



NICWA NEWS

Quarterly Newsletter • Summer/Fall 2025



*The
Lastest Inside:
Guided by
Culture*



NICWA
National Indian Child Welfare Association
Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

National Indian Child Welfare Association

5100 S Macadam Ave., Suite 300
Portland, Oregon 97239
P (503) 222-4044
www.nicwa.org

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) protects the safety, health, and cultural identity of Native children and families today and for future generations. NICWA strengthens tribal capacity to prevent child abuse and neglect, advances policies that uphold tribal sovereignty, and promotes Native-led, culturally grounded approaches to child welfare.

Through advocacy, coalition-building, workforce training, and technical assistance to improve service systems, NICWA works at the tribal, local, state, and national levels to ensure that Native children can thrive within their families and communities.

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3



4



5



6



9

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

2 Policy

6 Author Interview:
Angeline Bouley

3 Inside
NICWA

8 Programs:
Tribal Codes

4 Leading with
Culture

9 Training &
Resources

5 NICWA
Membership

Scan the QR code for
a list of all the links
featured in this edition.



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Message from the Executive Director

Dear NICWA Members, Sponsors, Donors, and Friends,

Regular readers of NICWA News know that I typically use this space at the beginning of each issue to reflect on the theme, which often stems from our National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) values. This issue is no exception. The theme **“Guided by Culture”** sums up the work we — NICWA board, staff, members, partners, and donors — have been doing together for decades. Intentionally established in 1983 as a culturally based organization, our grassroots founding board of directors had the wisdom to look to our Native cultures for guidance about what we should do and how we should go about our work.

Our advocacy and programs are guided by our cultures, and our board and staff talk regularly about how we apply our values and teachings to do the best work we can for the Tribal Nations we serve. As a capacity-building organization, NICWA works at the Tribal, local, state, and national levels to strengthen the interrelated and interdependent networks and systems that support Native children and families. Our work on behalf of Native children and youth responds to changing needs in Indian Country and the evolving context in the child welfare field and in the United States, and our values are our guideposts:

- We believe that our cultures are our strongest resource for helping children and families.
- We believe that Tribal child welfare practice must maintain a cultural and/or spiritual focus.
- We believe that effective practice includes translating the values and principles of traditional teachings into expression today.
- We believe in community-based services designed and delivered by and for local people.
- We advocate to maintain strong Native families.
- We advocate for the preservation of Native cultures.
- We value helping the helper.
- We are committed to cross-cultural competence.
- We seek and support positive, active, and effective Tribal-state relations.
- We believe that the highest priority for child welfare is child safety and well-being.
- We are committed to permanency and value the child’s right to have a family to grow up in and call their own.

As you’ll read about in this issue of NICWA News, these values recently shaped the relaunch of our membership program. NICWA Founder Terry Cross and our board of directors have always believed that a membership association of Tribal Nations, service providers, allies, and individual advocates was central to the identity of NICWA. Over our 40-year history, this has been a keystone that informs our work and champions our advocacy priorities. It has always been part of the vision that NICWA would be a membership organization in service to our community, built on the belief that it is our members who drive our work and help us continue our advocacy on behalf of Indian Country.

As we hear from you year-round, of utmost importance is our shared conviction that our cultures are our greatest resource for helping Native communities, families, and children. I often say that recent social science literature has finally caught up to our ancestral wisdom: a robust and growing body of research now shows that Native cultures are an effective protective factor, a key ingredient in many “helping” programs and services, and a facilitator of healing.

Our ancestors knew this all along!

With gratitude for your service to Native children and families,

Sarah L. Kastelic

Sarah L. Kastelic, PhD, MSW
(Alutiiq)





Congress Running Out of Time to Pass Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2026

With the clock ticking towards the end of the fiscal year on September 30, the House and Senate have been working to pass all 12 of the appropriations bills that determine federal funding for federal agency operations and programs. As of the August congressional recess, there have only been a handful of appropriation bills passed through House or Senate committees.

This has been a pattern since 1998, with Congress unable to pass the 12 necessary appropriations bills before the start of the new fiscal year, instead relying on continuing resolutions (CR) or passing large omnibus spending bills after the new fiscal year starts. For Tribal Nations, especially those with few Tribal funds to support programs when federal funding is delayed, it can spell trouble when appropriations are not passed until late into the new fiscal year.

