



NICWA NEWS

Quarterly Newsletter • Winter 2026

*The
Latest Inside:*
Storytelling

National Indian Child Welfare Association

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NICWA is a national, Native-led nonprofit uniting Tribal Nations, individuals, and organizations to protect Native children and families. Together with our partners, board, and staff, we work to keep Native children connected to their families, communities, and cultures.

OUR MISSION

NICWA protects the safety, health, and cultural identity of all Native children and families—today and for future generations—by upholding culturally based services, community strength, and Tribal sovereignty.

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Sarah Kastelic (Alutiiq)



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NICWA News is the quarterly newsletter for members and donors of the National Indian Child Welfare Association. Membership is available in multiple levels starting at \$45. For reprint requests, additional copies, or other information, contact us at info@nicwa.org

Message from the Executive Director

Dear NICWA Members, Sponsors, Donors, and Friends,

Welcome to the Winter issue of NICWA News. This issue embraces our oral tradition, Storytelling.

As you may know, I'm Alutiiq, also known as Sugpiaq. That's my linguistic and cultural group. In the 1800s, there were more than 60 Alutiiq villages in the Kodiak, Alaska archipelago with an estimated population of 13,000 people. Today there are about 4,000 Alutiiq people living in 15 rural villages, five towns, and in major cities. We've lived in our traditional homelands for more than 7,500 years. My family is from a village called Ouzinkie.

Because colonization—first Russian and then American—suppressed transmission of culture and identity, traditional storytelling is important to Alutiiq people. **It connects us to our families and our core values, building a strong sense of identity and well-being.**

Much of what we know today about Alutiiq storytelling traditions has been published in a doctoral dissertation by Dr. Alisha Drabek (2012), so I want to acknowledge her work. Drabek writes,

“Storytelling as a traditional vehicle for knowledge acquisition is multifaceted and offers a richness in learning that is difficult to surpass. Shared stories build a common experience; develop the art of listening and symbol association; foster social skills and an understanding of human motives and patterns of behavior; invoke a physical response through language; prepare us for life through experiential connections; transmit cultural traditions; strengthen identity and demonstrate ‘right’ behavior within values. All of these complex lessons and more can be conveyed through a simple story passed down from generation to generation” (p.14).

At NICWA, we see the impact of storytelling in our daily work, from rallying advocates to ensuring training lessons stick long after the class. Whenever a child welfare worker or a family going through the system shares their experience with us, we are reminded of the power of storytelling, which helps us empathize, connect, and relate. In Drabek's writing, she goes on to say,

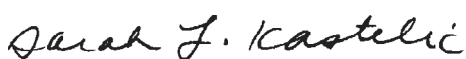
“Across millennia, stories convey their lessons and have sustained generations as they are retold and become integrated into our minds as a means of interpreting and comparing our experiences to what we've been told through story. Storytelling is a powerful learning tool that links us to our ancestors” (p.14).

And finally, “Ancestrally and contemporarily, storytelling is done to perpetuate life, convey values and a worldview, as well as heal from and honor past hardships. Asserting who we are as a people, how we see the world and what matters to us most is the job of storytelling” (p.15).

In this issue of NICWA News, you can read stories written by a variety of NICWA staff about our inspiration and recent work—and the people and places that have played a role in it.

Drabek says, **“Storytelling can become a healing process, both for storytellers and their audience, reinforcing our sense of identity and belonging to our identifying group — building unity, wellbeing and a sense of purpose or meaning to life”** (p.15). We hope that by telling our stories, you feel a sense of belonging to our community through our shared purpose as advocates.

In partnership,

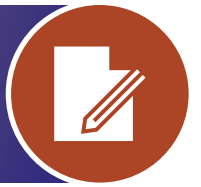


Sarah L. Kastelic, PhD, MSW

(Alutiiq)



**“Storytelling can become
a healing process, both for
storytellers and their audience...”**



Trump Administration Moving to Speed Up and Streamline Process of Deregulation

The Trump Administration has made it a top priority to “deregulate” the federal government as stated in two 2025 policy directives. The first, Executive Order (EO) 14192 titled [Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation](#), issued on January 31, 2025, describes the federal government’s goal to reduce regulations across all federal agencies and uses a formula to guide this process that says for every one new regulation, 10 existing regulations must be eliminated.

