

*The  
Latest Inside:*  
Uniting Our  
Voices for Our  
Children, Culture,  
& Communities



# NICWA NEWS

Quarterly Newsletter • Spring 2026

**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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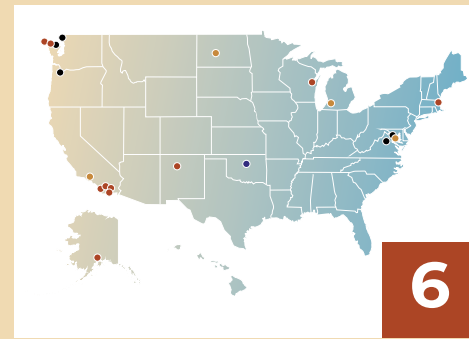
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Sarah Kastelic (Alutiiq)



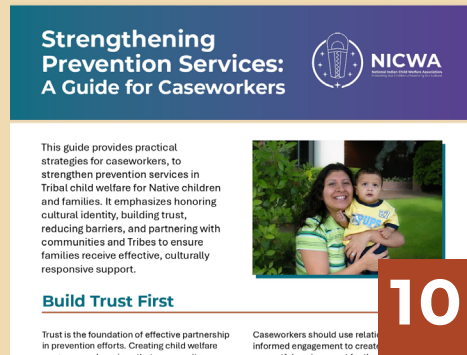
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**Message from the Executive Director**

Dear NICWA Members, Sponsors, Donors, and Friends,

Welcome to the spring issue of NICWA News. This issue embraces the 44th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference theme, “Uniting our Voices for Our Children, Culture, and Communities,” which calls us to come together in solidarity for a shared purpose to recognize that our future lies in the well-being of our children, the strength of our cultures, and the resilience of our communities. By uniting our voices, we amplify the values, stories, and aspirations that define who we are. Our Indigenous unity celebrates our collective advocacy, intergenerational wisdom, and cultural pride, reminding us that meaningful change happens when we speak and act together.

As Tribal people, we have faced systems and governments that sought to destroy our ways of life and eliminate us. Our ancestors fought back, united in their resolve to protect their children and the generations to come. Today, our ancestors’ teachings remind us that in these uncertain times, a return to our “roots” and our cultural practices can bring balance back into our lives.

**Indigenous self-determination is doing things our way, restoring traditional systems of care that reflect community values and ways of healing. It’s reconnecting to community-driven solutions and preventive measures as well as indigenizing our child welfare systems to include traditional practices.**

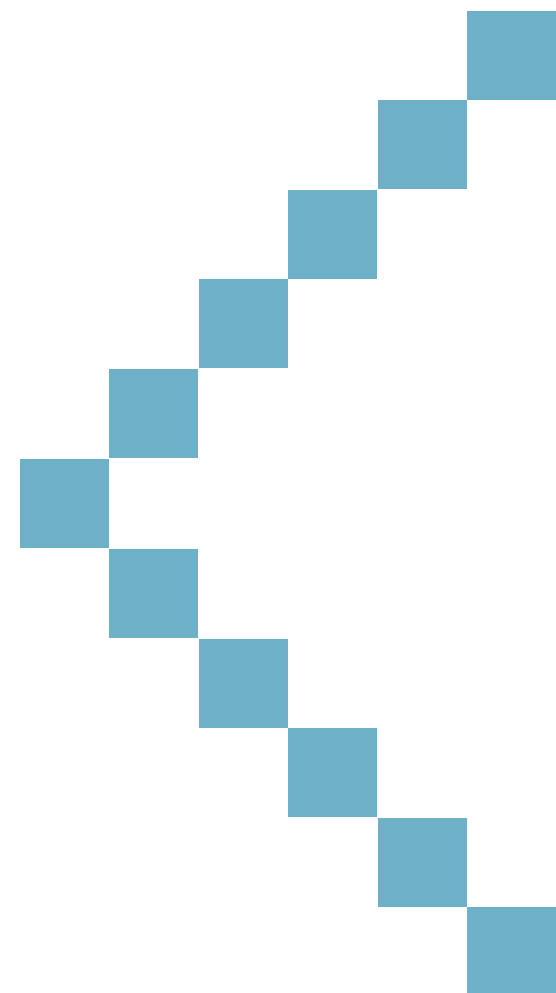
As you’ll read in this issue, we’ve just wrapped up our incredibly successful 44th Annual Conference, where we welcomed 1,521 people in Oklahoma City. We gratefully acknowledge the 40 sponsors who generously contributed \$297,500 to create this enriching experience. A gathering of service providers, community members, and advocates over four days of learning, networking, and celebration together, the conference furthered NICWA’s mission to protect 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. A real highlight was our first-ever regional convening sessions, where attendees met by region to review the ICWA 2050 plan and identify progress towards initial priority objectives.

