

IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY 2026 FINALIST

Focus Area

Family

Michigan Indian Legal Services, Inc.

www.mils3.org

INITIATIVE

Gikendaasowin Guide: The MILS ChatBot and Legal Navigator

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(from Meet the Finalists)

Michigan Indian Legal Services (MILS) seeks support to launch the *Gikendaasowin Guide*, a culturally grounded, AI-enabled legal navigator designed with and for Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (GTB) citizens across the five-county service region. Available 24/7 and built for voice access, the Guide will help community members and families understand and act on urgent legal issues involving tribal law, child welfare, housing, and protective orders.

Rural attorney shortages and the complexity of overlapping tribal, state, and federal systems leave many Native families without timely, practical legal guidance. The *Gikendaasowin Guide* will convert dense tribal codes, procedures, and court opinions into plain-language explanations, guided forms, and clear attorney intake pathways—meeting people at the moment they need help and strengthening their ability to self-advocate safely and effectively.

With grant support from Impact100 Traverse City, MILS will create a replicable digital justice model that can be sustained through modest ongoing operating costs and adapted for all 12 federally recognized Tribes in Michigan down the road. By combining legal accuracy, cultural grounding, and accessible technology, the *Gikendaasowin Guide* will reduce barriers to justice, protect families, and advance Tribal sovereignty through community-centered legal empowerment.

The following sections contain information from the application, as written by the applicant. While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough review and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our eligibility requirements.

ORGANIZATION'S VISION STATEMENT

MILS envisions a time when all Native Americans and community members have ready access to legal services to meet their basic needs and where everyone can enjoy their rights and be treated fairly in their pursuit of justice.

ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of MILS is to improve the lives of Native American peoples, families, and communities through legal assistance and advocacy at no charge for those who are income-eligible for services. MILS is a specialized law office that serves the unique legal needs of the members of the native communities in Michigan to: 1. protect families and cultural practices, 2. secure fundamental rights and access to basic needs, and 3. challenge policies and practices that are harmful to our clients and client communities.

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY

Michigan Indian Legal Services (MILS) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit legal aid organization providing free civil legal assistance to individuals and families who otherwise could not afford an attorney. As a Native-led organization, MILS advances safety, stability, and self-determination for Native people and tribal communities across Michigan. For more than five decades, MILS—headquartered in Traverse City—has delivered culturally grounded advocacy at the intersection of poverty law, tribal law, and federal Indian law, so clients are not denied justice because of income, geography, or jurisdictional complexity. Founded in 1975 following a study by the Michigan Governor's Commission on Indian Affairs, MILS was created to close a documented "justice gap" for Native people—many of whom lacked access to attorneys trained in federal Indian law and tribal jurisdiction. In its early decades (1975–2000), MILS strengthened tribal sovereignty and supported non-recognized tribes pursuing federal recognition, including work with the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa in the late 1970s. As tribal governments gained greater economic capacity (2000–present), MILS expanded to meet rising demand for direct representation. Since 2007, MILS has focused most of its work on representation within tribal court systems—protecting families, housing stability, and due process where specialized counsel is scarce. MILS provides legal services that are often unavailable through other free legal aid programs—yet are essential to keeping families together, stabilizing housing, and protecting rights in tribal and federal forums. MILS prioritizes matters involving tribal law and federal Indian law (e.g., the Indian Child Welfare Act, tribal housing, Jay Treaty issues, and tribal court child welfare cases). Few Michigan attorneys practice in this area and MILS is the only legal aid that does. MILS primarily serves tribal members and others who live and work in Michigan's tribal communities. · Michigan is home to 12 federally recognized tribes, each with distinct communities, courts, and legal needs. · According to the 2020 Census, approximately 2.5% of Michigan residents identify as Native American or Alaska Native; Michigan ranks among the top 10 states nationally by Native population. · Services are generally reserved for households with income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. · Many clients live in remote, rural areas of the Upper Peninsula and Northern

