

Featured Article

Creating Lifelong Connections for Children and Youth

NICWA NEWS

Quarterly Newsletter • Fall 2026

National Indian Child Welfare Association
6720 S. Macadam Ave., Suite 150
Portland, Oregon 97219
P (503) 222-4044
info@nicwa.org
www.nicwa.org

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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Scan the QR code for a list of all links featured in NICWA News articles.

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 fall issue of *NICWA News*. As we settle into the season, NICWA has moved to a new office. After more than 25 years, we have moved about a mile down the road to reduce our office rent significantly. From your own experiences with moving, you know what this means: combing through file cabinets, bookcases, and stacks of folders. In reviewing all of this material, we thought back through NICWA's history and our time in this space. We found forgotten treasures—old photos and historical publications—and discovered lots of paper we could have scanned or recycled years ago.

In our own offices and in our collective spaces, like our library and conference room, we've reminisced and shared stories. We've packed lots of boxes and supplies, and the artwork from our walls. This has put me in the mindset of reflection and gratitude.

Every Monday in our staff meeting, we spend a few minutes talking about one of our core values, and how it has shown up in our recent work. Particularly in an organization where not all staff get to travel and spend time in communities, it's important for everyone to hear about our trainings, projects, and advocacy and to see how their role—in whatever position they are in—supports our ability to meet our mission, to strengthen the safety, health, and cultural identity of all Native children and families. NICWA's founding Executive Director, Terry Cross, and I started this practice of talking about our values in staff meetings nearly 15 years ago as we began our executive transition process. It is a way of providing mission moments and connecting who we are and what we value directly to the work we do to support Tribal communities and Native families. In this way, we've reflected about our work over the years and about our relationships with Tribes, partners, and advocates all over the U.S. and Canada. Packing up our office has been an opportunity for similar conversations, and a chance to revisit and share projects and organizational milestones with our staff.

As we have made our move to a new office, we've remembered our work with many of you and have been grateful for what we've accomplished together at the local, state, and national levels. In this next chapter of our journey, we look forward to our continued service to Indian Country.

With gratitude for your partnership,

Sarah L. Kastelic

Sarah L. Kastelic, PhD, MSW

(Alutiiq)



NICWA's last day in our old office—August 2026

Artificial Intelligence

Child welfare agencies have long looked to, and benefited from, new technology as workers face the twin demands of growing caseloads and pressure for efficiency in their work to ensure child safety and family integrity, but as Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology becomes more prominent, use of this technology in child well-being and child welfare contexts requires a cautious approach. AI cannot replace the expertise of caseworkers, Tribal partners, and courts that are vital to protecting Native families. The increasing implementation of AI to speed up investigations, child placement, and permanency planning prioritizes efficiency over efficacy and could have severe and negative impacts on Native children and families. Decisions in child welfare cases should be made by experts with a deep understanding of the unique and complex factors involved in cases. AI has a very limited capacity to incorporate complex and nuanced case information and shouldn't be used to inform life-changing decisions without a complete understanding of the model's vulnerabilities and how these can be mitigated through model design and implementation practices within a child welfare agency or court system.

As the branch of AI technology called predictive analytics relies on existing child welfare case data and systems that have exposed Native children and families to significant harm, there are immediate implications that need to be addressed. Before leaning into the use of AI tools, Tribal Nations, partners, and child welfare workers should ask the following

1. **Who controls the data?**
2. **Who controls the development, training, testing, and governance of the model?**
3. **How will agencies and courts evaluate performance, bias, transparency, and ICWA compliance before and after deployment?**

In a recent article titled "Artificial Intelligence in Child Welfare: A Brief Overview for Tribal Nations and Native Families," authors Rocha Beardall and her colleagues explore key areas of concern about AI that is used without transparent evaluation, notably how it will affect ICWA compliance.

"If AI tools shape early case decisions, they can shape whether agencies identify potential ICWA eligibility, document that determination, notify Tribes, and support timely Tribal intervention. Design and evaluation of AI systems must pay particular attention to potential impacts on ICWA compliance," they wrote (Rocha Beardall et al., 2026).

The brief also noted the difficulties AI would have navigating complex cultural considerations, jurisdictional complexity, and government-to-government obligations that professionals in the field must follow.

