

**Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing**

**November 19, 2009**

**Testimony of Nancy Dooley, Educational Administrator**

**Gila River Indian Community**

**Department of Rehabilitation & Supervision – Juvenile Division**

**Sacaton, Arizona**

Chairman Dorgan, Vice Chairman Barrasso, and Members of the Committee, my name is Nancy Dooley, and I am the Educational Administrator for the Gila River Department of Rehabilitation & Supervision-Juvenile Division (the “DRSJD”). I have worked for the Community for ten (10) years. I would like to thank this Committee for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Department and the Community regarding our shared dedication to the Community’s youth.

To start, the Gila River Indian Community (the “Community”) has a total of 19,000 members. The Community’s jurisdiction extends over approximately 600 square miles and is located in Maricopa and Pinal Counties in Arizona. The Community shares its borders with the City of Phoenix, Chandler, Coolidge, Casa Grande, Maricopa and Queen Creek. With such close proximity to these cities, the Community’s challenges are unique and range from encroachment of the Community boundaries due to urban growth to the influence of urban gang culture in the Community. The influence of gang culture has expanded to 20 documented gangs operating within the Reservation and estimated gang membership of over 200 individuals, ranging from ages 11-24 years old. To combat this influence and to address the many other challenges that come along with gangs, the Community has continued to develop its tribal criminal justice system which includes the Community Court, Law Office, Defense Services Office, Police Department, Probation Department, Human Services Department, Tribal Social Services and Detention Facilities.

The DRS manages two (2) detention facilities located within the Reservation. The adult detention facility is 97,000 square feet, employs 97 staff members and can detain 224 inmates. The juvenile detention facility is 35,000 square feet, employs 56 staff members and can house 106 juveniles. In 2008, the DRSJD had a total of 156 youth that were detained, 104 males and 52 females. The adult detention facility was completed in 2001 and the juvenile facility was completed in 2003. The construction cost for both facilities was \$37.8 million dollars, with a federal contribution of \$9.8 million. Originally, the federal funding was intended to design a misdemeanor minimal security detention facility, but the reality for the Community is that we have violent offenders and require a higher level of security in the facility. The operating budget

for both facilities in 2007 was \$9.0 million dollars, including a federal contribution of \$3.1 million dollars.

My testimony today will directly speak to the Community's efforts to combat gangs through youth rehabilitation efforts.

The mission of the DRS is to uniformly and consistently serve the Community's need for security and safety as well as to address the rehabilitation needs of our residents. In order to accomplish our mission, DRSJD believes in providing our youth with the knowledge to make lifelong choices of change. We seek to guide the individual toward fulfilling his/her role within the Community by respecting and complying with its values, laws, and codes of behavior for the greater good of the Community and by acknowledging the strength and sacredness of the family and its cultural values. DRSJD provides numerous opportunities and programs to Community residents by focusing on education and counseling.

## **Education**

Residents are placed into classes depending on their age, grade, class space and academic ability. Each class has a maximum of seven (7) residents to facilitate better learning and to provide a safer environment for the staff. Gang affiliation is not a consideration for placement, as interaction among the residents regardless of gang affiliation is important to foster a community environment that is free of labels. Classrooms, like Residents' living pods, provide a lesson in tolerance and acceptance.

The education curriculum follows the State of Arizona standards and includes reading, math, social studies, science, and language arts. DRSJD offers either a high school diploma or GED testing for residents and, on average, 12 to 15 Residents receive their 8<sup>th</sup> grade certificate or high school diploma or GED completion each year. As part of our social studies curriculum, we follow the curriculum, "We the People" that is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Using this curriculum, we have a student council so the Residents can learn the federal, state and tribal government process.

DRSJD recognizes that looking to the future of the residents is important; that is why we include training for job related skills including concrete work, block work, painting, general construction, culinary arts and agriculture. The O'odtham people are culturally agrarian. Thus to continue the tradition, culture farming is offered to the residents on the grounds of the facility. Annual crops include zucchini, squash, and citrus, and this produce is incorporated into the meals and diet of the Residents.