"For Tribal Nations, especially those with few Tribal funds...it can spell trouble when appropriations are not passed until late into the new fiscal year."

Another complication of the CR or omnibus appropriations process is that it can make it more difficult to advocate for increases to individual programs as the process drags out and omnibus bills combine

multiple federal agencies, hundreds of programs, and hundreds of millions of dollars in a large legislative package. In most cases, CRs or omnibus appropriations bills are focused on larger budget targets rather than individual programs, which result in level funding from the previous year or even reductions.

Appropriations bills that have passed House and Senate Appropriations committees so far include the bill that funds the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) programs and operations. The House Interior Appropriations bill has increases for several BIA Human Services programs, including Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) grants (\$20.2 million), Welfare Assistance (\$80.5 million), and Social Services (\$62.0 million). The Senate Interior Appropriations bill, however, provided the same level of funding as fiscal year 2025, slightly lower than the House Interior Appropriations bill.

As the appropriations process moves forward, Tribal Nations and advocates for Native children and families are encouraged to reach out to their congressional members in the House and Senate and encourage them to support the House Interior Appropriations amounts for BIA Human Services programs. You can find your congressional members contact information [here](#).

Administration for Children and Families Solicits Comments

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is seeking public comment from Tribal Nations and states regarding implementation of several provisions within the new **[Supporting America's Children and Families Act \(P.L. 118-258\)](#)**, which passed last December. The new law provides additional funding for Tribal child welfare programs and court systems, requires collection of new data on states' implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act, provides technical assistance to Tribes and states, and reduces administrative requirements for Tribes under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act child welfare programs.

ACF will use these comments to develop guidance on how Tribal requirements will be implemented, impacting hundreds of Tribal Title IV-B grantees and Native children and families in state child welfare systems. **Comments are due September 22, 2025.** In addition, ACF is holding in-person Tribal consultations at several locations, with the **next session on October 10, 2025**. You can find a Dear Tribal Leader letter with information on the consultations [here](#). NICWA will develop sample comments that will be available on our website in late August, and we strongly encourage all Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations to submit comments or participate in the consultations.

For more information on these policy issues, please contact Mariah Meyerholz at mariah@nicwa.org.



David Simmons: Celebrating 35 Years of Service

David Simmons still remembers his first day at the National Indian Child Welfare Association. Back then, it was called the Northwest Indian Child Welfare Association, and the office was a cubicle in Portland State University's Regional Research Institute under the School of Social Work. David was in his graduate social work program when he began working with NICWA Founder Terry Cross, who was ready to submerge David in the world of all things Indian child welfare. To start – research. In the pre-digital era, this meant sourcing information from the library, and Cross' desk, which held an impressive and daunting collection of documents that seemed to be stacked a foot high.



Two years during his graduate program, and 35 years as a full-time employee is an impressive career in a field that can sometimes feel like an uphill battle. The key to his longevity is recognizing the importance of small changes and building upon that. He also appreciated the opportunity to work alongside Tribal leaders, Indian child welfare advocates, and people with lived experience.

Not many policymakers actually know how their policies will affect communities, but because of the relationships he's built with Native communities over the decades, David is honored to say he can relay those messages effectively. Over the years, he has appreciated the opportunities to visit Tribal communities, build strong relationships, and help realize solutions that were already there. This hands-on experience has helped him gain insight that strengthened his policy work.

It's hard to pinpoint specific career wins when he's spent decades building a foundation of change, but there are moments that shine extra bright, like defeating congressional legislation to repeal ICWA in the 90's or lobbying to provide Tribal Nations with the right to directly operate the Title IV-E program in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. As the director of government affairs and advocacy, he leads a team of government affairs specialists and still has some policy changes that he wants to see made, like Tribes gaining direct access to the Title XX Social Services Block Grant.

**Congratulations to David for reaching this impressive milestone.
We appreciate his hard work and dedication to supporting NICWA!**

A New Face on the NICWA Team: Lacee Shepard

Lacee Shepard is an enrolled Odawa Tribal citizen and a proud Michigander. After earning a bachelor's degree in journalism, she went on to complete a Master of Arts in Strategic Communications from Michigan State University.