"For Tribal Nations and Native families, these tools raise distinct risks because child welfare is governed through a complex landscape of sovereign authority, shared jurisdiction, and legally binding obligations under ICWA (Rocha Beardall et al., 2026)." Advocates must educate themselves about risks and potential problems of AI adoption, as well as the benefits, and champion safe and transparent use of any new tools as AI changes the practical conditions under which sovereignty is exercised and ICWA is implemented.

Read the full brief online on our website.

"If AI tools shape early case decisions, they can shape whether agencies identify potential ICWA eligibility, document that determination, notify Tribes, and support timely Tribal intervention. Design and evaluation of AI systems must pay particular attention to potential impacts on ICWA compliance."

Rocha Beardall, T., Edward, F., Bosk, E., & Freely, M. (2026). *Artificial intelligence in child welfare: A brief overview for Tribal Nations and Native families.*

Moving Forward Together: Urging Senate Action on the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act Recommendations

Urge your congressional leaders to fight for the well-being of Native families by co-sponsoring several important bills. Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Brian Schatz (D-HI) introduced the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act (S. 4976) based on the recommendations of The Way Forward report on July 14, 2026. The bill spans nine titles covering health, research and data, environmental health, nutrition, homelessness, workforce, and justice for Native children and families.

Two other bills that address Tribal child welfare and human service program funding are the American Indian and Alaska Native Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (S. 4179 and H.R. 8048) and the Promoting Strong Native Families and Children Act (S. 4638). These bipartisan bills are part of the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act recommendations and would provide new Tribal funding for child welfare and other human services programs.

> **If passed, this legislation could make significant strides toward improving the safety and well-being of Native children and families, reduce child welfare involvement, increase access to behavioral health services, and strengthen government-to-government relationships between Tribal Nations and the United States.**

Tribal Nations, Tribal organizations, and advocates for Native children and families, **call on your congressional leaders** to co-sponsor these bills, seek sponsors to introduce companion bills in the House where needed, and support their passage by both the Senate and House.

There's still time to urge Congress to stand with Tribal Nations and Native families. Take action on all three bills via NICWA's Advocacy Center.







The Government Affairs team presents at the annual Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians convention—September 2026

Protect our children. Preserve our culture.

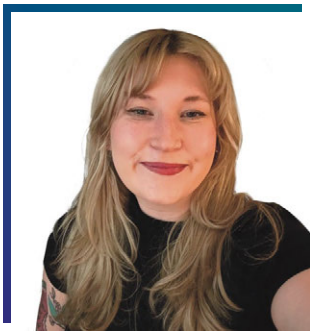
United, we have the power to defend the safety, health, and cultural identity of every Native child. Join us to keep families together and rooted in their community and culture.

Sign up for action alerts in our Advocacy Center to take action.

www.nicwa.org/take-action

Inside NICWA

Welcome New Members to the NICWA Team:



Kaley Bales

Kaley joined NICWA's team as a fiscal assistant in September 2026. Originally from California, she graduated with her Bachelor of Fine Arts from California College of the Arts in 2016. After college, she used her passion for mental health and social justice advocacy in her work with the Chumash Tribal government in California on their welfare programs. Kaley is delighted to be part of the team at NICWA, and is excited to contribute to the organization's work.

Outside of work, Kaley enjoys making art, crafting, mushroom foraging, and relaxing with her tabby cat, Mango. She can also tell you about almost every thrift store in Portland.



Sheena Allison

Sheena, Diné, was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, before moving to the Pacific Northwest in pursuit of higher education. Here, she fulfilled her dream and received a bachelor's degree in urban and public affairs.

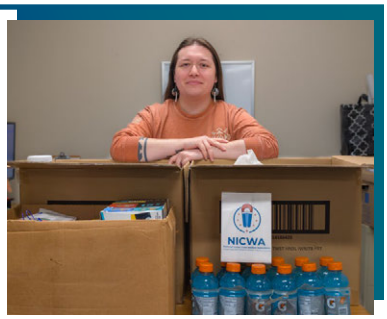
She has an extensive corporate background but wanted to make a career change that aligned with her values to create meaningful change and give back to Indian Country. This led her to NICWA.

Joining the team in 2026 as the operations coordinator, Sheena is excited to learn alongside our team and contribute to our work of supporting Native children and families and preserving Native cultures. Being raised to understand that her identity, culture, and family are everything, NICWA's value that culture is among our strongest resources resonated with her, and she's grateful to be part of a team that prioritizes child welfare, safety, and well-being.

