

My Hope for Oneida's Enrollment

A Sustain Oneida White Paper

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## INTRODUCTION

Oneida's enrollments are in decline. For the first time ever, more Oneidas are passing away and leaving the Nation than eligible new members are being enrolled. The root problem is blood quantum, which requires new members to maintain 1/4 Oneida blood. While this may seem like a new issue, the devious seed was planted several decades ago. Today, we witness the results in our decreasing eligible enrollment numbers, and we must decide how to respond. If we do nothing, we are a mere century away from our existence being threatened due to little/no members, and we will certainly no longer be here in seven generations. Thankfully, we are in *full* control to decide our fate and ensure Oneida's continued existence for the generations and centuries ahead.

To understand the blood quantum problem, each of us only needs to look at our own family trees. Each is rooted in a matriarch/patriarch that is a full-blood Oneida and dates to our original census in 1935. Those members had children, the majority with non-Oneidas, so our Baby Boomers are largely 1/2 Oneida blood. Their children are the Gen X and Millennial Oneidas. Again, Baby Boomer parents mostly married non-Oneidas, so their children's blood quantum is 1/4<sup>th</sup>, the minimum required. This is where the predictable problem arises as today's youth fall to 1/8 blood quantum, or less, and are no longer enrollable. Of course, there are exceptions, and your family may be a generation behind/ahead of schedule. But it's vital to understand, we're all walking on this same path.

By the time a third generation introduces a non-Oneida parent, the bloodline is lost under our current enrollment criteria. Each year that passes, Oneidas continue to have children that are not enrollable and more family lines come to an end. We cannot afford to idly delay this conversation or fear making the wrong choice. I write today to:

1. Convince you that our current enrollment criteria is not in the best interest of Oneidas today, tomorrow, nor seven generations from now.
2. Suggest solutions and share what other Native nations have done to address membership sustainability.
3. Ask you to lend your voice to find a solution that both achieves membership sustainability and addresses the concerns and needs of our current membership.

## WHO IS KEITH DOXTATOR?

I'm Keith Doxtator, the grandson of Hudson Doxtator. He was a WWII and Korean War veteran, Oneida code talker, and was one of the last living Oneida-as-a-first-language speakers. He spent the last decade of his life recording countless hours of our language onto cassettes and working with teachers to sustain the language, ensuring it was around and available for future generations.

For three years, I've served as the Director of the Trust Enrollments Department. I've become intimately aware of our Enrollments, the data, and the trends. I've become involved with our Sustain Oneida initiative which began in response to our recognition of decreasing