Our conference is a powerful reminder of the commitment and impact of the caseworkers and service providers in our Tribal and state helping programs and systems. We hope you’ll mark your calendar now for the 45th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference in Albuquerque, NM, on April 4-7, 2027.

With gratitude for your service to Native children and families,

*Sarah L. Kastelic*

Sarah L. Kastelic, PhD, MSW  
 (Alutiiq)





## Pushing the Needle Forward: American Indian/Alaska Native CAPTA Bill to Expand Tribal Capacity in Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

ICWA 2050 aims to ensure the best care for Native children within their community by increasing Tribal child welfare capacity — a primary goal of the plan, and one of the main objectives in the next five years. To successfully achieve this goal, greater federal investments in prevention funding to Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations are necessary.

On March 24, 2026, Senators Lisa Murkowski (AK) and Elizabeth Warren (MA) and Representative Adelita Grijalva (AZ-7) reintroduced the American Indian and Alaska Native Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (AI/AN CAPTA) in the Senate (S. 4179) and House (H.R. 8048). This marks an important step forward, ensuring Tribal Nations receive an equitable distribution of federal child maltreatment prevention grants to support community based services that reflect the needs of Native children, families, and communities.

AI/AN CAPTA would create a separate Tribal set-aside for child abuse prevention funding and increase the set-aside to five percent—supporting sustained investment in Tribal prevention programming and culturally relevant prevention strategies developed by Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations. Currently, Tribes and Tribal organizations share a one percent set-aside through a competitive grants program, funding only two Tribal grantees for each three-year grant cycle.

The Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention program, created under Title II of CAPTA (P.L. 93-247), is one of only two federal programs that specifically target the design and implementation of prevention programs in Tribal communities. Tribes that have accessed this funding have successfully paired it with other child welfare dollars to create programs that strengthen families, improve child safety, and reduce foster care placements. A Tribal set-aside would expand Tribal access to this program and support state efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect. This investment

strengthens Native child and family well-being, supports Tribal sovereignty, and provides Tribal communities with essential prevention resources to protect their families.

**Executive Director Sarah Kastelic shared NICWA's support for AI/AN CAPTA along with the National Congress of American Indians, the Navajo Nation, and the Child Welfare League of America in a recent press release by Senator Murkowski's office.**

*“Native families and communities have strong traditions with regard to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. The National Indian Child Welfare Association greatly appreciates the introduction of the American Indian and Alaska Native Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and Senator Murkowski and Senator Warren's efforts to move this legislation forward. The legislation will increase funding for Tribal Nations to expand their community based prevention efforts and ensure Tribal prevention models are more accessible and available to inform future Tribal prevention program development and future policy discussions of how to increase support for these proven approaches.”*

NICWA encourages Tribal Nations, Tribal organizations, and advocates for Native children and families to contact their senators and representatives, asking them to sign on to S. 4179 and H.R. 8048 as co-sponsors, and to support the passage of this legislation by the full Senate and House. Explore NICWA's Advocacy Center at <https://www.nicwa.org/take-action/> to take action today.

Together, we can advance ICWA 2050 priorities that expand Tribal capacity to prevent child abuse and neglect and ensure that programs are shaped by and for Native children and families.

