



Agindaso Abinoji-yag

"He/she reads or counts children"

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By Sadie Hart, ICWA Compliance Monitor

ICWA Compliance Newsletter Q3 2023

Fostering Culture: American Indian Family and Children Services

In May 2023 American Indian Family and Children Services (AIFACS) welcomed Tara Bruening as the new Executive Director. AIFACS' mission is to develop and support foster homes in providing compassionate, stable, secure and culturally competent care for American Indian children and youth. Bruening, an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, comes to the role with a passion for the work and her community.

Tara's involvement in the Indian child welfare field began as a child. "Growing up, my parents were one of two ICWA foster homes in Hennepin County. My earliest memories are with all my siblings. At one point I think we had ten kids in our house and that lasted for five years. We had two sets of sibling groups that were staying with us and one had gotten adopted out to a non-Native family and one had gotten reunified with their biological parents. I'm still connected with them today."

"The ones that got adopted out I think impacted me a little bit more. I remember their adoptive parents lived within 15-20 minutes from us and they said, 'we are going to visit all the time and we want to stay connected.' They were my brother and sister for five years and as soon as the adoption was finalized, my mom didn't hear from them. She kept calling them, and no answer, so she drove by their house one day and there was this 'for sale' sign outside and they moved to Arizona. Those kids' family, their parents, their relatives, were all from the Twin Cities. Their family is from here, so they

were taken out of their community in every way possible and moved. By the end of my mom's time being a foster parent and shelter parent, we had over 300 kids come in and out of our home. So that was pretty much my entire childhood."

After attending college for counseling Tara worked in Iowa as a therapist for 6.5 years and a program coordinator at a small-town county agency for 1.5 years. "I moved back to the Twin Cities and my license did not transfer. I had to do so many hours of supervision, and I thought it was a really organic ending to my time as a therapist, which I loved. Then I started working as an ICWA Guardian ad Litem Coordinator for the Second Judicial District. Being in court was a very intimidating thing for me, but that's where I started understanding ICWA from the professional and legal side of it. That transitioned to being a community trainer for the University of Minnesota Duluth Tribal Training Certification Partnership (UMD TTCP) and I got to work with some really great people and train on ICWA and MIFPA."



*Tara Bruening, Executive Director
at American Indian Family and
Children Services.*

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“I think that made me more confident in my own understanding of ‘what does this mean?’ and really put things into place how ICWA and MIFPA coexist and how they are implemented or not implemented in Minnesota.”

As an American Indian foster licensing agency AIFACS provides services through a cultural lens. “AIFACS was started in 1985. There are trainings being done to prevent out of home placement in the first place, and I think AIFACS was really created to make sure that we could provide some sense of family and cultural preservation once families were already involved in the child welfare system. We recognize that placement is still going to be necessary and having homes that are culturally competent and able to provide those cultural needs for American Indian children is so important.”

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“Kids have a right to know their family, and their community, and who they are. And for someone to provide that cultural component is really, really important. It's something that has been traditionally and historically taken from us so being able to provide kids with ‘hey, we understand that you need a safe place to stay right now, things are going on at home and you're not able to stay there while your parents work through their things, but we do have a home here that you are able to stay in and make connections.’ And in a perfect scenario that family would be able to help keep those cultural connections, too.”

“And you think about things that we just might do differently. We're going to see hair different; a Native person might think twice before cutting hair or ask before take them to get a haircut. And that's just it. It means something different for Native people. And there is that historical trauma piece of it. And so, different things like that, that other people might not understand.”

AIFACS has locations in St. Paul and McGregor and has 8 staff members. “Together we really work as a team, trying to be out in the community to provide support for families and then also provide homes for Tribal Nations and counties that use us. We have homes all across the state and are able to work with all counties and all Tribal Nations. A lot of our homes are more concentrated in different areas, like Hennepin County, and we also have some homes up north in the Leech Lake area.”

“We have a high relative placement, which is really great because when we think about those prevention efforts, we think about placing kids with relatives when they need to be in out of home placement.”

“My goal for AIFACS is to expand our homes, so getting homes in the Duluth area and then in the Southwest, closer to Upper Sioux and Lower Sioux communities and then moving all across the south. Because we do understand that these homes are always going to be necessary. I think the UMD TTCP trainers are doing some really great work on that prevention side and we're here to pick up those ones that are falling through the cracks of the child

welfare system. We're here for when homes are still needed - being able to provide culturally competent homes for kids and families.”

