

CNA Spotlight

Collaborating with the Community to Improve Public Safety

The Gun Lake Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee

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Photos: Gun Lake Tribal Public Safety Department

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Introduction

The Gun Lake Tribe Public Safety Department



This report is part of a series highlighting innovative programs that have been implemented in some of the most progressive police agencies across the country. These reports will highlight some of the nation's most innovative best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; approaches to gun violence; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime. Each of these reports provides background on the program, details the important components of the program and the agency's approach, highlights the successes the agency has experienced as a result, and identifies ways other agencies can employ similar programs.

This report highlights the Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee (LEAC) of the Gun Lake Tribe Public Safety Department. CNA worked closely with the Gun Lake Tribe Public Safety Department to develop this publication over the course of two years and spoke with numerous department personnel about the initiative.

The Gun Lake Tribe (GLT), known formally as the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians of Michigan, is a federally recognized Indian tribe and sovereign nation with powers of self-government. Located just south of Grand Rapids, Michigan, in rural Allegan County, the tribe has approximately 700 members, though not all reside within the tribe's territory in Michigan. The tribal lands are not contiguous; some parcels are more than 13 miles apart. The tribe's lands include a settlement, a community center, cultural grounds, a casino, a convenience store and gas station, and a restaurant.

“The LEAC provides us with that direct, interactive contact with the community that provides the pulse of the community, their needs and their expectations of their police department, and their views on the services that are delivered.”

Gun Lake Tribe
Senior Public Safety Officer
Dennis Wilkins

The GLT is governed by a Tribal Council consisting of the Tribal Chairman—the chief executive of the tribe—and representatives of the Gun Lake Tribe Voting Districts. This council oversees multiple government departments, including education, environmental, housing, language and culture, and public safety.

In 2011, the Gun Lake Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee appointed Richard Rabenort as Public Safety Director, and the GLT received certification for its Public Safety Department to enforce federal, state, and tribal law.¹ This certification closely followed a cross-deputization

agreement with the neighboring Allegan County Sheriff's Office that allowed officers of the GLT Public Safety Department to provide service to tribal members and to assist local law enforcement and community members when needed.² Officers respond to calls for service outside of the tribal lands based upon the sheriff's office's "closest unit" policy, which assigns the nearest responding law enforcement units to calls for service. GLT public safety officers have a wide range of responsibilities—they might enforce tribal laws governing hunting and trespassing one day, state laws involving nontribal citizens the next, and federal felonies the day after that.



Members of the Gun Lake Tribal Council meet with Senior Public Safety Office Dennis Wilkins (*left*) and Public Safety Director Richard Rabenort (*right*).

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1. Herb Woerpel, "Gun Lake Tribal Police Gain Certification to Enforce Federal, State, Local Laws," M Live, June 13, 2011, http://www.mlive.com/penaseeglobe/index.ssf/2011/06/gun_lake_tribal_police_gain_ce.html.
 2. Woerpel, "Gun Lake Tribal Police" (see note 1).

Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee

The Tribal Council established the Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee (LEAC) by motion in 2009 to guide the creation of the Public Safety Department. Historically, many tribal communities have had strained or negative experiences with law enforcement agencies due to cultural differences and barriers, as well as discriminatory or culturally insensitive policing practices. The Gun Lake Tribal Council designed the LEAC, and approved its bylaws, to ensure that tribal members had a voice in developing a law enforcement agency that would meet tribal cultural and community needs. Its members have longstanding relationships with county law enforcement and government, which have helped build relationships between the GLT Public Safety Department and local law enforcement. Similar committees in other tribes focus to varying extents on officer oversight, future initiatives, or community outreach.

Figure 1. Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee membership



Gun Lake's LEAC comprises eight members: two tribal citizens; representatives from the Tribal Health Department, the Tribal Business Board, and the Tribal Court; the Tribal administrator, the Tribal Council vice chairman; and the Public Safety director. The committee changes membership at regular intervals, which allows tribal members to gain expertise and offer insights, and also ensures continuous, accurate representation of the tribal community. The tribal citizens on the council are appointed for four-year terms, while the tenures of other seats are named in the committee bylaws by position. Tribal citizens who are interested in sitting on the committee submit letters of interest to sitting committee members, and the committee recommends appointees to the Tribal Council. The LEAC meets quarterly for a report on departmental operations, including staffing, training, and proposed policies, procedures, and initiatives.

Transparency in all areas is a priority for the Public Safety Department. To this end, the Public Safety Department submits monthly reports to the Tribal Council. The Tribal Council holds quarterly meetings, open to tribal members, which include updates on governmental department operations, including public safety. The presence of Tribal Council representatives on the LEAC aids in communication and transparency. Additionally, to support accountability separate from the LEAC, the Public Safety Department presents a report on staffing and departmental updates, with relevant statistics, at the yearly tribal membership meeting.

The LEAC serves as a liaison and resource for the Tribal Council, the community, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The LEAC works with the Public Safety Department on recruiting officers, developing incident action plans, and promoting communication between the department and the community. These activities help keep agency decisions responsive to tribal community needs.