## NICWA Testifies at a House Appropriations Hearing on Adoption

NICWA Board Secretary Aurene Martin testified on the importance of culturally grounded permanency options and the central role of extended family networks in Tribal child-rearing practices during a March 26, 2026 hearing held by the [House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies](#). The hearing, “Advancing Permanency in Child Welfare: Leveraging Federal Funding for Adoption Programs,” reflects the subcommittee’s oversight role in examining how federal dollars are used to support child welfare systems. The subcommittee brought together leaders in Tribal child welfare, adoption, and research to evaluate how federal funding streams can better support adoption and post-permanency services.

“When Native children cannot safely return home, it is essential that they remain connected to their Tribal communities, cultures, and identities – helping to break the cycle of trauma many Native families have experienced,” said Aurene.

Aurene’s testimony wove together personal and professional experiences, highlighting how federal funding and policy must recognize Tribal permanency approaches, including Tribal customary adoption, and ensure federal funding aligns with Tribal interests and values so Tribes can fully participate. “Those experiences showed me how important it is to center a child’s identity and relationships in permanency decisions,” said Aurene, speaking to her experience navigating the private adoption system and adoption through Tribal court.



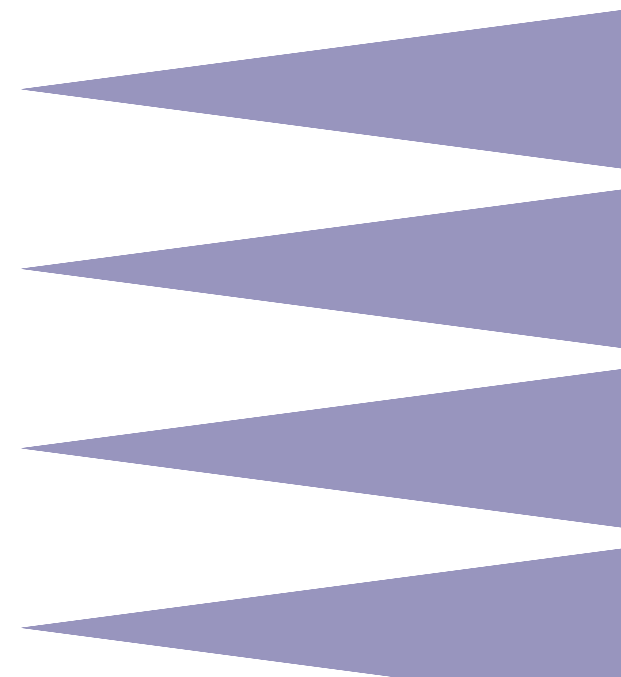
NICWA Testifies at a House Appropriations Hearing on Adoption

**Closing out her public testimony, Aurene shared the following recommendations to strengthen adoption services for Native children:**

1. Create a dedicated funding category within the federal Adoption Opportunities program specifically focused on Tribal priorities. This would ensure discretionary funding is accessible and relevant to Tribal Nations.
2. Support ongoing consultation by the Department of Health and Human Services with Tribal Nations to ensure that other federal funding programs are designed in ways that reflect Tribal needs and reduce barriers to access.

After the hearing, committee staff will review the testimony, identify common themes, and brief members on potential actions. Witness insights can help shape the next funding bill—through adjusted budgets, added directives, or highlighted priorities such as Tribal customary adoption, post-permanency supports, or trauma informed services. In some cases, hearings like this can inform future oversight activities or collaboration with committees that write child welfare policy.

**Listen to the full hearing, available online.** Aurene’s testimony can be found at timestamp 40:30 of the hearing recording.





## Welcome New Members to the NICWA Team:

### Kace Hudson



Kace Hudson is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and a descendant of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and joined NICWA in February as the communications specialist. Their Tribal bands are Kalapuya, Umpqua, and Tututni. Kace has a background in Tribal government and holds two Associate of Science degrees in Web Development and Design and Video Production and Emerging Media. They have over five years of experience in graphic design, web management, and social media management, and have worked with Tribal organizations and programs for most of their career. They are a dedicated advocate for cultural education and preservation, and believe all Native people deserve access to their culture and traditional knowledge. Kace has always had a passion for storytelling and plans to use their skills and creativity to support NICWA's mission and elevate Native voices.