Sheena enjoys exploring Portland and going on small adventures. More than anything, she loves experiencing new things and making memories with the people she cares about.

Donation Drive

Several local Pacific Northwest Tribes faced the devastating effects of the wildfire season this summer. At the time, a majority of our nation's wildfires were within Oregon and Washington, which are home to over 35 Tribes and many distinct Tribal bands.



Donation drive—August 2026

Our staff felt called to help our relatives in neighboring Nations facing the effects of the fires. Led by Communications Specialist, Kace Hudson, our team filled boxes with nonperishable foods, hygiene supplies, and baby items to support relief efforts. The Portland community showed a beautiful display of comradery and care, with several businesses and organizations facilitating donation sites to help those affected. Our donations were dropped off at the Native American Rehabilitation Association of the Northwest to be dispersed as needed.

Personalize how you'd like to stay connected with NICWA!

Choose the e-newsletter topics you're interested in receiving from us by clicking the "Update Profile" link on the bottom of our emails.

Not subscribed yet? Sign up for our e-newsletter on our website!

NICWA Has a New Home

See a tour of our new office on our social media!

Creating Lifelong Connections for Children and Youth

The right foster care placement for a child can plant a seed that grows over generations. Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe Treasurer, Ricky Johnson, remembers his own mother's foster care journey and the woman who changed her life. Lovingly referred to as "Grandma Nell," she was a foster mother who provided a supportive and caring place to grow. Grandma Nell was part of Ricky's life until she walked on, but her impact never left.

Ricky's mother, Jerelyn, knew her path was to carry on Grandma Nell's example by opening her home to care for children in the child welfare system. "My mom gave those children a safe place during difficult periods of their lives. She showed them love and kindness, but she also gave them structure. She expected them to go to school, treat people respectfully, and understand that they were worthy of care," said Ricky.

When their Tribe's Indian Child Welfare Manager, Liz Mueller, received notice that a six-month-old baby was eligible for Tribal membership and needed a home, she called Jerelyn. She asked her to care for the baby while they arranged a permanent placement.



The Johnson family

"That permanent placement ended up being us," Ricky said.

"We fell in love with him and eventually adopted him. He became my little brother, and it is almost impossible to explain how much he means to our family," he said. "My mom gave him unconditional love, and he grew into an incredibly thoughtful and selfless person. He is kind, respectful, and deeply loved by my mother, my sister, my sister's children, and me. Our family would not be the same without him."

Ricky noted that ICWA made this possible. By following the protections of ICWA, his brother was not lost or disconnected from his Tribe, even though he was hundreds of miles away.

"[ICWA] gave our Tribe the ability to find him, bring him home, and place him with a Tribal family that understood where he came from," said Ricky. "Because Liz [our Indian Child Welfare Manager] and our Tribe did that work, my brother grew up knowing his relatives and his community. He grew up as part of the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe rather than learning about that part of himself later, after years of separation.

When a Native child is placed with relatives or within their Tribal community, the benefit goes far beyond the placement itself. The child does not have to choose later between the family who raised them and the people they came from. Those parts of their identity can grow together," he added.

Children that grow up in their communities have a strong sense of identity. They grow with the lessons that our Elders have carried for us, and with vital support to guide them through difficult times. Fierce advocates for children ensure that even if a child cannot grow up with their biological family, they still grow up supported, protected, and in their culture.



"The family and the Tribe benefit too. My brother did not simply receive something from us. He brought something into our family that we cannot imagine living without," said Ricky.

"For me, ICWA is about making sure Native children are not forgotten or treated as though their connection to their Tribe is unimportant. It recognizes that Tribes have a responsibility to their children, even when those children are living far from home. My brother is part of our family today because our Tribe was able to act on that responsibility," he said. "And behind that story is my mom, who understood from her own life what one caring adult can mean to a child. She spent years trying to be that person for as many children as she could."

Building a Network of Families for Native Children

NICWA and the National Center for Diligent Recruitment co-presented *Community Connections: Building a Network of Families for Native Children* in September. The webinar focused on making systemic changes to effectively support kinship and foster families for Native youth.

Child welfare systems prioritize prevention and keeping children safely with their families. When out-of-home placement is necessary, reunification remains the primary goal. When reunification is not possible, agencies and Tribes must pursue other permanency pathways such as kinship care or guardianship.