“We are getting so many referrals which is really wonderful. However, the other side of the coin is that we see a higher need for foster homes and really trying to work with school districts and Indian education programs that have families that are interested in doing foster care or even respite care. Because any type of care we can give kids and families is really helpful.”

The majority of homes licensed by AIFACS are children's relatives. “We have a high relative placement, which is really great because when we think about those prevention efforts, we think about placing kids with relatives when they need to be in out of home placement. So we're happy to do that. However, there are just those situations where the child does not have a relative and so we need to have homes for both.”

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"We're trying to find different ways to reach out to families. For example, the process that was in place before I had come was to e-mail and call families. We found that people respond much quicker and at higher rates when we text them, so being able to send a text and say, 'Hey, how's it going? Do you have any questions?' Our numbers are growing by changing that one thing which seems kind of silly, but it's just how things are."

Recruiting foster families who can care for medically fragile children is also a priority. "Right now I don't think we have any homes that are able to take medically fragile children, but it is something that we would love to be able to offer because we do see a need. When I was in Guardian ad Litem it came up a lot and I knew that some of our ICWA children were placed in non-ICWA homes because of their medical needs. Whenever we talk about providing this service, I think - how do we get there? Maybe they have that background already and how can attract them - maybe Native nurses who are also interested in foster care; very specific recruitment. Or how can we provide training to our foster parents so that they are able to provide that level of care?"

"Whenever we talk about providing this service, I think - how do we get there?"

Once families are interested, they begin the application process, which can be completed online or on paper. "We understand that having Internet and devices can be a barrier to some families, so there is a paper option as well. That's something our onboarding licenser is able to do - to go meet people either in their homes or in the community and help them fill that out so that it can still be online or if they want it in person and they can still fill it out in person on paper. She can facilitate and navigate that. It is kind of a hefty application and full of questions. I would say it takes an hour and a half to two hours to fill out."

The next steps include a background study, a home study, and an online training. "The home study is a four or five hour process. I think some barriers that one could see would be that you just don't really know this person, this licenser, that is coming into your home. Our licensers are great, thankfully, but we try to be culturally competent. We try to be empathetic, and open, and understanding. But at the end of the day, you're opening your home to someone who is coming in and asking you about your history and maybe some topics that are difficult to talk about, and then walking through your home. For a lot of people that can be intimidating, and that can be a difficult thing to do."

AIFACS is able to advocate for foster families to overcome barriers in the licensing process. "I had a family last week who's getting licensed and she couldn't remember the person's name that she bought a dog from. She said the dog had vaccinations, but she didn't have a card. She didn't know if they had to get new vaccinations and this molehill had become a mountain for her. So, we reminded her that this is also an active effort and the county can help get her dog vaccinated, which was the main reason that she was not able to get licensed. Our business manager always says we're a mom-and-pop shop and I think there's a lot of truth to that. Because we're a smaller agency we can take the time that sometimes counties just don't have. We can take the time to look further into why this family isn't licensable and is there something that we can do to help them get licensed?"

"Sometimes it's difficult when a county social worker knows for certain that a family will not be licensable. This is more about something on a background check that is a more serious offense and this person won't be able to be licensed. Sometimes social workers know that, and they still send them to us to get licensed and say, well, maybe AIFACS will license you. There's been a lot of conversations about that with our county partners, that some things we are not able to look past. We're able to work with the vaccinations or some of those smaller things."

"Because we're a smaller agency we can take the time that sometimes counties just don't have."

Foster families must complete 12 hours of continuing education each year. "Because we try to be culturally competent and we work towards being culturally competent, we're able to understand that for a lot of families they go to community events and pow wows, so that counts for up to six hours. For the first six months after a child is placed we do monthly visits and then we do a visit at nine months, a visit at 12 months, and then the second year it's quarterly."

Fostering Culture (Continued from page 3)

“That first six months is the hardest, it's kind of their honeymoon period and then things start to change. Our licensors license homes but they're kind of therapists in a way, and they really support our families emotionally, being able to talk with parents and kind of be a sounding board. That first six months is just really critical.”

Ensuring foster families understand that reunification is the ultimate goal is a priority. “We're trying to really work with families from the get-go to understand that foster care is a temporary service. Sometimes people just don't understand that and they see taking in a child is like ownership or that they have a right to keep this child even though the plan was always reunification. Really making sure that we're very clear with our families. It can be difficult for some of our non-relative placements who are interested in foster care, but they're interested more in foster to adopt as opposed to foster care like what we would traditionally think about it.”