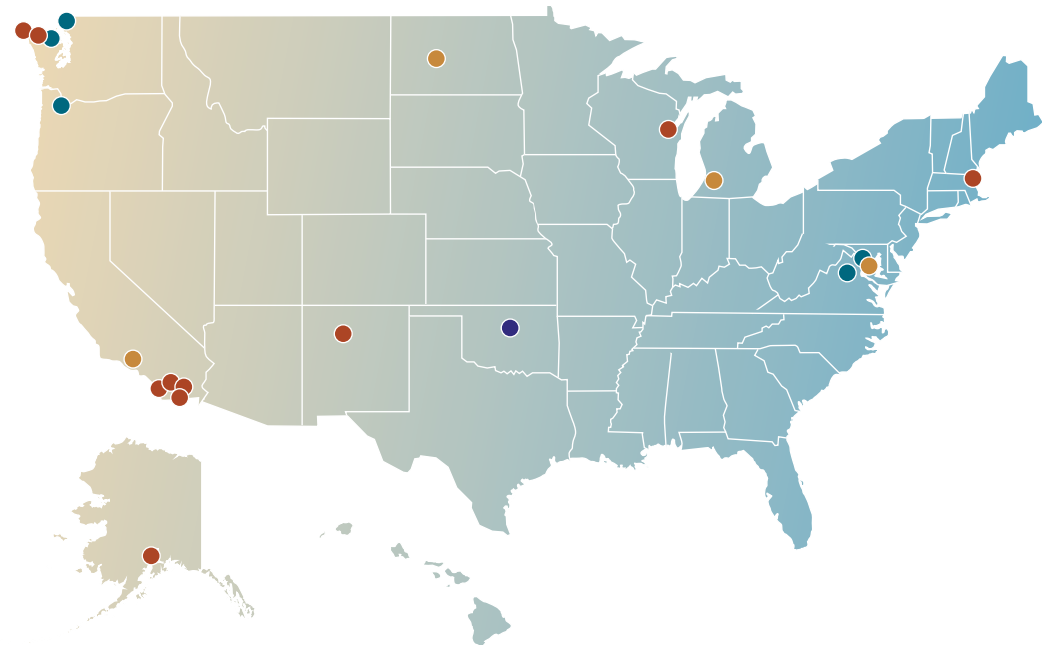
### Kassandra Eller



In April 2026, Kassandra Eller joined the NICWA team as the development communications specialist. She is originally from the Greater Seattle area and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Central Washington University. She later earned a certificate in Nonprofit Management from Oregon State University. Kassandra has over five years of experience working with arts organizations across the Pacific Northwest and is excited to apply her skills in relationship-centered fundraising, marketing, and storytelling in support of NICWA's mission. She is committed to supporting children and families facing hardship and to strengthening communities through culturally grounded work. Outside the office, Kassandra can often be found behind her camera working on a photography project, exploring Oregon's various hiking trails, slowly making her way through an ambitious to be read list, or spending time at home with her partner, pitbull, and tabby cat.

## Where We've Been:

- Conference
- Policy and Government Affairs
- Programs
- Executive Team



## Bridging Systems for Relative Caregivers in Tribal Communities

At the 44th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference, NICWA shared its Bridging Systems work in partnership with the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin and the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network. Through this work on building bridges and collaboration within Oneida Human Services Division, Louise Padron, Tsyoshaht Delgado, Rebecca Green Blanks, and Tara Reynon shared their goals, successes, and next steps in providing services for families and relative caregivers. The Bridging Systems project focuses on culture, future-orientated, ongoing learning, solutions-focused, and strengths-based guiding principles that provide the foundation for Oneida's goals.

The goals are to increase cultural engagement, develop engagement between relative caregivers and service providers, and secure opportunities for additional family services from diverse funding sources. Since the first site visit, the Oneida team has centered culture, with their cultural footprint leading the way in collaboration and system bridging within their community.

During their workshop, Tsyoshaht shared cultural teachings and creation stories that provide a foundation for serving their families. She gave an example of Sky Woman's experience as a grandparent raising her grandchildren. The Oneida team has shared these stories and teachings with their Grandparent Support Group and seen how cultural teaching creates a ripple effect of learning in the community. Through this project, the Oneida Nation has provided cultural e-learning movie watch parties for staff to join as well as having conversations about these cultural teachings. This has given staff the opportunity to learn these teachings so they can share them with the families they serve.