Lacee has spent over ten years in the communications field, using storytelling to support public services and strengthen community connection. She later leveraged these skills in a new way with a PNW Native art organization, where she had the opportunity to collaborate with Tribal communities across Turtle Island.

Lacee joined the NICWA team as communications director in July 2025 and is excited to contribute to their important work.



Leading with Culture



NICWA has always “led with culture” in two senses of the phrase. First, we literally started with culture. The founding NICWA board considered our mission of Native child well-being and asked the question,

“What do our cultures teach us about how to raise healthy, spiritually strong Native children and youth?”

NICWA’s earliest programming consisted of curriculum and training for Native parents and Tribal child welfare workers aimed at applying the values and principles of traditional Indigenous worldviews and teachings to the care and nurturing of Native children and culturally based services and supports for their families. Both [Positive Indian Parenting](#) and the Tribal child welfare basics curriculum [Heritage and Helping](#) documented and applied cultural beliefs and teachings practically to support for Native families. Fast forward 40+ years and NICWA’s programming remains anchored in culture.

Second, we lead with culture by putting it out front in all that we do. NICWA’s all-Native [board of directors](#) is a deeply committed group of child advocates that set the direction for our work. Our Annual [Protecting Our Children Conference](#) programming, [ICWA 2050](#) plan, and board-set [policy priorities](#) all hold culturally based services as the cornerstone of helping families.

We support Tribal and urban Indian communities through culturally-based program assessments and technical assistance to decolonize—or re-Indigenize, as our board often says—their programs and services.

Culture is truly the heart of all of our work.



Creating Community Through NICWA Membership

Our founder, leadership, and board have always believed that a membership association of Tribal Nations, service providers, allies, and individual advocates was critical to the organization of NICWA. Over NICWA's 40-year history, this has been a guiding value that informs our work and champions our advocacy priorities. It has always been part of our vision that NICWA would be a membership organization in service to our community, built on the belief that it is our members who drive our work and help us advocate on behalf of Indian Country.

Serving Indigenous communities is sacred work, and we welcome like-minded professionals, allies, and advocates to share your values with us and join our cause by becoming a member of NICWA.

Your expertise, in partnership with our 40+ years of experience, positions us to co-create tools and resources and address advocacy priorities. It is this collaborative partnership that helps us build a strong foundation that safeguards Native children's connections to culture while exercising Tribal sovereignty.

Together, we are building a powerful movement to protect Native children, uplift families, and strengthen Tribal communities. If you believe in the power of collective advocacy and cultural strength, we invite you to deepen your impact by becoming a member of NICWA.

Together, we are unstoppable.

Our new membership levels are:

Sweetgrass Individual Membership

(\$100 for one primary contact,
Elders and Students—\$45 discounted rate)

Cedar Tribal and Organizational Membership

(\$400 for two primary contacts)

Sage Tribal and Organizational Membership

(\$1,000 for four primary contacts)

All membership levels receive the same great benefits. Your membership gives you access to:

- Monthly members-only e-bulletin
- Members-only webinars
- Networking opportunities at the NICWA annual conference
- NICWA News publication
- Recognition in NICWA's annual report and members-only e-bulletin
- 10% discount on online course registration
- \$100 discount on standard in-person NICWA annual conference registration

Have questions about becoming a member? Reach out anytime at membership@nicwa.org or (503) 222-4044.



Author Interview: Angeline Boulley



Angeline Boulley is an accomplished Ojibwe author with two successful novels that tackle topics like Tribal enrollment and biracial identity. When it was announced that her third novel, *Sisters in the Wind*, would be released and centered around the Indian Child Welfare Act, we couldn't wait to learn more.

Ms. Boulley spoke with the National Indian Child Welfare Association's Executive Director, Sarah Kastelic (Alutiiq), about the book and the themes surrounding Native youth, identity, and ICWA that are explored.

Sarah Kastelic: Angeline, on behalf of the National Indian Child Welfare Association, I'm so happy to welcome you to this conversation today, and really excited to talk about your new book, which introduces the topic of the Indian Child Welfare Act, an issue about which our organization is a passionate advocate. I've been looking forward to our conversation today.