As NICWA's Heritage and Helping training describes, **"The concept of belonging is at the heart of permanency planning."** Extended family and community members who share responsibility for nurturing, protecting, and raising children create a sense of belonging. Permanency in Indian Country reflects broader Tribal definitions of family and culturally appropriate ways of providing forever homes.

The training cautions that, "Termination of parental rights is valued as the method of choice [for facilitating permanency] in the dominant culture child welfare system; in Indian child welfare, however, it has the potential of severing the child's connection to their extended family and Tribe." This concern elevates the need for diligent, culturally grounded recruitment of Native families and support for relative/kinship care providers. The webinar recording can be found on the National Center for Diligent Recruitment's YouTube channel.

Celebrating Oneida Nation: Bridging Systems







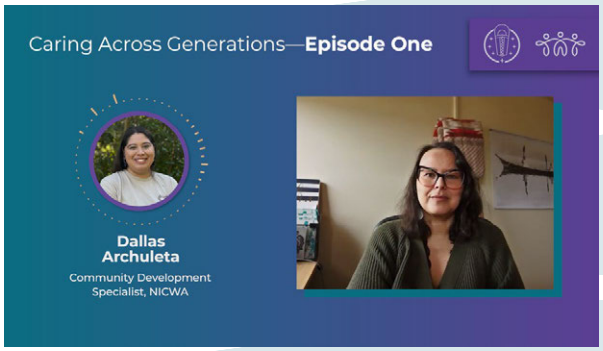


NICWA and the GrandFamilies & Kinship Support Network have just completed the two-year Bridging Systems technical assistance project with the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. At the final site visit, Oneida Nation reflected on their original goal of ensuring that their culture is the foundation of their services for families and shared how culture became a footprint in the Bridging Systems initiative. Through this project, staff have integrated cultural e-learning watch parties as a way to gather together as a community and discuss how cultural teachings apply to the services they provide. The team developed a Grandparent Support Circle, which built a strong relationship with kinship families. Oneida Nation has seen an increase in families attending events and their engagement with services. As the team shared highlights of the Bridging Systems work, they reflected on strategies to sustain their collaboration and build natural, nurturing networks for families.

They celebrated their accomplishments, and the NICWA staff recognized them for their passion and dedication to the Bridging Systems initiative as well as their work advocating for Native families and children. NICWA honored team members with gifts, and the team shared stories about the impact of their work. Through this project, all of the participating service providers took action to support kinship families and collaborated to provide the best service for families.

Caring Across Generations: Relative Caregivers in Indian Country

NICWA is excited to announce the Caring Across Generations video series, which elevates the voices of caregivers raising their relative children. In this series, three relative caregivers shared their stories about raising Native children with varying child welfare system involvement, from an ICWA case to Tribal foster care and guardianship. The caregivers provided insights into helping their relative children stay connected to family, community, and culture; the obstacles they experienced; and the supports they received while raising Native children. They shared advice for service providers, including ways to provide support and to value the role that relative caregivers carry. In one caregiver story, Robin offers:



Episode one with relative caregiver Robin Sigo

> **I would really love it if they [service providers] would ask the biological parents... 'What are your child's favorite TV shows? Their favorite book? Do they have a favorite blanket? Do they have favorite snacks?' Because I want that information to come to me from their biological parent. It reinforces that the parent is the expert on their child, and that even if there's something that happened so that they [the child] had to go into a placement, that the parent is still connected to the child, and then that reminds the relative caregiver that they are still the parent.**
>
> **"It sets that early seed at the very beginning for that parent, that they're the experts... And then that means that I, as the relative caregiver, am going to be like, oh, right. They helped me figure this out. We're in this together."**

We'd like to thank our relative caregivers for sharing their stories, our partners at the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network for funding this project, and our members and listeners for tuning in. You can

- view all the relative caregiver stories on NICWA's YouTube channel.
- explore other relative caregiver resources on NICWA's Resources for Service Providers page.
- become a member to stay up to date on the latest tools and opportunities to take action in support of Native children and families.
- share an ICWA story by submitting this form.