More recently, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released a [“Streamlining the Review of Deregulatory Action”](#) memo dramatically shortening agency timelines to eliminate regulations to somewhere between 14–28 days depending upon whether the agency considers the regulation to be “facially unlawful,” or unconstitutional or invalid in every conceivable application.

The OMB memo states that existing EOs, such as [EO 13175](#), that direct federal agencies to consult with Tribal Nations on changes to federal administrative policy, is not presumed to apply during the Administration’s efforts to deregulate. In addition, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) also issued a policy rescinding the Richardson Waiver, or the current policy on Public Participation in Rule Making, that requires HHS to provide the public an opportunity to review and comment on proposed policy changes.

Considered together, these shifts in the regulation and administrative policy process could have chilling effects on the ability of Tribal Nations and the general public to weigh in on proposed changes or elimination of administrative policy in the future.

NICWA and Tribal Nations are working with Administration officials to better understand how these changes will be implemented and how to ensure the government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the federal government is preserved.

Trump Administration Issues New Executive Order on Child Welfare

On November 14, 2025, the White House released a new EO titled [“Fostering the Future for America’s Children and Families”](#) (EO 14359). The EO directs federal agencies overseeing child welfare policy and programs, among other things, to review current child welfare policies to assess how data collection is used to evaluate whether a program is successful, expand the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and predictive analytics in child welfare services, speed up the placement of children into a permanent placement if they can’t return home, and increase partnerships between child welfare agencies and faith-based organizations. Related to EO 14359, Assistant Secretary for the Administration of Children and Families under the Department of Health and Human Services, Alex J. Adams, has spoken about his goal to have a home for every child to improve foster care and support families in the U.S. child welfare system.

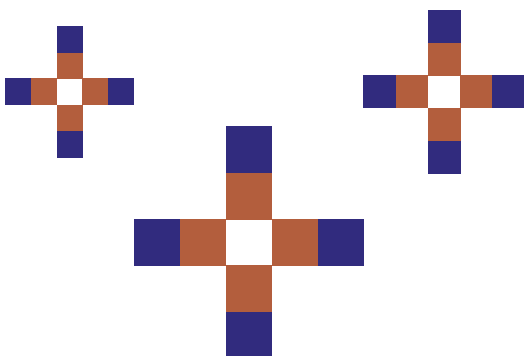
Some of the changes outlined in the EO could support Tribal Nation priorities, including increased emphasis on data collection to improve implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and, when necessary, ensuring Native children are placed with extended family members when they can’t stay at home safely.

However, there are also concerns with how AI and predictive analytics would be used in child welfare and how speeding up permanency for Native children in state systems would be accomplished. Predictive analytics, a data-driven process that has been used to assist in determining which families should receive supportive services and what types of services, has been criticized for reinforcing biases against certain families, particularly against families of color.

Advocates fear that this type of data analysis and the promotion of AI in child welfare could lead to fewer services for Native families and more removals of Native children into foster care.

Using AI in child welfare also raises questions about how Tribal data and data on Native children and families in child welfare systems might be used and how this would impact data sovereignty for Tribes and Native children and families.

NICWA, in partnership with Tribal leadership, is taking steps to learn more about the directives in this EO and to talk with the Administration about their plans for implementing the EO with Indian Country, including consultation with Tribal Nations.





Honoring Indigenous Values of Community and Care

Community-based services designed by and for local people are one of the core values we hold at NICWA, and they are not only seen in the work we do but also in the people doing it. Two team members, Community Development Specialist Dallas Archuleta (Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde) and Government Affairs and Community Development Specialist Evan Roberts (Tlingit), are leading with this value in their recent office-based food drive. This effort was in direct response to the federal government shutdown's ending of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, which left many families in our Portland, Oregon community without the support they relied upon. Food insecurity is not just about hunger; it is about dignity, belonging, and the ability to thrive.

The food collected through this drive will be donated to Barbie's Village, a project of the Future Generations Collaborative that provides a solution to the houseless crisis for the local Native community. It provides basic needs such as stable housing, early childhood services, and access to medical and food resources. Barbie's Village has shared its space with NICWA on several occasions when we've hosted child welfare workforce trainings onsite, so we know firsthand the impact they have on the Portland Native community by leading with the understanding that our lives are interconnected, and that caring for one another strengthens the whole.