Angeline Boulley: Yes, me too.

Sarah Kastelic: Our first question is really just about your thought process. So, what inspired you to create this character, Lucy Smith, who is impacted by the Indian Child Welfare Act?

Angeline Boulley: I think what really drew me to this character is that I wanted to tell Jamie's story. Jamie is a character that was in Firekeeper's Daughter, and he

references having been adopted and kind of mentions a troubled upbringing. I wanted to explore that more, and I wanted someone who would have a connection to the community where all of my stories are rooted in, on Sugar Island, and so I was able to do that. I was really wanting to capture what it is like for a young person to be in this difficult situation and be told - "Oh, don't say [to your social worker] that you're Native, it's going to go a lot easier, smoother if you don't. If you don't bring this up, then it can change how it's viewed by court and social services personnel."

Sarah Kastelic: So you've been thinking about ICWA long before this book. Even as early as your first book in developing Jamie's character, you were already thinking about ICWA and the impact of child removal?

Angeline Boulley: Yes, my career — although it's focused mostly on Indian education — I really have worked with all different types of [Tribal] membership services programs. So, our social services, culture, recreation, elders, you know all of these programs that my Tribe and many other Tribes do. I've been able to work with people and have learned so much over my career that I really wanted to touch on ICWA and how important it is.

Sarah Kastelic: So, you have a lot of personal experience to draw on in working with your community around these issues as you created this character and written the story?

Angeline Boulley: Yes, and you know, I'm very fortunate that I have family members and friends who have gone through the foster care system, good experiences and negative experiences, and that I was able to interview and get that firsthand, first person account of it from different people who've either been a foster parent, or been a foster child or teen. So yeah, I try to do my research diligently and make sure I'm pulling as many first-person perspectives, rather than you know, archived information.

Sarah Kastelic: As a reader, I'll just say it felt like you did both of those things masterfully. Actually, you talked about the Congressional hearings when ICWA was first signed into law, and you also mentioned to me in passing that you read all the amicus briefs that were filed in the Brackeen case recently, and so it feels like you balanced well your approach of first-person narratives and really understanding from human perspectives what this felt like, as well as the really rich archival information that's available about the long history of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

These issues can be really widespread, prevalent issues for our Native communities. The issue of child removal and the long history of people taking our children is referenced in your book. But these issues are also really sensitive and very personal. And so, I was curious about how you approached portraying the cultural, emotional,

and legal challenges related to Native kids in foster care and adoption.

Angeline Boulley: I felt that Lucy Smith, that her story was maybe the most familiar one that we might encounter — Of a teen who hasn't been raised in her community, but finds out or has always known that she's Native, so her connection to the community, her family, it was severed a long time ago. And really, I always want my stories to be about helping teens find their way back home. And so, Lucy was a great opportunity to do that. And I felt that teens in the foster care system, that they might feel similar to Lucy and think, "But I don't know this word [in my Native language], or I'm learning pronunciations. I didn't grow up with this knowledge, but I am hungry for it. I very much want to know it."

Sarah Kastelic: Your book touches on some nearly universal human themes, identity, belonging, loss, and yet you approach these topics through a Native lens. What's your approach to that? What do you draw on?

Angeline Boulley: I draw upon that there can be no one great Native American story because we are not a monolith, and so I look at it as a mosaic of so many different stories that we can tell. And I just want to reach teen readers, and that adult crossover audience, to weave these stories together. All of my stories pull from Native identity and different aspects of it. In previous books, it's been about enrolled and unenrolled Tribal members; in my second book, it was biracial identity, and so looking at a person that maybe might not have that familiarity with their community, but they are still Anishinaabe, and they have a home with us.

Sarah Kastelic: So tell me a little bit about what role you see fiction and storytelling more broadly playing in social justice or legal advocacy.