New Resources from NICWA's Partnership with the Yuhaaviatam of San Manuel Nation

NICWA receives hundreds of calls and emails a year from people looking for information about ICWA and Tribal child welfare. These requests come from parents, relatives, care providers, those tracing their Native ancestry, Tribal leaders, policymakers, and more, and NICWA staff direct them to information from our library of resources and contacts. As NICWA wraps up our latest three-year grant from the Yuhaaviatam of San Manuel Nation, we are honored to have had the opportunity to create 10 new resources to respond to the requests we receive. This year, we created four more responsive resources to address requestors' needs.

Managing a child welfare case can be daunting. We created companion tipsheets ***Navigating Conversations with Your Attorney in State Child Custody Proceedings*** and ***Navigating Conversations with Your State Caseworker*** to guide parents through these unfamiliar and challenging conversations. These resources provide tips and examples to prepare families at every stage of the process.

A third new resource, ***Federal Laws that Support ICWA***, shows how other federal laws interact with the goals of, and support the work of, ICWA.

Finally, to address the shortage of resources for youth in and transitioning out of the foster care system, ***Resources for Youth in and Aging Out Of Care*** provides information in a variety of fields, from college and career, to housing, mental and physical health support.

Training & Resources

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.

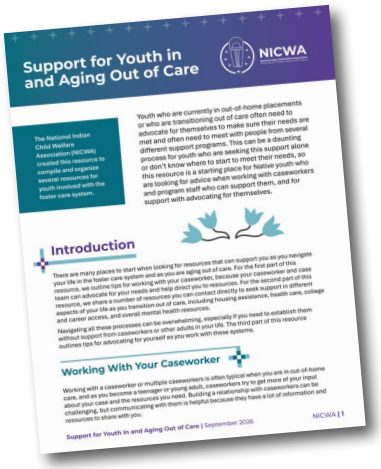
Below, please see a few of the resources we have created over the past few months.

New Resources

- Tips for Raising Native Children with Disabilities
- Accessing Services and Increasing Advocacy for Relative/Kin Caregivers Raising Native Children with Disabilities
- Qualified Expert Witness Quick Reference Guide
- Support for Youth in and Aging Out of Care
- Federal Laws That Support ICWA
- Navigating Conversations with Your State Caseworker

Updated Resources

- Summary of Key ICWA Provisions
- Summary of the 2016 ICWA Guidelines



Visit our online Resource Library to access these and all our other resources!

UPCOMING TRAINING INSTITUTES

February 8–11, 2027
Virtual
- Positive Indian Parenting

March 11, 2027
Virtual
- Foundations of Tribal Child Welfare Casework Practice

September Training Institute in Portland, OR



Positive Indian Parenting with Lorraine Brave



Foundations of Tribal Child Welfare Casework Practice with Tara Reynon



Gifts for Child Welfare Worker Appreciation Month



Day two of our training institutes on Orange Shirt Day

Champions for Native Children

One of NICWA's greatest honors is recognizing our Champions for Native Children (CNCs): hardworking individuals and agencies who dedicate every day to making the lives of Native children and families better. Established by NICWA's board of directors, these annual awards honor an individual and an organization that have made outstanding contributions to the well-being of Indigenous children and families.

Champions are doing extraordinary work throughout Native communities with innovation and persistence. They strive to improve the lives of Native children now and for future generations by weaving stronger connections across families and Tribal Nations, and protecting the heart of our communities, our children.

CNCs are nominated by our NICWA community. They are hardworking individuals and programs you see all around you doing good work for families. If you know someone, or an agency/organization you believe is worthy of recognition, we cannot wait to hear their story from you.

Philanthropy

Sponsor the Protecting Our Children Conference





There's still time to join the 45th Annual Protecting Our Children Conference as a sponsor. Support from our sponsors makes the conference possible for the practitioners, experts, and leaders in their fields who return year after year. Sponsoring this event gives you the opportunity to reach a unique audience of leaders, advocates, and decision-makers while directly supporting NICWA's work to build Tribal Nations' capacity and strengthen Tribal sovereignty. Sponsors are recognized throughout the conference and across NICWA's communications channels, and sponsorship opportunities start at just $1,500, with logos due by February 24, 2027.

For more information, visit www.nicwa.org/conference/#sponsorship or contact NICWA's development manager April Black at april@nicwa.org.

NICWA
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Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

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Fall 2026

REGISTER TODAY!

Learn, connect, grow—

join us in weaving stronger connections for Native children and families.

Join us in Albuquerque next April!

www.nicwa.org/conference/



Albuquerque, New Mexico | April 4–7, 2027