This food drive is not simply about filling pantries, it is about ensuring families are able to live securely with their basic needs met. It is about recognizing that when one family struggles, the entire community is affected. By working with Barbie's Village, we are continuing our support for Native families and ensuring that children can grow up safely. Food is more than just sustenance in many of our communities; it is medicine, ceremony, and a gift meant to be shared.

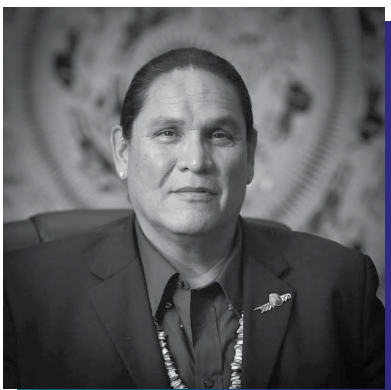
Thank you to Evan and Dallas for stepping up to better serve our community!



NICWA Staff with food drive collections

Remembering Ernie Stevens

It is with deep sadness that the NICWA acknowledges the passing of our former board member and committed advocate for Native children and families, Ernie Stevens, Jr., citizen of the Oneida Nation and president of the Indian Gaming Association. Early in his career, Ernie was mentored by the late Eloise King (Colville), a founding NICWA board member. In the late '90s and early 2000s, before becoming the leader of distinction we all knew and admired, Ernie traveled for NICWA first as a volunteer and then later as a board member, representing us and furthering our mission of strengthening the well-being of Native children and families at national meetings and conferences.



A mark of his character was that even after growing into national prominence, he never forgot his mentor, Eloise, or NICWA's mission. We could always count on him for a warm greeting, key introductions, and a ringing endorsement. We will miss him dearly and appreciate all he did for Native children, youth, and families.

Meet Senior Child Welfare Fellow Misty Flowers

Misty (Thomas) Flowers is a member of the Santee Sioux Nation and a descendant of the Tlingit of Alaska. With nearly 20 years of experience in child welfare, including 12 years leading her Tribe's social services department, she is recognized as a leader in Indigenous advocacy. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and has served as a Diligent Recruitment Advisor at the National Center for Diligent Recruitment. She is a longtime leader with the Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition, currently serving on its board of directors, and has co-led the Honoring Indigenous Families research project.



Her honors include being named a White House Champion of Change, receiving the Early Achiever Award from the University of Nebraska Alumni Association, and induction into the Jackie Gaughan Multicultural Center Wall of Fame. As Executive Director of the Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition, she helped the organization earn the NICWA Member of the Year Award. She is excited to join the NICWA team and remains committed to advancing Tribal child welfare and strengthening ICWA systems for the protection of Native children.

Reflections on Culture, Family, and Healthy Strong Children

By Terry L. Cross, (Seneca Nation) Senior Advisor Emeritus

Research often affirms or invalidates things we think we know. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, NICWA was a partner on several research projects. As a result of these projects, especially the “Practice Based Evidence Project,” conducted jointly with Portland State University and the Native American Youth and Family Center, we were able to affirm several assumptions long held as culturally self-evident. Relationships with caring adults, especially elders, are important to wellness. A strong and positive cultural identity is associated with several positive life outcomes. **Hope, gratitude, respect, generosity, and service to others are not just values but important culturally defined disciplines that help heal trauma and promote health and balance in our lives.** Today, as Native youth and families are actively reclaiming this heritage of wellness by remembering their cultures, we are witnessing the healing of entire generations. I see it in the work of NICWA, and I see it in my own family.

Last year, I was invited to speak at my grandson’s middle school Native American Heritage Month assembly. My grandson was the co-emcee. As I watched him engage in that role with confidence and poise, I was filled with appreciation. At age 14, he was already demonstrating a leadership role. **He was living his Tribal identity in service to community. To me, this is remarkable.**

My grandmother, Flora Jamison, was taken from her family at about nine years old and placed in Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. During the summers, she was placed in the “outing system” by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This meant spending her summers in temporary foster care with White families in the Philadelphia area. Apparently, she never returned home for four years. She spent her high school years at Hampton Institute, after which she worked as a domestic servant in Chicago. We don’t know how she made it back to



Family photo provided by Terry Cross



Terry Cross' grandson delivering his speech

the Allegany Reservation in New York to marry my grandfather and to give birth to my uncle, aunt, and mother. We do know that the tuberculosis epidemic that swept our territory in the 1920s took her when my mother was only a few months old.