Angeline Boulley: I find that writing a story in a first-person point of view can immerse a reader in an issue that they didn't know about. It can bring them into that awareness and greater understanding, and it's something that in the book, Lucy can read the Senate hearing reports about the Indian Child Welfare Act, but the reader is reading Lucy's story and how this Act has impacted her. And I think there's a great way to reach people, and that's what makes stories so powerful — is because we can share the parts of our culture and history and contemporary issues that we're comfortable sharing in a way that really is approachable for people who don't have any knowledge in that or background in that issue. And that's the best way to reach people, and to have more people out there questioning, why isn't ICWA always followed? What are the arguments opposed to it? We know that there's such good outcomes when it is followed. So, I think that you can reach so many more people through a memorable story, an engaging story. It can really speak to people's hearts, minds, and really just

help our teens, help our people who are those lost ones and help them find their way back home.

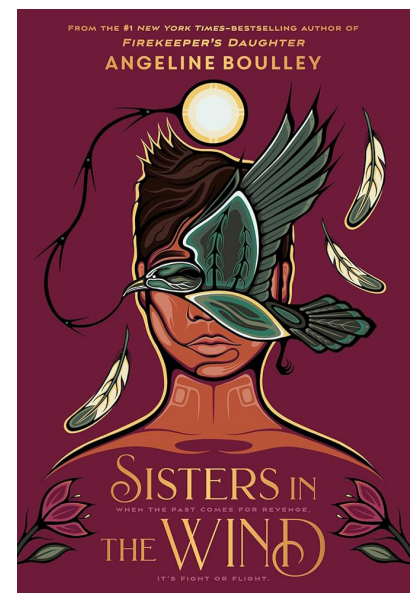
Sarah Kastelic: And lastly, I'll just ask, what do you hope that readers, especially readers that aren't familiar with Native communities and culture, what do you hope they take away from this story — In terms of the importance of Native kids' connection to their extended family, to their community, to their culture?

Angeline Boulley: I would say what I want readers to take away is that the law is there for a reason, and it has the best outcomes when it is followed, and not when it's subverted. And to someone it might be extra paperwork, but to a young person, this could be the connection that gives them strength and a connection with family, and those their family members - they may be waiting and wondering what has happened. We don't forget those lost ones. We know they're out there, and so hopefully, Tribes and communities have a way to welcome people back home.

Sarah Kastelic: The themes you wrote about are so relatable to our work here at the National Indian Child Welfare Association. We get phone calls every week from Native people who are adult adoptees who are trying to find their way back home, to try to find their family, to find their community. It's such a common experience, and you've written about it so eloquently. I feel like it's such a gift for people to be able to learn about this issue in the way that you're presenting it. So, I just want to say in my Native language, Alutiiq, "Quyanaa".

Angeline Boulley:
Thank you so much!
It's a pleasure to talk with you about this important issue. I am an educator through and through, and so I hope that I continue to write stories that are telling aspects of our communities that we're willing to share, and really help those teens and help people to reconnect with their Native communities and families.

"We don't forget those lost ones. We know they're out there, and so hopefully, Tribes and communities have a way to welcome people back home."





Tribal Codes: Expressions of Sovereignty

NICWA is partnering with a team of trusted colleagues to continue the Tribal Child Welfare Codes Analyst project. In the initial round of code review this spring that builds off of our original 2014 study, the NICWA team focused on three key areas: Tribes' purpose statement, definition of family, and the concept of a child's best interest.

NICWA staff have gathered over 170 child welfare codes to date. Early findings show that over the past 10 years, 50% of those codes have been updated, and since 2000 (25 years), 92% of Tribal codes have changed or been updated.

Preliminary trends show Tribal Nations are seeking to reawaken, reclaim, and revitalize their ways of knowing, being, and doing and to give weight to these ways in written Tribal law. However, more study is needed to better understand the timeline for Indigenization of Tribal Nations' child welfare codes.

A Tribe's code generally indicates the Nation's intentions and aspirations for children's well-being. Tribal cultural preferences are generally incorporated through descriptions of what the Tribe's highest priorities for children would be for their community, and some provided statements that describe the interconnectedness between child and family well-being and having access to culture and the Tribe's traditional ways of raising children.

The image below illustrates language from the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians that emphasizes the importance of children's access to culture and of the Tribe's own ways of raising children.



Agua Caliente
Band of Cahuilla Indians

"Purposes" of the code include:

(4) To preserve the opportunity for Indian children to learn about their culture and heritage, and to become productive adult members of the Tribal community, by experiencing their culture on an ongoing basis.