“An area of improvement is always going to be that we need homes. So anyone who's interested or thinks this might be something you could do I really urge you to just try and get licensed. Especially because, statistically, Native people are more likely to have family members that are in the child welfare system and so even getting licensed in case that were to happen. Then there's no waiting period or anything like that.”

AIFACS holds various events throughout the year, including holiday parties, an honoring feast, and an open house. They recently attended a St. Paul Saints game. “We had 145 people RSVP, so we were really excited about the turnout for that. With some of that naturally comes support. If people meet at the St. Paul Saints game and they hit it off, it happens to be finding those natural supports, kind of cultivating and creating those.”

“I think something that's really necessary in the more immediate future is that we need to be providing more programming to our families. I think of other organizations around the Twin Cities that are doing ribbon skirt making, or storytelling, or drum making, and things like that. Those are things that I really want to provide families with here. I was fortunate to grow up with a really great Indian Education program and I know that that was a big support for me and it was a big support for my family. So wanting to mirror that.”

“Our licensors license homes but they're kind of therapists in a way, and they really support our families emotionally, being able to talk with parents and kind of be a sounding board.”

“A lot of good things are happening here and we want to make sure that we can continue to help AIFACS grow and really help the community understand that in order to do that, in order to provide culturally competent homes, we need culturally competent providers, and trying to let people know that we're here and that we need them and that our relatives and our kids need that, too.”

“How can we support our families and create this community through cultural education? And in supporting parents in that way. But also looking at how can we support just the parents, and what do just the parents need and how can we help with that? We have families across the state, so how can we make it so that people who don't live in the cities still feel connected and maybe that's having a camera set up and a Zoom and someone saying, ‘OK, this is what you're going to need’ or maybe that we just provide that. Figuring out ways to be creative in order to keep people connected.”

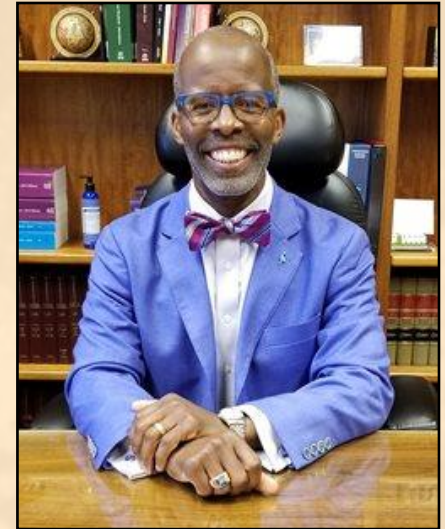
Finally, Tara noted her excitement to be at AIFACS. “I think that some things just happen and I feel like I'm supposed to be here. A lot of good things are happening here and we want to make sure that we can continue to help AIFACS grow and really help the community understand that in order to do that, in order to provide culturally competent homes, we need culturally competent

providers, and trying to let people know that we're here and that we need them and that our relatives and our kids need that, too.”

Miigwech, Pidamayaye, Pilamayaye, and Pinigigi (thank you) to Tara for answering our questions and we look forward to seeing AIFACS continue to grow!

Gigawabamin (See You Later) to Judge Smith

Please see the memo below from Judge Stephen Smith regarding changes to the Second Judicial District ICWA Court. Chi-miigwech to Judge Smith for his leadership in upholding the spirit of ICWA and MIFPA and working with the community to support American Indian families over the past several years!



To: All that care to read this (and I hope you do)

Over the last five years, I've had the privilege to observe and work with dedicated social workers, guardian ad litem, state and parent counsel, parent mentors, tribal counsel and representatives, and other justice partners engaged in active efforts to support Indian families. It has been enlightening, rewarding, and without question, some of the most compelling work that I have been involved in as a judge. As such, it is bittersweet that I share with you I am transitioning to our civil court by January of 2024.

In my former life as a trial lawyer, I spent 28 years litigating and trying civil and criminal cases in state and federal court. So, there is a part of me that looks forward to returning to the civil arena. But, as that time approaches, I appreciate that a part of me will miss doing this work on a regular basis (I'll certainly cover when needed). I wanted to split time between our civil court and the ICWA court, but the logistics simply don't work. Judge JaPaul Harris will assume the lead in our ICWA court. I will assist in his transition in every way possible. Working together, we've made real progress in addressing the needs of Indian families in child protection matters. But work certainly remains.