My mom went to stay with our great-grandpa Gordon, where her first language was Seneca, and where she learned the values of our culture by being raised in a family with little exposure to the colonial society. At age five, my mother was beaten in first grade for speaking Seneca. By then, she was living with my grandfather and a new stepmother, also a traditional Seneca woman. To protect her, they stopped speaking the language and eventually moved into the nearby state park where my grandfather was a ranger. There, he could protect her from being removed to boarding school.

More tragedy was to visit our family. Our land was taken as part of the Kinzua Dam project. My cousin was taken from us after the death of my aunt. World War II-related post-traumatic stress plagued my uncle and his family, and there were far too many losses of extended kin and culture due to trauma-related substance use disorders. My mother grew up in fear and worked hard to protect her children from the persecution with which she had lived. She didn’t teach us Seneca. She didn’t take us to Longhouse. Like so many of her generation, she judged it best to step away from her community. **Despite the losses and her desire to protect us, she could not help but bring us up with a strong foundation of Seneca values, a depth of teachings and lifeways, and a sincere pride in our heritage.**

My journey was to be exposed to and mentored by elders from my Clan and to travel the country as I worked growing NICWA, to be taught and mentored by elders and activists from many Nations. I often say that my mother's generation was a generation of fear. They lived with trauma on every front.

My generation has been a generation of anger and activism. We have endeavored to heal our intergenerational trauma through reclaiming our cultures and remembering who we are as Native people. Our children's generation is now actively working to decolonize the wrongful taking of land, natural resources, sovereignty, worldview, and our children. Our grandchildren's generation is showing us new ways of being and doing Native.

I could not have done what I achieved at NICWA without my grandmother's sacrifice. I would not be who I am today without my mother's kinship care experience with my great-grandparents. I would likely not have had the childhood I had if my grandfather had not prevented my mother from being sent to boarding school. And, I likely would not have become the social worker I am had it not been for the Seneca Nation Educational Foundation's support of my education, funded by the very same Kinzua Dam settlement that took my family's land.

So, as I sat at my grandson's assembly and watched him in his ribbon shirt with his long braid, as I waited to speak to 800 middle schoolers about our culture, I could not help but feel deeply grateful for the love and connection with each succeeding generation. My family has seen and experienced the worst of colonization in each of the last seven generations and yet, we persist, and we are strong.

Yes, relationships with caring adults support balance and health. A strong cultural identity contributes to positive outcomes, and deeply rooted Native values lived through daily action brings strength. It's intellectually satisfying to see it demonstrated in the research. **It is even more satisfying to experience it in my own family.**



Terry Cross and his grandson at the Native American Heritage assembly

NICWA Winter Retreat

On November 6, 2025, the NICWA staff gathered for our winter retreat at Portland State University's Native American Student and Community Center. Staff retreats, planned by our operations team, move organization-wide initiatives forward, provide all-staff training and professional development, and provide an intentional way to strengthen our relationships and morale. This quarter's retreat was facilitated by our founder Terry Cross, who led us in a refresher training on Understanding the Relational Worldview.

At NICWA, we often compare and contrast two worldviews, the Linear Worldview and the Relational Worldview. The Linear Worldview finds its roots in Western European and American thought and is based on belief in a series of cause and effect relationships, whereas the Relational Worldview finds its roots in Tribal cultures and includes four quadrants representing four major forces or sets of factors that together come into balance. The Relational Worldview is a fluid, cyclical view of time in which each aspect of life is related. Harmony is achieved when various aspects of life are in a complementary relationship and produce wellness, beauty, growth, success, the capacity for joy, and the ability to thrive.



The Relational Worldview can be used at both an individual and an organizational or community level. On an individual level, the quadrants consist of context, mind, body, and spirit. Context consists of factors like social history, community, culture, economics, and work or school. The mind quadrant encompasses individual memories, emotions, self-esteem, and thinking process. Genetics, sleep and rest state, and health status are some of the factors in the body quadrant, and the spirit quadrant consists of learned and innate positive and learned and innate negative beliefs. During our retreat, staff reflected on how our individual balance also impacts how we show up for our roles at the organization.