Diabetes is epidemic on the Reservation and the DRSJD provides diabetes prevention education. Physical fitness as an important part of our program, and the residents have one hour of daily exercise that ties in the diabetes prevention with good choices in nutrition. We have an extensive cardiovascular room and equipment. Each resident is placed on a fitness routine for their individual needs such as if they need to lose weight, develop upper body strength or endurance. The facility has exercise equipment and weights as well as a playing field. We also provide lessons in personal hygiene and grooming to residents.

DRSJD's effort to educate Residents is paying off. Former graduates are attending the Scottsdale Culinary School, attending the fire department academy and becoming smoke jumpers, enlisting in the military, and becoming better parents by using the skills they learned in the counseling sessions offered.

## **Counseling**

The Community believes that counseling Residents is an important part of the rehabilitation process. Counseling allows the residents to understand their behavior so that they may make better decisions. DRSJD offers group and individual sessions that are facilitated by counselors. Programs work with the Residents to understand why they are in custody, deal with their anger and other feelings, and teach accountability, positive action and means to changing behavior, and includes the use of spirituality and traditional counselors. DRSJD also provides counseling services for Residents that have been convicted of sex offenses and alcohol abuse. Over the years, we have had both success stories, as well as tragedies. We have those that continue to stay

in touch with staff, either to let us know what they are doing and that they are doing well or those that are having problems and calling for advice. One young man that was with us at different times due to his gang activity was accepted into the forest fire fighting program took the extra step to become a Smoke Jumper and was enjoying his new found career, and asked if he could talk to the residents and let them know that they can make it and that they don't have to stay on the path that they are on and that change is possible.

## **Effectiveness**

Through my work over the past ten (10) years, I have seen a number of residents come into DRSJD for various charges from runaway behavior to homicide. About 95% of the residents that come to DRSJD are gang members. When I first started working with the Community, it took me a number of years to fully understand the impact of gangs on the Community and youth. I was shocked and found it difficult to hear that many of the Residents would often say that they did not believe that they would live past 20 years of age, but listening to many of the stories over the years, now I understand why. Residents are being exposed to gang culture at a very young age and often have parents who are gang members too. A particular resident shared his story with me about how he joined a gang when he was 9 years old. Both of his parents were gang members. Unfortunately, his parents were in and out of prison and he was mostly raised by his grandmothers. As his initiation into the gang, he was given a gun to shoot at a rival gang member and was "jumped in," or physically beaten, by 13 other gang members. After, he chose his gang name; he explained that he believed the gang would be the family that he never had.

Since that time, this young man has been involved in multiple shoot outs with rival gang members. He has been stabbed 7 different times and been shot. He has participated in transporting drugs and illegal status individuals from Mexico. His story is similar to many other stories, in that despite all the efforts and programs that are offered, there remain many social problems that lead a young person right back to gang life after being released from DRSJD. However, the philosophy of DRSJD programs is to provide young people with better skills and tools to make lifelong choices of change, so although this young man did not "reform" or leave his gang, being in DRSJD has provided him, in his own words, with "attention from staff, school

and an opportunity to reflect on his future.” The difficult reality is that most gang members will not leave the gang for fear of retaliation, and sadly because they do not believe they have that option. Attempts to leave the gang are mostly accomplished by moving away from the Reservation or otherwise distancing themselves from the gang lifestyle.

### **Cooperative Efforts**

The Community is working diligently to address the gang activity by not only addressing illegal activity, but also take preventative and intervention steps to address the problem. Preventative measures include the Gila River Police Department forming a specialized group of police officers called the Community Service Unit (the “CSU”) that reaches out to Community members and provides information and presentations about identifying signs of gang affiliation to parents, schools and teachers for early intervention. CSU also administers a graffiti abatement program whereby convicted gang members are required to paint over graffiti in the Reservation. With all the programs offered by DRSJD, there has been a reduction in recidivism. In 2008, of the 156 youth there were detained, only 34 were previously detained more than once in the facility, which is a 21% recidivism rate. This is a vast improvement from previous years, such as in 2003 in which the recidivism rate was 78%.

Mr. Chairman and other Members of the Committee, we hope this information is helpful, and we stand ready to provide any other information or assistance you may request.