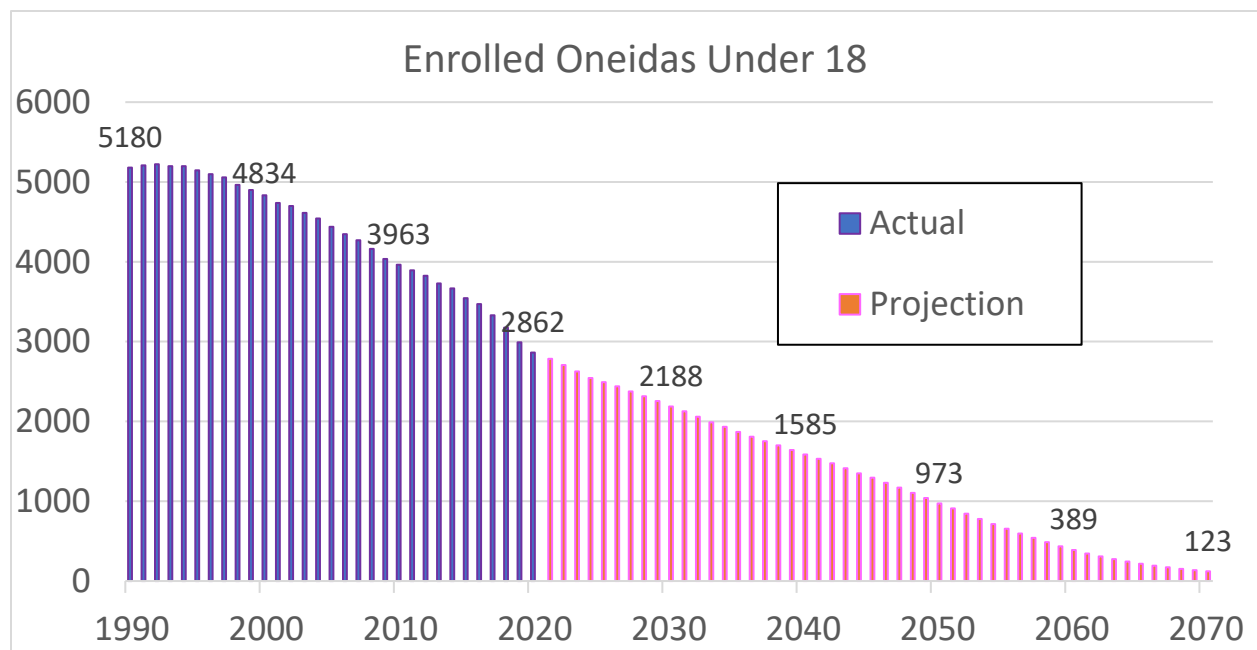
*Hudson Doxtator, my Grandfather*

enrollments and blood quantum. The direction of our enrollments – to put it bluntly – scares me.

Like Grandpa Hudson saw the immediate need for change to save our language, I write today to share it will take an equal and immediate effort from us today to sustain another valuable resource – our population. A language dies when there is no one left to speak it. A Nation dies when it's children cannot be members.

### STATE OF OUR ENROLLMENTS

In 2019, we lost one member, meaning our deaths and relinquishments outnumbered new enrollments by one. In 2020, Oneida lost 35 members. While those numbers may not seem like much to a population of over 17,000, these are just the tip of the iceberg. Treat this as our warning of what's about to happen. The urgency is being masked by our total population figure. The blood quantum problem is amplifying each generation, yet total population measures multiple generations at the same time. To best understand the urgency, we must narrow our population view to a single generation.



Our youth membership topped in 1992 and has been predictably declining since. I was one of those peak 5,253 youth members. I went to school, came back, work for the Nation and now, humbly, I'm doing what I can as a leader of my Department. Can we count on our next generation of kids to fulfill the same employment and leadership duties they will walk into with only half the population?

Our diminishing youth is not sustainable. Not only for employment, but that's half our children to be potentially engaged in our culture, our community, our language, our way of life. Our children will grow to adults, become new parents, become our teachers, become our leaders. Halving the children is halving the new ideas, innovation, and culture. This youth chart will become our population chart... if we let it.

## MORE DESCENDENTS, FEWER ENROLLMENTS

I should clarify, Sustain Oneida is NOT about a sharp decline in our members having children. Oneida's children are simply no longer eligible. Enrollments is now receiving more descendant applications than Enrollment applications. Over the last decade, we received 241 descendant applications each year, compared to only 218 new members annually over the same decade. More of our members children are not enrollable than are.

Additionally, we know many Oneida descendants have simply not filled out the paperwork and paid the fee to become officially recognized as a descendent – why bother? Our demographer projected our actual descendent count may be triple or quadruple of our recognized descendants. For each new Oneida parent holding their enrolled child we have, there's likely a few other Oneidas holding their non-enrollable child.

## A SACRIFICE

With all the information presented, why haven't we done something about blood quantum? There's an unknown impact of what opening and expanding our enrollments will do to our ability to maintain current benefits, and some families haven't begun feeling the pain of blood quantum strong enough yet. Does the fear of sacrificing your financial benefits cause hesitation to preserving our membership? It's certainly a cost, but is maintaining benefits even the goal? Why not open enrollments to all our children engaged in our community, culture and heritage?

To recall my Grandpa Hudson again, he went through extreme sacrifice. He attended the boarding school and was punished for speaking Oneida. I'd imagine the easy choice would have been to disengage from the language and submit to the "kill the Indian, save the man" system. I'm proud to know he didn't give in. His Oneida language proved invaluable to the US Army as a Code Talker and to our Nation's language program to re-introduce it back into our school. If I could ask him about Sustain Oneida, I'm confident he wouldn't blink at any financial sacrifice to ensure his descendants will continue to be Oneida.

## WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Since 2012, Sustain Oneida has been discussing exactly what our blood quantum requirement will do to our population and what potential solutions are available to our Nation. By now, thousands of Oneidas' hours have been invested. We have collected so much data, community feedback, and reliable projections. Our department has hosted 50+ community meetings. I'm optimistic that so many Oneidas have taken this issue seriously, given it the necessary thought, and engaged with our conversations.

## SOLUTIONS

I'll summarize all the proposed solutions into three broad categories: Do nothing, delay for a generation, and fundamentally change our enrollment criteria away from blood quantum. Other Native Nations

across the country have explored and selected each of these three options already. It's time for Oneida to intentionally select which path to take.

#### *Do Nothing – by choice*

The Doing Nothing option could mean we intentionally agree to do nothing. We would accept the path we're on, even if that means enrollments are destined to be zero. While not too many other tribes chose this route, these decisions tend to come from the financially well-off tribes, those that have significant and meaningful individual financial benefits. At some point, we must admit that protecting individual benefits will win at a polling booth over the inclusive community proposals. When that happens, enrollments close and the bottom line for remaining members is maintained or grown. I don't believe Oneida is to this point.

#### *Do Nothing – by inaction*

We must not get stuck in an analysis paralysis phase of investigating, re-investigating, and reviewing projections and finances of each nuanced option, to the point where *NO* option happens. We must not become complacent that discussions are happening and we're inching in the right direction. Sustain Oneida started nearly a decade ago, and we cannot wait another decade. Doing so is an expensive opportunity cost of missing another generation of our members' children not being enrollable.

#### *Do Nothing – by minor change*

We cannot make a minor change and feel like we're done. I hear ideas like accepting other Oneida blood, or all Haudenosaunee blood, or accepting adoptions. Each of these are great and the initial steps to a more inclusive membership. However, don't be fooled to think they will change the trajectory we're on. Each of those ideas result in a one-time boost of a few dozen or few hundred members. That's not solving the problem, that's kicking that can down the road a year or two. They are not addressing the underlying, mathematical extinction that blood quantum requirements are moving us toward.

#### *Do Nothing – The Results*

Whether by choice or inaction, doing nothing results in the same journey. Using Oneida's own Enrollment data, we have a detailed projection of this journey for the next 50 years. Each year, our population declines, fewer new children are enrolled, the average blood quantum decreases and our median age increases. Fifty years from now, in 2070, we'll be down to ~10,000 members, of which about 65% will be elders, and only 100-300 will be children. A century from now, we'll be down to just a few hundred members that are practically all elders. I hope we can all agree that doing nothing is the most dangerous option.

#### *Delay for a Generation*

Some other Tribes have pushed their membership criteria back a generation to allow their first-generation descendants to enroll. These "Bridge the gap" solutions include lowering the needed blood quantum to 1/8<sup>th</sup> or increasing current members' blood quantum. Increases usually apply to elders, i.e., all our 1967 members, may become full blood, so the trickle-down increases keep more children enrollable. The result is the same; there are many 1/8<sup>th</sup> Oneida blood descendants today that would qualify for membership if changed to 1/8<sup>th</sup> or they'd become the needed 1/4<sup>th</sup> blood if their grandparent became full blood.

This change buys us time and could even be repeated indefinitely. However, I don't know if we want to continuously not enroll our children until they grow up and wait for our next decision to buy a generation of time. I wonder how invested our youth will be if they're not enrolled Oneidas until they're adults – age 20, 30, 40, or older. Would we better instill Oneida's values, culture, and language if they were enrolled as children? If so, then let's find a solution that welcomes children immediately.

### *A Fundamental Change*

Addressing the root enrollment problem is to remove our blood quantum requirement altogether. Only a Constitutional change with this type of amendment will ensure our members children will be enrollable forever forward. A simple example would be lineal descent where all members children are eligible for enrollment. An example from other Haudenosaunee Tribes is a matrilineal descent – only Oneida mothers would produce enrollable children. Another example is a Tribe that requires a lineal descendent *plus* community/cultural involvement.