(9) To recognize and acknowledge the customs and traditions of the Tribe regarding child-rearing.

(10) To preserve and strengthen each child's cultural and ethnic identity whenever possible by, for example, requiring visitation with extended family/Tribal members, attendance at cultural events, and language classes, instead of leaving these practices up to the discretion of a guardian or conventional adoptive parent.

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Dr. Miriam Jorgensen, research director, Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance & Development and senior researcher, University of Arizona Native Nations Institute, leads a team of analysts on this project. She stated, ***"One of the exciting aspects of our project is how it supports productive conversations between Tribal child welfare staff and Tribal leadership- and Tribe to Tribe conversations- about how a Tribe's law can best support children and families."***

Project findings were shared at NICWA's 43rd Annual Protecting Our Children Conference, and based on the robust discussion during the workshop, there is a strong indication that Tribal communities and leaders are taking seriously their sacred responsibility for children by indigenizing their Tribal laws to reflect their individual community needs and cultural teachings.



Strengthening Knowledge and Serving Native Families

This June, NICWA hosted training institutes at a special community-based space in Portland, Oregon. Attendees from 13 states joined us for three days of training at Barbie's Village; courses included Positive Indian Parenting (PIP) and Working with Substance-Abusing Families.

Barbie's Village is a beautifully re-imagined former church whose space was donated to the **Future Generations Collaborative**, a collective impact partnership between Native serving and Native specific organizations, institutions, governments, and community members. In March 2024, the property transfer was completed as part of the "Land Back" movement with the whole property being totally reenvisioned. The space includes community gathering areas, a large kitchen, nursery, and gym.

Outdoors, the property features a garden and eventually will include a tiny home village to help people facing homelessness find stability. Barbie's Village was lovingly named after Atwai Barbie Jackson Shields, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, who passed away in 2017. Barbie was a wife, a mother, and a frequent helper in the Future Generations Collaborative community.

Participants at NICWA's June training institutes enjoyed being in the community (as opposed to a hotel), meeting new people, and acquiring new skills to take home to their communities. NICWA looks forward to hosting another **training event** at Barbie's Village in September.

"This was a great training! Thank you so much for everything! I can't wait to be able to help our families in our community!"

- Training Institute Participant

Responding to Requests for Information: Trends and Resources

At NICWA, we believe that the best way to protect children is through services that preserve and strengthen their families and extended families. This value is woven into every aspect of our work and serves as a driving force behind our efforts surrounding Requests for Information. Anyone can request information through a **form** on NICWA's website or by calling us, and our staff will offer resources, referrals, and compassionate support to help callers during challenging times.

Every year, NICWA receives hundreds of inquiries from individuals seeking assistance, often from families navigating the child welfare system with questions about the Indian Child Welfare Act or their rights under it. Some people seek help tracing their Native ancestry or finding affordable legal representation. Many are unsure about who within their Tribal Nation can assist them in navigating complex legal and human service systems.

Throughout the year, NICWA collects trend data on types of callers and their needs. In 2024, parents accounted for 36% of inquiries, relatives for 17%, and service providers for 6%.

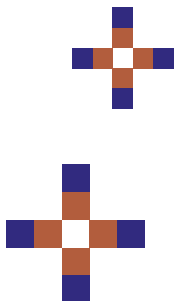
In response to last year's trends, NICWA compiled and created resources for individuals seeking support. We specifically developed resources to help relative caregivers advocate for themselves in state court.

These include finding free and low-cost legal help, as well as;

- **NICWA Tracing Native Ancestry Guide**
- **ICWA Quick Resource Guide**
- **When ICWA Doesn't Apply**
- **A Family's Guide to the Child Welfare System**

And numerous others for families and service providers. NICWA has also been compiling state-specific resources that can support Native families and children.

We continue to monitor trends in the requests we receive, adjusting our resources and programs to best serve those who reach out through calls and emails.





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Quarterly Newsletter
Summer/Fall 2025

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Presenters are the heart of our conference, recognized as the premiere national gathering dedicated to Tribal child welfare and well-being.



Apply by
October 31, 2025

www.nicwa.org/conference



Scan the QR code
to apply now!



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Uniting Our Voices for
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Oklahoma City, OK
March 29–April 1

2026