Elders of the Indian community blessed our ICWA Court in June 2018 (that's when I first met Elders Nelda Goodman and Maria McCoy). That was the culmination of the work Judge Diamond, community leaders, and stakeholders started to create the ICWA court. My colleagues and I, along with all of you, have worked to continue cultivating the fruits of that labor.

The success of our ICWA court hinges not on a single person but on the collective efforts of us all. The 2nd Judicial District remains committed to this work. And I am honored to have made a small contribution to it. Miigwech, Pidamayaye, and Pilamayaye!

Judge Stephen Smith

Second Judicial District ICWA Court Celebrates 5 Year Anniversary



*Heather Capistrant and
Jasmine Grika, former Nokomis
Circle Liaison.*

On July 19th, 2023, justice partners celebrated the Second Judicial District ICWA Court's 5th anniversary. This celebration acknowledged the work that has been done to improve the experiences of American Indian families in child protection as well as recognizing the work that still needs to be done. A youth who was involved with the Ramsey County child welfare system also shared their experiences and the positive impacts of justice partners who specialize in ICWA and MIFPA cases.

Assistant Ramsey County Attorney Heather Capistrant was honored for her contributions to Indian child welfare. Heather specializes in Indian child welfare cases and is actively involved in improving the child welfare system for American Indian families. She was instrumental in initiating quarterly case reviews with the Red Lake Nation, the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, and the Minneapolis American Indian Center for cases with out of state tribes. She is also a Special Member of the American Indian Bar Association and co-chair of the Minnesota County Attorneys Association ICWA Subcommittee. Miigwech, Heather, for your contributions!

Parenting in 2 Worlds Program Begins at Ain Dah Yung Center

Beginning this fall the Ain Dah Yung Center is partnering with Arizona State University Global Center for Applied Health Research to offer parenting classes through a research study. The goal of this study is to determine if a 10-week program can improve the health of urban American Indian and Alaska Native families. Other study sites include the Denver Indian Center, Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties, and Phoenix Indian Center.



The program includes two classes. In the Parenting in 2 Worlds class adult family members learn how to strengthen family practices, improve family communication, and help promote their children's wellbeing and reduce their risk behaviors. In the Healthy Families in 2 Worlds class adult family members learn about different health topics like accessing appropriate healthcare, strengthening family health practices, and using CPR and First Aid.

To qualify for the study caregivers must identify as American Indian and care for at least one youth between the ages of 12 and 17 who identifies as American Indian, lives in an urban area, and attends an urban school. Participants must also agree to be randomly selected to join either the Parenting in 2 Worlds class or Healthy Families in 2 Worlds class. Families can earn up to \$200 by participating in this study.

Tyler Bouwens, Family Advocate and Parenting in 2 Worlds group facilitator, noted that "Parenting in 2 Worlds offers a unique learning community for Native American families to develop knowledge and skills to address the challenges our teens face today."

The next class is anticipated to start in February 2024. If you would like to learn more or be notified for upcoming classes please email sadie.hart@adycenter.org.

Court Updates

This newsletter includes positive observations from ICWA hearings as well as highlights that demonstrate the great work happening in Ramsey County.

Observation: The children's attorney noted the kids enjoyed summer camp and looked forward to returning for a new school year.

Observation: The tribal social worker said that Ramsey County is doing everything they can to facilitate the mother's relationship with her children and finding housing resources.

Observation: The youth's attorney shared that the youth appreciated the relationships she had formed with the social worker and Guardian ad Litem as well as the support they were able to give her during the child protection process.

Observation: The foster care provider said she was happy to see the mother's connection with her children and had hope for the future that the children's healthy relationship with their mom would continue to grow.

Observation: The youth's attorney shared that the youth enjoyed the rides at the Mall of America and being able to spend more time with their siblings over the summer.

Observation: The mother's attorney said that her client is in constant communication with her and shares pictures and updates. The attorney also noted how proud she is of her client working towards reunification with her children.

About the Quarter 3 Data

Data was collected from July 1, 2023 to September 30, 2023. This data was collected by the court monitor at hearings, talking to the parties involved, and reading case files. This data reflects hearings the court monitor attended and does not include all Ramsey County ICWA hearings.

