

Strategic priorities include:

- Respectful Government to Government Collaboration & Partnership
- Self-Governance
- Embrace & Implement the Spirit of ICWA
- State Government Alignment
- Community Engagement
- Culturally Specific Services & Supports

Each of these priorities have a separate work group, with approximately 65 participants involved.

2017 goals include:

1. Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation
2. Tribal Compacting of Child Welfare Services
3. Tribal Consultation

What can you do?

- Join a strategic plan work group
- Stay informed
- Support wellness

“Alaska Native culture keeps Alaska Native children safe.”

This is the vision statement for a five year strategic plan created to address the disparities that Alaska Native children experience in the child welfare system. Today over 3,000 children are in the Alaska foster care system. More than half of these children are Alaska Native. This disparity is unacceptable.

Recognizing that no one government agency or Tribal entity can solve this problem alone, the “Transforming Child Welfare Outcomes for Alaska Native Children Strategic Plan 2016-2020” was created as the result of a passionate and collaborative process which included numerous Tribal, state and community partners over many months. Participants talked openly and frankly about how to solve problems, reduce barriers and promote children being served closest to home within the context of their Tribe and culture whenever possible.

A personal account from a non-native foster parent:

With her little hand in mine, the two of us slowly walk down the ferry ramp into the bowels of the Le Conte, one of the oldest and smallest vessels that make up the fleet of inter-island ferries of Southeast Alaska’s Marine Highway. We are blasted by that familiar smell of salt water, marine diesel and car exhaust that permeates the parking level of the ferry before we ascend the several flights of stairs to the passenger level of the ferry. I feel weighted down as I struggle to carry the squirming child along with the numerous other packs and totes I am lugging that contain snacks and toys to keep an active toddler occupied for the four hour ferry trip. For Susie this is simply another day of her short life, where every day brings some kind of wonderment. When you are 2 years old, nothing is mundane; an ordinary walk to the park is a delight. For me, however, this day, this trip, feels far from joyful. In fact my mood feels like the dense heavy, gray clouds that press down on the forested islands we pass, layers and layers of suffocating gray.

Susie is 2.3 years old, a beautiful Alaska Native child with healthy rosy cheeks that are just beginning to shed their baby fat. She has soft, long, jet black shiny hair. Susie has been in state foster care since she was 11 months old. I am her 3rd foster home. Susie and I bonded quickly. I couldn’t wait for my work day to end and to pick her up from preschool. Although I did not ever encourage her to call me mommy, she quickly learned from her peers, to reach up her arms for me and call me mama. Susie loves to be read to, loves “Dora the Explorer”, and bubble baths. She is smart, perceptive and talkative. Susie could easily be that little girl I have always wanted as my own. But she doesn’t belong to me or my

white culture. She comes from her own rich heritage, of which she must do her part to revitalize and pass-on.

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed 40 years ago by congress as a measure to attempt to stem the tide of a disproportionate number of American Indian/Alaskan Native children entering state foster care systems and being adopted by white families; these children would forever be lost to their families, Tribes, communities, and culture. Today, both nationally and in Alaska, racial disproportionality continues to exist at alarmingly high rates. In 2016, while comprising less than 20% of the population, Alaskan Native children comprise over 55% of the children in foster care in Alaska.

While it is easy to place blame on the child welfare system for the years it has taken to implement ICWA as it was intended; data shows widespread disparities of Alaska Native/American Indian people involved in *all* service sectors of society. In order to follow the vision *Alaska Native culture keeps Alaska Native children safe*, there remains a need to balance both a recognition of the impact of historical trauma as well as the strengths of families we serve. Many professionals who have the responsibility to help vulnerable families may have unconscious bias about Alaska Native culture. These professionals are in positions to make life changing decisions for the family. Yet, without thoughtful and continuous self-evaluation, it is human nature to fall into systemic racism and follow the practice of favoring white, non-relatives over Alaskan Native relatives.

The ferry takes us to her island village, to her mother's family, where she will be permanently placed with her maternal uncle and his family; a home, where she fits and belongs. Her hair and skin color matches theirs. She will be cuddled, loved and called "baby." Their home is different than mine. It smells different, and is smaller, more crowded. Instead of having her own bedroom, as she did at my house, Susie will share a room with her brother who sometimes lives in the house and her teen-aged cousin. There is a chest freezer in the living room. Susie is terrified. She clings to me and won't let go.

Not too long ago, I feel confident that the Office of Children's Services (OCS) would have let me keep Susie forever. The caseworker and I could have come up with many different "reasons" for why Susie should be adopted by me; and the white judge, white attorneys and white guardian ad litem, who make such decisions, would have nodded and agreed. Times have changed. And this is a good thing. Having been a social worker first, and a foster parent second, my head has known this long before my heart; but my heart is getting there. The spirit and intent of ICWA maybe, just maybe, are beginning to be embraced.

The privilege of working in the field of child welfare is having the honor of being a part of a family's path to healing. In the example above Susie is in a home where she is learning how to live in her Alaska Native culture and it will be one less battle she will have as she grows up, a child from a traumatic beginning, as she pieces together her identity.

A year later I go back to her village and visit Susie. She is happy and thriving. She is now three years old and doesn't remember me at all. Somewhere deep in her mind, seeing me may trigger a vague sense of familiarity – a sense of knowing she was well cared for, nurtured on her journey to get back to her family's people. And that is truly what matters - that I was a vehicle to help her return, intact, healthy and able to rejoin her people. My heart truly believes this.

About the authors:

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