Through the partnership, there has been greater communication across departments and a better understanding of each department and the services they provide. As the project nears its end, the team hopes to continue building sustainable collaborative systems have many more service opportunities for families in their community.

## Sovereignty and Community Strengths: NICWA's Tribal Child Welfare Codes Project

Tara Reynon, NICWA's senior program director, alongside Dr. Miriam Jorgensen, research director at the Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance & Development, presented preliminary findings of our Tribal Child Welfare Codes Project during the Protecting Our Children Conference.

Building on the previous study that NICWA and partners conducted in 2014, the Tribal codes analysis project seeks to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the legal framework that Tribes have enacted in their communities to address their children's well-being. Project staff are reviewing over 160 Tribal child welfare codes from Tribal Nations across the country and are analyzing information on topics such as the Tribes' purpose statement, definition of family, jurisdiction, and the best interest of the child. The data speaks to how some Tribes have included provisions to ensure children in foster care can attend cultural activities and learn their traditional languages. Through their codes, many Tribes have also expanded the definition of family to include individuals such as close family friends, godparents, and even all members of the Tribe to create more

placement options for children. These laws aim to serve the best interests of the child while also supporting the sustainability of their Nations.

The study shows that work is currently being done to update and indigenize child welfare codes. More than 90% of the codes we have located have been updated since 2000, with approximately 50% having changed between 2015–2024. The growing number of Tribes that have updated their codes over the past decade indicate a desire to decolonize existing laws, and our hope in sharing this data is to provide resources to equip and empower other Tribal Nations who are looking for ways to make similar updates for their communities.

It is clear that Tribal Nations are exercising their sovereignty to ensure that the laws that govern their communities reflect a renewed focus of child and family well-being.

*Once the project is completed, a public report will be available, along with tip sheets, Tribal leader guides, and other resources to provide guidance for Tribes seeking to indigenize their laws.*

# The 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Protecting Our Children Conference

The annual Protecting Our Children conference is more than four days of workshops. It's a tribute to the generations of child welfare workers before us, a helping hand to those currently doing the difficult work, and heart work in action.

Every year's conference looks a little different. From new and updated programming to different locations, there is something unique each time. The one constant is the awe-inspiring attendees, and this year's incredible group of 1,500 child welfare workers, advocates, and Tribal leaders traveled from as far as Australia to take part in this premier national event. The 2026 theme, "Uniting Our Voices for Our Children, Culture, and Communities," rang true as we heard and learned from child welfare workers who are just launching their careers and those who have been doing this work for 30 or more years.

## Helping the Helper

"At most conferences I'm engaging with my mind, but in this one I'm engaging with my heart as well." —Leland Kiang, USAging, first-time NICWA Conference attendee and presenter.

The throughline at conference was heart work: the compassionate and emotionally demanding work that exists in child welfare. On the evening of Sunday, March 29, we kicked off the week of general sessions, member activities, and culture night demonstrations where we saw the traditional dances of Oklahoma Tribes from local youth dance groups, setting the tone for the week ahead. In this work, we know that you can't pour from an empty cup, and that full hearts support strong heart work, and we're so grateful to the Riverside Indian School Native Heritage Club and the Comanche Youth Dancers & Singers for spreading good medicine and for a strong reminder of the importance of our work, keeping children connected to their culture.

We're also grateful to the incredible panels that graced the stage, and the support of our host sponsors Casey Family Programs, Choctaw Nation, Muscogee Nation, and Seminole Tribe of Florida.

***"All those with the boots on the ground, we appreciate your hard work...It takes heart. It's in your heart to help our kids."***

- Muscogee Nation Principal Chief, Gerald Hill

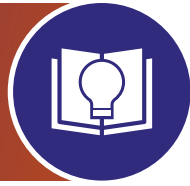
## Regional Convenings

The newest addition to this year's conference was the regional convenings, a chance for attendees to gather in their regions to discuss the ICWA 2050 plan objectives and have open discussion about how we can all learn from each other and work together to create a better future for Native children.