Importantly, the Tribal administrator, who is the equivalent of a city or county administrator, serves on the LEAC and has an open-door policy with the Public Safety director. The Tribal administrator also holds biweekly to monthly meetings with the directors of all government departments, including Public Safety, at which they develop strategies to address issues within the department, plan for upcoming events, and determine future resource requirements.

Successes

The LEAC's first success was establishing the Gun Lake Tribe Public Safety Department in 2011 and overseeing its growth from two members to 15 sworn officers. The LEAC's guidance on department mission, values, and priorities provides a good example of participatory governance, consistent with the philosophy of community policing.

Recently, in an effort to strengthen ties among Gun Lake Tribe citizens, government staff, and law enforcement, the LEAC assisted in choosing the Public Safety Department's new motto of "Keeping Our Community Safe and Strong,"

which is proudly displayed on all of the GLT's marked police vehicles. The committee also successfully assisted with redesigning the Public Safety Department's new police cars, badges, patch, and logo. The new patch more prominently features the word "police" to ensure that citizens recognize officers. The patch also highlights the tribe's logo and is meant to be more community-friendly, featuring blue tones rather than dark gray.

The Public Safety Department developed and implemented a strategic plan in collaboration with the full GLT Tribal Council and LEAC. This plan addresses routine and emergency scenarios that the Public Safety Department may encounter in the community. The LEAC and Public Safety Department evaluate the plan yearly to sustain successes and improve service to the tribe.

Challenges

The LEAC has faced relatively few challenges; it enjoys the support of the Tribal Council and has been well integrated into the Public Safety Department's functions since the department's creation.

Committee members note that the main challenge the LEAC faced during its inception was finding someone experienced in police work to serve as an advisor. This advisor was intended to provide knowledge of standard

police operations and procedures, as well as the elements needed to create a successful police department. A committee member at the time worked for a police department and asked the former police chief to serve as an advisor and consultant on the committee, to which the chief agreed.

The main challenge the committee continues to face in sustaining its work is finding a time to meet that works for all the members. The committee has no set schedule, but rather meets when everyone is available. Regular meetings are essential to address issues as they arise and to ensure that the Public Safety Department continues to uphold the values of the tribal community.

The LEAC has not had trouble recruiting members. Each time a vacant seat has been advertised, the committee has always had numerous responses from tribal citizens.

Moving forward

The Gun Lake Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee will continue to advise the Public Safety Department on community concerns and considerations, and will work with the department on strategic planning. The committee has no major initiatives at this time, but plans to highlight new officers to the department, including the new K-9 officer.



Members of the Gun Lake Tribal Council meet with Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing team members Jennifer Styles (second from left), Tarrick McGuire (third from right), Emma Wohl (second from right), and Terry Gainer (right).



A public safety officer spends time with tribal youth at Camp Jijak.



A structure stands on Gun Lake Tribal lands.

Lessons for Other Agencies

An agency organizing a Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee (or nontribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee) should consider the following:

- **Establish well-defined goals and responsibilities.**

The GLT Law Enforcement Advisory Committee was established to guide the creation of the Public Safety Department. Agencies should consider what precise role the committee will play—whether it serves as a liaison to the community, reviews proposed policies, or plays a more hands-on role in guiding departmental operations. Ensuring that the committee has a well-defined role in relation to the law enforcement department will contribute to a positive working relationship between the committee and department and increase the likelihood that the committee will see sustained success.

Tribal communities may consider creating a Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee to address community concerns that law enforcement is not responsive to community needs, to guide the process of creating a new department, or to ensure transparency of their community's law enforcement agency.

- **Include community members on the committee.** The committee should include various stakeholders who can accurately represent the community, including representatives from business, health, and education

and interested community members. The committee should also include a member well versed in law enforcement operations who can provide subject matter expertise and insight into standard and innovative policing practices. This committee member will ensure that recommendations and strategies put forth from the committee are feasible; he or she may also guide the logistics of implementing new strategies developed by the committee.

- **Include tribal citizens on the committee.** Gun Lake Tribal Law Enforcement Advisory Committee members feel that it is important to have tribal citizens sit on the committee because they offer insight on how the tribal community operates and the cultural values that each officer should embrace. Agencies interested in creating a committee should consider all the groups that make up their community and include community members, business owners, health and social services organizations, and government executives, if possible. A diverse group of committee members will better serve the department's community and its members' needs. Tribal and nontribal police officers need to take into account the community's values and adopt procedures that respect those values.

About CNA

CNA is a not-for-profit research and analysis organization based in Arlington, Virginia. The organization pioneered the field of operations research and analysis 75 years ago and, today, applies its efforts to a broad range of national security, defense, and public interest issues, including education, homeland security, public health, and justice. CNA applies a multidisciplinary, field-based approach to helping decision makers develop sound policies, make better informed decisions, enhance public safety, and lead more effectively.

The Gun Lake Tribe, or Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians of Michigan, established its Law Enforcement Advisory Committee in 2009 to guide the establishment of its Public Safety Department. The Committee continues to ensure that tribal members have a voice in the department's policies and planning. This Spotlight report outlines the process of forming an advisory committee, its membership and duties, and advice for other agencies considering similar programs.

This series of Spotlights highlights innovative programs implemented in progressive police agencies across the country. These reports showcase best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; approaches to gun violence; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime.



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