Many organizations use linear outcome metrics such as profit, number of families served, and other quantitative data to assess their success and organizational health. At NICWA, we also use the Relational Worldview to assess organizational health.

The winter staff retreat gave employees an opportunity to reflect on the Relational Worldview organizational quadrants of environment, infrastructure, mission, and resources to tell the story of our success and challenges throughout the year. As the New Year approaches, we encourage NICWA members to reflect on the ways in which we can reach balance as individuals and how we can reach harmony together.



Honoring Winter Teachings: Storytelling, Culture, and Strengthening Tribal Family Systems

For many Native Nations, winter is the sacred season for storytelling—a time when teachings are shared, history is preserved, and relationships are strengthened. As the land rests and communities gather indoors, stories carry cultural knowledge passed down through generations. Winter storytelling teaches Tribal values, laws, humor, and survival lessons, often through narratives that reinforce respect for nature and traditional ways of living.

NICWA Community Development Specialist, Dallas Archuleta, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, recently learned from her uncle and cultural teacher that stories are shared only during wintertime. If stories are told outside of this season, she was warned, one could be stung by a bee—an example used to demonstrate the taboo of sharing sacred stories at the wrong time. Dallas reflected that winter gatherings are moments –

“...to learn from our ancestors the stories they have passed down,” and serve as a connection to “...our culture, ancestors, and the creation of life.”

These values are not only preserved through family and community gatherings but are also intentionally woven into Tribal programs that support families today. Through the Bridging Systems project at the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin Family Services Program, a cross-departmental team was formed to improve

access to services for relative caregivers. Cultural teachings and traditions were identified as a central foundation to how the Tribe should serve families.

Led by Oneida Tribal member and Family Services Supervisor, Louise Padron, the team implemented cultural e-learning watch parties that allow staff and caregivers to learn about the significance of Oneida teachings. Many of these teachings are rooted in nature and seasonal cycles. One example is the Midwinter Ceremony, which takes place five days after the first new moon of the year and lasts four days. This ceremony is a time for the community to gather and renew responsibilities for the year ahead.

Louise shared that Midwinter is a time for storytelling, traditional teachings, and life lessons. During the Peach Stone games on the fourth day, participants wager items of importance, reinforcing lessons about humility, reducing greed, and remembering Clan roles and values.

Together, these teachings and practices show that winter storytelling is both a cultural responsibility and a source of collective strength.

By honoring seasonal protocols and centering traditional knowledge in community and service systems, Native Nations ensure ancestral wisdom continues to guide future generations.



Peer Sharing about Prevention Programming

In September, several Tribal Nations located in Washington state traveled to Neah Bay, the ancestral lands of the Makah Tribe, for an inter-Tribal gathering where Tribal child welfare leaders came together to put children first. Lummi Nation and the Makah Tribe coordinated this gathering along with NICWA and the support of ZERO TO THREE, a national nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life, to discuss [the Safe Babies approach](#). The gathering provided the opportunity for peer sharing and discussions about strengths and barriers when building best practices for families.

The Safe Babies approach, led by ZERO TO THREE, is a trauma-informed practice that creates a team-based connection between courts, child welfare, and the community. This system creates a more holistic approach to the care of children, where families are treated as partners. The Makah Tribe is using the Safe Babies approach in their Tribal court system, and the Lummi Nation is implementing this approach in their Tribal child welfare program as a preventative measure to help families before reaching the point of crisis.

Over several days, participants heard from one another about the struggles to break out of their existing silos and coordinate resources for families, but the recurring message of the gathering was the dedication to building collaborative Tribal systems. Attending elders gifted the group with knowledge and shared traditional child-

rearing practices; they also taught cedar weaving techniques to create a bracelet and necklace. Much like the woven strands that came full circle, the group left with the reinforced desire to wrap around the families in their communities and build resources for them.

This gathering took place over Orange Shirt Day (September 30), which served as a powerful reminder of the strength of community when we return to Tribal teachings. This was a timely event that reminded participants of the children who never made it home from Indian boarding schools and highlighted the importance of fighting for our children to have a safe start and a strong connection to their communities and cultures.