Lower Michigan. MILS maintains an in-person presence in tribal communities to build trust and reduce access barriers. MILS is governed by a 10-member Board of Trustees structured by bylaws to ensure strong community accountability and compliance with Legal Services Corporation (LSC) requirements. Attorney trustees are appointed by the State Bar of Michigan, and at least 33% of trustees must be client-income eligible. Nine of the ten Board members are Native American, including six citizens of federally recognized tribes. Executive Director Cameron Ann Fraser is a citizen of the Delaware Tribe and Cherokee Nation, and the majority of staff members are Native American—strengthening trust, cultural alignment, and informed decision-making. MILS delivers client-centered, trauma-informed representation grounded in cultural, historical, and jurisdictional knowledge—so clients can navigate complex systems with an advocate who understands both the law and the community context. Guided by Seventh Generation teachings, MILS prioritizes long-term well-being and works alongside clients to pursue outcomes rooted in dignity, safety, and cultural values. MILS maintains a statewide presence through regular office hours in tribal communities and urban Indian centers, including outreach throughout the Upper Peninsula. Ongoing needs assessments and long-standing partnerships help ensure services remain responsive and trusted; philanthropic support helps sustain this presence and ensures specialized counsel is available when families face urgent legal crises. MILS is supported through a diversified mix of federal, state, tribal, foundation, and private funding. Federal support represents a substantial share and includes grants from the Legal Services Corporation; the U.S. Department of Justice (including TCCLA and historically VAWA/VOCA); and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (including ANA and CSBG). MILS also receives state and foundation support, including the Michigan State Bar Foundation (IOLTA/state filing fees and special project grants) and the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation. In addition, MILS partners with multiple Michigan tribes through service contracts and court appointments. Private philanthropy remains essential to sustaining specialized staffing, rural outreach, and timely representation—flexible resources that help MILS respond quickly when clients face high-stakes legal emergencies.

COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

The glow of the laptop was the only light in Elara's kitchen at 2:00 a.m. Papers covered her table—an eviction notice for housing on tribal trust land and dense printouts of Michigan tenant law that felt like a foreign language. Every "general" legal website told her the same thing: standard state landlord-tenant law applied. But Elara knew better. She lived on her tribe's ancestral land, where state rules don't always cross the reservation line. "If only the law spoke Anishinaabemowin," she whispered. She clicked the chat icon on the Michigan Indian Legal Services website. "Aanii," it greeted her. "I am the Gikendaasowin Guide. How can I help you today?" Elara typed slowly: "I live on the GTB reservation. My landlord is trying to evict me but gave me papers for state court. Is that right?" The response was immediate—and different. The Guide: "Jurisdiction on trust land is complex. In most cases, state courts do not have authority over housing disputes on tribal trust property. Under the Grand Traverse Band (GTB) Tribal Code, this matter likely belongs in Tribal Court. Would you like the specific housing provisions that apply?" For the first time in days, Elara felt her chest loosen. Her google search knew everything about the world—but nothing about her home. She asked one more question: "Does the Michigan Indian Family Preservation Act

affect my housing situation if I have foster children?” The Guide: “MIFPA provides heightened protections to keep Indian families together. If housing instability threatens a placement, MILS may be able to intervene. Based on your location and income, you likely qualify to speak directly with an attorney.” A link to an intake form appeared. Elara didn’t just have information—she had a path. The Gikendaasowin Guide is designed to provide that same clarity and relief to community members across Northern Michigan. It will primarily serve citizens of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (GTB) and their families who live, work, or interact with the GTB Tribal Court system. For this project, the service area aligns with Impact100 Traverse City’s five-county region—Grand Traverse, Antrim, Leelanau, Benzie, and Kalkaska—where many GTB citizens reside and where Michigan Indian Legal Services has deep community ties. The Guide will be co-designed by GTB citizens serving on the MILS team and advisory committee. It reflects Anishinaabe values, cultural protocols, and the realities of navigating overlapping tribal, state, and federal legal systems in a largely rural region. While accessible anywhere by phone or computer, the tool’s content, referrals, and explanations are tailored to this region and its courts. It is intentionally built to reach underserved community members—those with low incomes, limited transportation or broadband access, lower legal literacy, disabilities, or those seeking discreet, after-hours help. By offering plain-language guidance, voice controls, checklists, and GTB-specific pathways in one place, the Gikendaasowin Guide makes culturally grounded legal help more reachable across the GTB service area.

NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED AND GAPS IN EXISTING SERVICES

The GTB community faces a significant and worsening access-to-justice gap driven by a critical shortage of legal professionals serving Tribal courts. Michigan faces a critical shortage of legal representation, and the problem is accelerating. Across Michigan’s 12 Tribal Courts, the number of practicing attorneys is only about half of what is needed. In rural northern Michigan, the gap is especially stark: in 2023, Grand Traverse County had just 472 attorneys, while neighboring counties reported as few as six. At the same time, the legal workforce is rapidly aging—over 40% of Michigan’s active attorneys are age 60 or older—and the State Bar is projected to shrink by nearly one-third over the next decade. For MILS these trends have created an unsustainable strain. Client intakes and direct appointment requests continue to rise and traditional staffing models can no longer meet the demand. Without intervention, the justice gap for the GTB community will widen. GTB Citizens, particularly families with children, elders, survivors of domestic violence, and individuals facing housing instability, often encounter significant barriers when navigating Tribal child welfare, eviction, and domestic violence-related laws. These legal areas have direct and profound impacts on family stability, personal safety, and housing security—key determinants of long-term community wellness. Yet many community members face significant barriers to legal representation, leading to high rates of self-representation, procedural confusion, and increased strain on Tribal courts and staff. You can’t have “access to justice” if you can’t find the law. The Gikendaasowin Guide addresses this gap by providing plain-language legal triage, step-by-step procedural guidance, and access to relevant forms, checklists, and explanations. By helping users navigate the court system more confidently, the tool will reduce pressure on limited legal and judicial resources. There remains a critical gap in on-demand, plain-language legal education tools that empower community members to understand Tribal child welfare, eviction, and domestic violence laws before issues escalate. Without accessible information, vulnerable individuals are

more likely to delay action, misunderstand processes, or disengage from systems designed to protect them. The proposal addresses this gap by providing a secure, culturally grounded, and user-friendly platform with 24/7 access to accurate, non-legal-advice information on key Tribal laws and procedures. The chatbot will cover: 1. Child welfare processes, parental rights, hearings, and support services 2. Eviction prevention, tenant and landlord responsibilities, and court timelines 3. Domestic violence protections, including protective orders, safety planning resources, and referral pathways By offering consistent, plain-language explanations and directing users to appropriate Tribal departments and emergency resources, the chatbot supports early understanding, prevention, and informed decision-making. This initiative enhances existing services by reducing informational barriers, supporting trauma-informed access to justice, and allowing Tribal legal staff to focus on urgent and complex matters. By improving access to trustworthy legal information in high-impact areas, the Chatbot will strengthen families, enhance safety, and build trust in Tribal systems. This initiative represents a sustainable, transformational investment in community education, prevention, and justice—creating lasting benefits for GTB citizens and future generations.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

The Chatbot will be designed for long-term viability, transitioning from a grant-funded innovation to a core pillar of Michigan Indian Legal Services' (MILS) service delivery. Our sustainability strategy relies on three pillars: financial integration, operational efficiency, and a proven history of scaling technology. Impact100 Traverse City's investment serves as the essential catalyst for development. Once launched, the chatbot will require low, predictable maintenance costs for hosting and content monitoring. MILS will absorb these expenses into our annual operating budget via indirect cost pools, ensuring the tool remains active without a perpetual need for project-specific grants. Operationally, the chatbot is not a "side project"; it will be embedded into our existing workflows. By automating responses to routine jurisdictional and procedural inquiries, the tool reclaims significant staff capacity. This "efficiency dividend" allows our attorneys to focus on complex litigation while the chatbot provides 24/7 foundational support, effectively paying for itself through optimized human resources. This initiative serves as a proof-of-concept. Following the grant period, MILS will leverage the chatbot's success to pursue justice-innovation and Native-led technology grants. Our goal is to scale the content from the initial focus areas to include all 12 federally recognized tribes in Michigan, ensuring the infrastructure created today benefits the entire state in perpetuity. MILS has a demonstrated history of successfully transitioning pilot programs into permanent services.

1. Technology Modernization: In 2025, we successfully launched a Statewide Online Intake system. This mobile-friendly platform transformed our delivery model, allowing us to reach tribal members in all 83 Michigan counties—a shift we have sustained through internal budgeting and strategic staffing.
2. Scaling Innovation: In 2024, we piloted a Tribal Court Attorney program with the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians to solve chronic attorney shortages. This model was so successful it is now a permanent fixture of our tribal court infrastructure.
3. National Recognition: Our ability to balance digital expansion with community trust earned MILS a "Model Practice" designation from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) in 2024. Furthermore, our selection to host the NLADA's 2026 Client & Community Advocacy Fellowship underscores our capacity to lead and sustain community-integrated legal tools. By maintaining culturally grounded content and using data-driven feedback from our standing Advisory Committee, we ensure the chatbot remains an essential resource. Impact100's support will build the

foundation for a permanent digital advocate that strengthens families and expands equitable access to justice for generations to come.

