collaborative efforts and out of necessity, state-tribal relations are focusing more on interactions with state legislatures.

Sia Davis tracks Native American issues for NCSL.