"Attending elders gifted the group with knowledge and shared traditional child-rearing practices..."



Protecting Sovereignty, Protecting Children

As NICWA gears up for our 44th annual conference in a few months, we visited Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and participated in the Oklahoma Indian Child Welfare Association (OICWA) Conference. Over three days, we learned from leaders in the field about their work in behavioral health, juvenile justice, and public policy – and our Senior Program Director, Tara Reynon, had the honor of starting and closing the conference in a good way by connecting culture to identity.

“Cultural connections bring a sense of identity and belonging; knowing who you are increases capacity for resilience and healing; and culture is prevention.”

This messaging was a consistent drum beat throughout the conference and especially at the children’s powwow. The children’s powwow was a reminder of the importance of Tribal child welfare work—keeping Native children with their communities and connected to their culture. During the event, children learned their cultural practices from their families and elders, as the youngest in the crowd watched preparing for their chance to dance in the future. When children are raised with these teachings, they can carry them forward and do great things.



This message will also be reflected in the Oklahoma youth panel that will speak at NICWA’s 44th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference in March. The youth panel will share their experiences in the child welfare system and how their connection to culture was instrumental in the success they have today.

These gatherings are always a reminder of the strength found in our communities. From youth to elders, these conferences bring us together to share knowledge to better serve Native children and families, tying into NICWA’s 2026 conference theme ***Uniting Our Voices for Our Children, Culture, and Communities.***



NICWA Launches New Web-Based Advocacy Software

In October, NICWA launched a new web-based advocacy software package developed by Soft Edge. The software provides NICWA constituents with new tools to assist them as they learn about and advocate for improved policies for Native children and families.

“This has been a long-time goal of NICWA, to offer our constituents a user-friendly technology experience to increase education on the needs of Native children and families and tools to increase communication with policymakers,” said David Simmons, NICWA Government Affairs and Advocacy Director.

Among the many things the software can do is provide summaries and detailed information on complex policy issues impacting Native children and families, identify key policymakers to communicate with and provide sample comments, access additional resources, and provide a way for members to sign up to receive future policy alerts. NICWA staff will implement new features starting in 2026, but we invite you to review current policy issues posted on our website [***here***](#) and get acquainted with the new resources.

NICWA Government
Affairs and
Advocacy Team



44th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference

Uniting Our Voices for
Our Children, Culture,
& Communities

**Oklahoma City, OK
March 29–April 1**

2026



About the Protecting Our Children Conference

Every year, NICWA gathers frontline workers, experts, advocates for Native children and youth, leaders in Native child welfare and other related fields, legal professionals, and Tribal and other governmental representatives to learn together over several days at the Protecting Our Children Conference. This conference is NICWA's signature event and the largest gathering in the United States and Canada focused on Native child advocacy issues, and it would not be possible without the support of conference sponsors.

Over the past several decades, sponsors of the Protecting Our Children Conference have included Tribal Nations, businesses, nonprofit organizations, private foundations, and other groups that want to demonstrate their support of efforts to build Tribal Nations' capacity to prevent child maltreatment and strengthen Tribal sovereignty. Sponsors also enjoy the opportunity to reach a unique audience of leaders, advocates, and decision makers. As the Protecting Our Children Conference moves around the country, we all benefit from the mix of new sponsors with strong regional ties to the conference location and returning sponsors who have stood alongside NICWA and our conference attendees for years.

Become a Sponsor!

There's still time to support the 44th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference in Oklahoma City from March 29–April 1, 2026. Join Host Sponsor the Seminole Tribe of Florida, Muskogee (Creek) Nation, and others to lift up emerging issues and best practices in Native child welfare and related fields by becoming a sponsor today.

Visit www.nicwa.org/conference/#sponsorship for more information on sponsorship benefits and levels, and contact April Black, development manager, at april@nicwa.org with any questions.



NICWA

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Quarterly Newsletter
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44th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference

Uniting Our Voices for
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Oklahoma City, OK
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Be part of a movement that uplifts Native children and families. Gain knowledge, share stories, and inspire change at NICWA's annual conference in person or online. Register online at:

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