These gatherings highlighted the strength our communities have locally, and offered insight into how our neighbors are succeeding, opportunities for support, and ways to unite our voices. Tribal representatives and other service providers discussed the need for legislative reform, better training opportunities, and stronger Tribal-state relationships. They also highlighted work already underway that could contribute to the ICWA 2050 objectives, including informal, community based, and grassroots efforts.


As the week closed in a good way, with a thoughtful presentation from author Angeline Bouley, we were immensely grateful for the 79 conference workshops, successful banquet dinner and paddle raise featuring Lane Factor from FX's Reservation Dogs, and amazing guests who all came together to make this year a success. We look forward to another year of incredible work on behalf of children and families to share with each other at next year's conference.






## SUMMER Training Institutes

-  **June 9-11, 2026 | Portland, OR**  
 Positive Indian Parenting  
 Working with Substance-Abusing Families
-  **July 20-23, 2026 | Virtual**  
 Positive Indian Parenting

 **August 25, 2026 | Virtual**

Foundations of Tribal Child Welfare Casework Practice

 **September 29-October 1, 2026 | Portland, OR**

Foundations of Tribal Child Welfare Casework Practice  
 Positive Indian Parenting

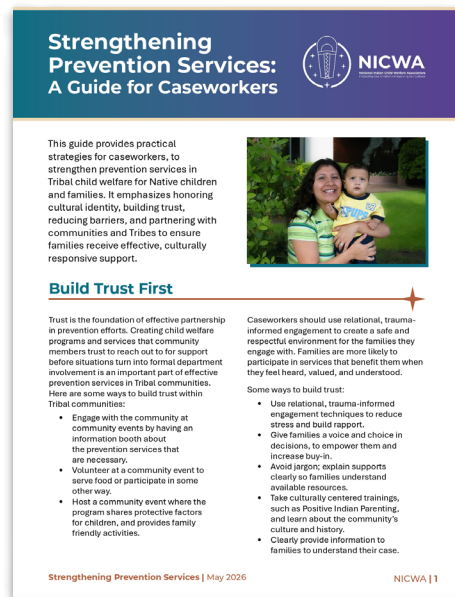
## Resources This Quarter

As a core component of our ongoing work, NICWA creates brief written resources on a variety of topics for families, service providers, and Tribal leaders.

Drawing on our guiding value that our cultures are our strongest tool for helping children and families, NICWA's resources provide practical, culturally based, and timely information to Native families and youth, and those who serve them through our online resource library.

**Below, please see a few of the resources we have created over the past few months.**

- [Reimbursement for Culturally Adapted Services and Programs for Native Children and Families](#)
- [NICWA Disproportionality Child Welfare](#)
- [Active Efforts and the Indian Child Welfare Act: Protecting Native Children and Providing Support to Keep Native Families Together — in partnership with ZERO TO THREE](#)
- [Does ICWA Apply](#)
- [Honoring Native Kinship: A Brief on ICWA and Relative Caregivers — in partnership with Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network](#)
- [Navigating Conversations with your attorney in State Child Custody Proceedings](#)
- [Strengthening Prevention Services: A Guide for Caseworkers](#)



## The Paddle Raise

For our relatives in the Pacific Northwest, the Tribal tradition of canoe journey in large seagoing canoes is about connection... connection to the ancestral waterways, the traditional art of carving, and family and community. It is a sign of resilience and sovereignty that is celebrated every year. As canoe families work together on the open water to pull their canoes forward with paddles in unison for tens to hundreds of miles, they know that they are not alone and that their effort is part of something bigger.

As they reach their destination after a long journey, they raise their paddles high to show they have arrived with good hearts and to ask permission to land. This raising of paddles is a symbol of respect and a celebration of generational teachings.

Every year during our conference we hold a banquet dinner paddle raise where attendees generously raise their donation envelopes, their metaphorical paddles, to help us generate critical unrestricted funding to support NICWA's advocacy for Native children and families. We are so grateful to the over 350 dedicated child welfare supporters who raised their paddles with us that night, and those who continued the support throughout the rest of the month. We have always known the generosity of our community knows no bounds, and we truly appreciate the support.





# NICWA

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Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

**National Indian Child Welfare Association**

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