CHAIRPERSON JAMES:

I think we're missing a few speakers, I'm just going to go through the list and see who we have.
MR. THOMAS: Good afternoon. I am Chief Sachem Matthew Thomas of the Narragansett Indian Tribe. We are the indigenous Native American people of the State of Rhode Island, and a tribe of about 2,500 members. We've been a federally recognized tribe since about 1983 and our reservation lands are in Charlestown.

My goal this afternoon is to report to you on the impact of poverty, joblessness and the social ills suffered by members of my tribe. We currently administer 15 Bureau of Indian Affairs funded social service and training programs and health planning under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. All of these programs are under funded. The Narragansetts have no economic means to supplement the federal dollars we receive.

The economic situation for the Narragansett is not good. While the average per capita income for a Rhode Islander was $15,000, according to a 1990 census, for a Narragansett it was only 60 percent of that figure, or $9,000. This is an undue burden for my people to endue during this day and age.
It is important that since 1996, the Narragansetts have been deprived of a right which Congress afforded recognized tribes under the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, the right to establish and operate gaming facilities on tribal lands. When we announced our plans to build and open a gaming facility on our reservation in 1992, under IGRA, the state sued us. We won. So what did the state representatives do, they changed the law. This discrimination is particularly unjust when viewed against the success of the Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos in Connecticut.

I understand that many of you visited Foxwoods last evening as part of your view of Native American gaming establishments. In 1997, about $943 million was wagered at the two Connecticut casinos on slot machines alone. The Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan tribes are prospering from their endeavors, as is the state of Connecticut, which received $242 million last year from these two casinos as part of a revenue sharing agreement. It is estimated that one of every three dollars wagered at Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun was wagered by a Rhode Islander, neither the Narragansett Tribe or the state of Rhode Island benefit from that.
As I mentioned earlier, a legislative rider proposed by Senator John Chaffee was enacted as part of an omnibus appropriations bill in 1996. That rider eliminates our reservation for the purposes of IGRA. It appears that the priority of Rhode Island's governor is the protection of the two casinos at Newport and Lincoln, despite the repeated polls conducted by our tribe showing that Rhode Islanders strongly support a Narragansett operated gaming facility.

The governor has stated on numerous occasions that we should subject ourselves to Rhode Island law and take the issue of a Narragansett gaming facility before the voters. When we recently announced our intention to do just that, Governor Almond went on record saying he would do all he could do to see that we are defeated. We seek fairness, we get discriminated against.

And finally, when this Commission reports to Congress, please draw a clear distinction between Las Vegas gambling and Indian gaming. Tribes, much like states, are sovereign governments obligated to provide for the health and well-being of our citizens. And like states, we tribes must find ways to pay for the services and programs we provide.
The United States has a Constitutional sacred trust responsibility to preserve tribal governments and Indian people. Nationally, Indian gaming has given tribes the resources needed to better ensure the success of their members. The Narragansetts ask for no less for our children and our future generations.

Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON JAMES: Thank you.