### BENEFITS

Benefits are unrelated to the number of Enrollments, but simultaneously entangled with Enrollments' impact on our numbers. Sustain Oneida started with a simple sounding initiative to specifically address our declining Enrollments. Yet it's proving nearly impossible to address our membership criteria without simultaneously discussing our financial benefits.

I don't have the magic answer to this one, but I am hopeful the solution is coming from our membership. During my time with the Sustain Oneida initiative, it's become crystal clear that most of our members sincerely care about the long-term sustainability of our membership. Further, we can all recognize the obvious – a meaningful change to our Enrollment figure will change our ability to pay financial benefits to each person. Reducing or cutting percaps would be wildly unpopular as a stand-alone idea. But if the concession is made to enroll our children, then I hope we can plan for inclusion and the longer-term community.

Oneida offers so many great programs and benefits to our members, and I'm not suggesting we get rid of those allocated benefit dollars altogether. Instead let's come together, be creative, and prioritize how to reallocate them to fixed expenses tied to improving the community. We could invest in further development, housing, meeting sites, small business incubators, cultural classes, technology, parks, etc. We should still offer social service programs to help those in financial need by offering food, housing/rent, education, clothes, internet, etc. at reduced rates. I implore us all to not view decreasing percaps as a "loss", but rather a "reallocation" to another benefit. Then we can put our minds together and get excited about what else we can accomplish – that's not tied to a membership number.

### CONCLUSION

I wish I could go back and ask Grandpa Hudson what his recommendations are. I'm sure his answer would be enlightening. I recall two of his core values that he instilled in me: Appreciate what you have & Listen to you elders.

Grandpa Hudson grew up during the Great Depression, and he reminded us to appreciate what we have today because it was far more than previous generations had. Perhaps Covid is our century's reminder of this lesson. It's a message to be thankful for all the blessings we have and not to focus on the pain of our wants. Be thankful for our friends and family and the technology to stay connected, for a roof above our heads and food in our stomach, for our health, and that our great Nation has struggled through Covid, but will recover. How does this translate to Sustain Oneida? I think Grandpa Hudson would prioritize the long-term sustainability of our enrollments above all else. He'd separate enrollments from benefits, yes, even if that meant decreasing or cutting percaps. Part of appreciating what we have includes sharing it with our youth and community so it will continue to grow.

The other life lesson from Grandpa Hudson was to respect and listen to our elders. They've walked the paths before and have knowledge and experience to share. In 2018, Trust Enrollments conducted the largest Sustain Oneida survey. It gathered responses from 2,575 Oneidas, or almost 1 in 5 of our adult population. We sorted the data, particularly looking at our elders' opinions. One striking difference emerged. Elders are split about equally on changing our Enrollment criteria (36% support change, 33% oppose, 31% unsure). Compare that to the rest of the surveys – non-elders supported change 2:1 (50% support, 24% oppose, 25% unsure).

It's clear to me that our elder voice is needed to move forward. If any change will come, the elders' vote will be most influential. Throughout my writing, I've made position known: we must make changes to our enrollment criteria now, so Oneida exists one century from now. To our elders, especially those that have other viewpoints ... What fears do you have? What hopes do you have? What variables should we consider? How does this impact you and your family? How do we avoid this mathematical extinction if we don't change? I hope many more Oneidas join our Sustain Oneida conversations, and I'd like to specifically invite our elders to come and share your perspective. I'm all ears to listen and learn; our elders' wisdom is needed now more than ever.

Grandpa Hudson was proud to share knowledge of our language for the sake of future generations. Let's continue to honor that legacy by updating our enrollment criteria for the sake of our future generations as well.

#### CALL TO ACTION

To everyone, if this motivates you to drive change, here are my requests:

- Help spread this initiative. Share this with your family. Print it off for our elders. More minds working together will lead to the best result.
- Have this difficult enrollment conversation with your family – at the dinner table, post-Covid at larger family gatherings, in your social groups. Help get more people up to speed and engaged.
- Share your thoughts with us at [SustainOneida@oneidanation.org](mailto:SustainOneida@oneidanation.org). When it's safe to meet again, the discussion will be on a GTC agenda. Not only will we be presenting the situation, but it would be much more powerful to share the results of dozens of community conversations along with it.
- Finally, when the time comes, vote for the change we require.