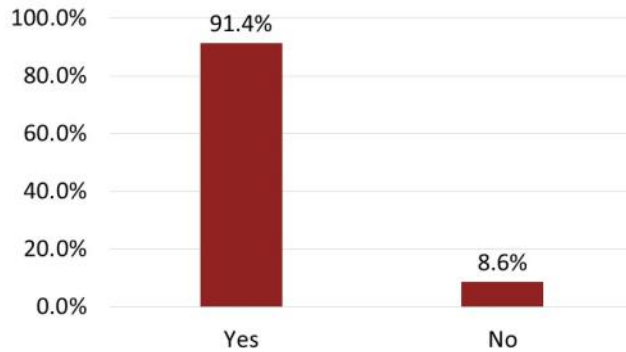
Tribal Attendance

The following chart indicates the tribes involved in ICWA cases in Ramsey County during Quarter 3. The chart includes the tribes involved, the number of hearings that occurred, and the number of times the tribe attended hearings. This data reflects hearings the court monitor attended and does not include all Ramsey County ICWA hearings.

| TRIBE | NUMBER OF HEARINGS | TRIBE PRESENT |
|--|--------------------|---------------|
| Bois Forte Band of Chippewa | 1 | 1 |
| Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe | 5 | 5 |
| Chippewa Cree Indians of Rocky Boy's Reservation | 1 | 1 |
| Choctaw Nation | 2 | 2 |
| Ho-Chunk Nation | 1 | 1 |
| Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe | 7 | 7 |
| Lower Sioux Indian Community | 1 | 1 |
| Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin | 1 | 1 |
| Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe | 5 | 5 |
| Oglala Sioux Tribe | 1 | 1 |
| Red Lake Nation | 7 | 7 |
| Rosebud Sioux Tribe | 3 | 3 |
| Spirit Lake Nation | 1 | 1 |
| Standing Rock Sioux Tribe | 1 | 1 |
| White Earth Nation | 6 | 6 |
| Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska | 2 | 2 |
| Unknown/Tribe Not Identified | 5 | - |

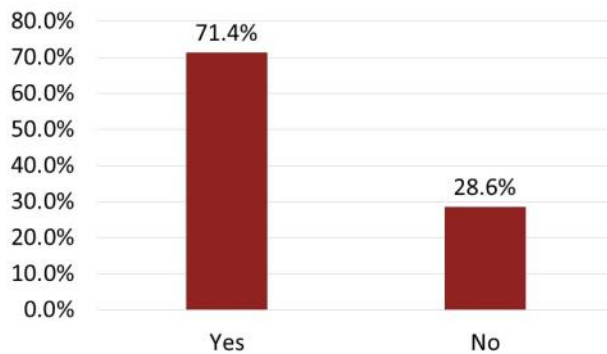
Did the tribe seek to participate in the hearing?

| | | |
|-------------|----|-------|
| Yes | 32 | 91.4% |
| No | 3 | 8.6% |
| Grand Total | 35 | |



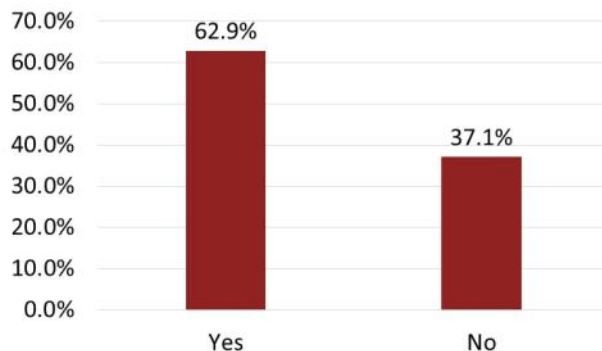
Was there a discussion of how the tribe has been involved in case planning?

| | | |
|-------------|----|-------|
| Yes | 25 | 71.4% |
| No | 10 | 28.6% |
| Grand Total | 35 | |



Was there a discussion of culturally appropriate services for the family?

| | | |
|-------------|----|-------|
| Yes | 22 | 62.9% |
| No | 13 | 37.1% |
| Grand Total | 35 | |



Tribal Participation

During Quarter 3 tribes attended 100% of hearings in which a tribe was identified. Tribes participated in 91.4% of those hearings and monitored the other 8.6% of hearings. Monitoring typically occurs when tribal membership eligibility is still being determined.

There was discussion of how the tribe was involved in case planning at 71.4% of hearings, an increase from 61.8% in Quarter 2 of 2022. This included tribal consultations, home visits, and case management.

Since Quarter 3 of 2022 discussion of culturally appropriate services has increased from 20% of the time to 62.9% of the time in Quarter 3 of 2023. This included services provided by the Ain Dah Yung Center, the American Indian Family Center, and Minneapolis American Indian Center.

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