

# *Sitka ICWA Partnership*

## **Sitka Tribe of Alaska**

*The safety and well-being of children is vital to a Native nation's future. For years, tribal and state agencies in Alaska have taken different approaches to the needs of vulnerable families, leading to large numbers of children being adopted outside their home communities. With the goal of securing better outcomes for tribal families, the Sitka Tribe reached out to its state child protection counterparts to build more collaborative relationships to benefit tribal families. The Sitka ICWA Partnership is breaking new ground through brave communication, joint case management, and cooperative staff training.*

### **TRIBAL CHILDREN AT RISK**

Located in southeastern Alaska approximately 95 miles from Juneau by air or water, the Baranof Island is home to the 4,400 citizens of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska. Beginning in the mid-18th century, Russians and Euro-Americans intent on trading and settling on the island disrupted the Tlingit people's way of life. Disruption over land and resources was followed by repeated tuberculosis and influenza epidemics, decimating the local tribal population. Assimilationist colonial policies aimed at destroying language and culture, focused particularly on the removal of tribal children from the community, spiriting them away to boarding schools and creating further generational harms.

Today, the legacy of this trauma is significant; many tribal families struggle with anti-social behaviors and potential child protection concerns. State child protection authorities remove Sitka Tribal children at a rate that is 410 percent greater than their population demographic. For many years, it was routine for Native children removed from their families to be adopted into non-tribal homes. State welfare officials justified these placements as being in the children's best interest even

though most adoptees were raised without connection to their tribal identities and family relations. For the Sitka Tribe as a whole, child removal often meant the real and permanent loss of future leaders, artists, and teachers.

In 1978, the US Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to improve the handling of Native American child protection cases by mandating the involvement of tribal governments in certain proceedings. Despite this federal mandate, the Sitka Tribe remained dissatisfied with the handling of its children in the Alaska state child protection system. Time and again, the Tribe was put in the position of reacting to state child welfare decisions rather than having the opportunity to address issues proactively. The situation was made worse by decades of child protection disputes and sovereignty litigation that created an adversarial relationship between tribal and state child protection workers. Put bluntly, tribal social service workers did not trust state officials, particularly in light of the history of placing tribal children in non-tribal homes, outside of the community.

## HONORING NATIONS

### PARTNERS IN CHILD PROTECTION

In 2001, the *For Our Grandchildren* committee of Sitka tribal elders urged tribal leaders to focus on the rights of children. As one of the Tribe's social workers notes, "the elders charged the entire Tribe with the responsibility to raise healthy and successful generations—by all means necessary." These teachings prompted the Tribe's Department of Social Services to rethink the adversarial approach to child welfare cases. The Tribe resolved to move beyond historical grievances and to actively engage with the state child protection system. The Sitka ICWA Partnership represents a commitment by the Sitka Tribe of Alaska and the state of Alaska to work together, instead of against each other, to protect vulnerable children and assist families.

To build their collaborative approach, the Tribe's Social Service Department and the local Sitka Field Office of the state's Office of Child Services participate in extensive cross-training, workshops, and meetings.

Tribal caseworkers enroll alongside new state caseworkers in a three-week program at the Alaska Child Welfare Academy to become familiar with non-tribal perspectives on child protection. Together state employees and their tribal counterparts attend the Tribe's ICWA-related trainings, which include the "Motherhood/Fatherhood is Sacred," "Native Motivational Interviewing," "ICWA Qualified Expert Witness," and "Children in Need of Aid" curricula. The Tribe routinely invites Alaska child protection staff to important cultural events and celebrations in the community. Tribal and state employees engage in a local truth and reconciliation process, respectfully reviewing the state's Office of Child Services Tribal Survey to identify areas for improvement.

Now, child welfare cases involving tribal citizens are handled cooperatively from the outset. The state of Alaska and the Tribe have signed a confidentiality agreement





which allows information to be shared freely and quickly between their agencies. State and tribal case managers visit homes together to conduct initial assessments in response to reports of neglect or potential harm. Caseworkers from both offices meet bi-weekly to review family situations and brainstorm ways to create safe environments for children. With the goal of reducing trauma, the partners use the resources of both the tribal and state systems to work with families to avoid reactionary removals and when necessary, find appropriate placements. The Tribe invests in two full-time ICWA caseworkers and legal counsel with ICWA expertise. In the words of one tribal employee, “We bring the noise for every kid. We go after them wherever they are. We are relentless.”

The partnership between the Sitka Tribe and the state child welfare system is making a serious difference in what are otherwise daunting statistics throughout Alaska and the United States: The Sitka Tribe intervenes in 100% of cases involving a tribal child. The Sitka ICWA

Partnership reduces “screened-in” reports of harm from becoming actual removals; building one of the lowest removal rates in all of Alaska. In situations that require an out-of-home placement, the Sitka ICWA Partnership presents a 95% ICWA compliant placement rate—children in need of aid are cared for by extended family and tribal citizens. The best interest of each child is carefully weighed on a case-by-case basis; in those special circumstances where a non-ICWA placement is warranted, caregivers are required to sign a cultural connection agreement to secure the Tribe’s blessing going forward. These agreements insure that all children, regardless of placement, are entitled to know who they are, have the opportunity to engage with healthy extended family, and to remain connected to the Sitka Tribe as valuable and productive citizens. Through a careful process of truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness, the Sitka ICWA Partnership gives life to the *For Our Grandchildren* committee’s vision that “the ultimate future of our people is considered in each action taken from this day forward.”

## HONORING NATIONS

### BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

The Sitka ICWA Partnership places children before interpersonal politics. Tribal leaders recognize that the Alaska Office of Child Services and state judiciary have a very real and ongoing role in tribal child protection. The painful history impacting tribal families is undeniable, and there are plenty of reasons for reluctance and distrust. However, tribal partnering with the Alaska child protection system is generating new approaches to a system that can impact tribal citizens for generations to come. By attending state training, the Tribe's ICWA team cross-pollinates with the state's social workers and learn the very regulations, terminology, and policies that are practiced by their counterparts in the state system. One tribal official notes that with a more in-depth knowledge of the state system, tribal employees are "given the skills to operate on multiple sheets of music." The benefits of this cross-training partnership flow both ways: now, when faced with difficult situations, the ICWA team has a better understanding of their Alaska counterparts' intentions and constraints, while state child protection employees have a greater appreciation of the Indian Child Welfare Act, Indigenous values, and traditional medicine to heal families struggling with severe distress.

Focusing on the shared goal of safety and permanency for each child has helped the Sitka Tribe and the state's Office of Child Services Sitka Field Office move beyond their contentious past. Disagreements can be handled constructively within a commitment to respect and to learn from each

other. State and tribal caseworkers voluntarily participate as a cohort in the Tribe's course, "Healthy Relationships," which is referred to client families to boost communication and conflict resolution skills. Tribal staff report that face-to-face time as a child protection system creates an atmosphere that is safe and respectful to have difficult conversations. The candid, brave discussions can be uncomfortable in the short-term, but, in the long-term, provide critical ingredients for trust. A state employee recalls, "We were suspicious of each other, but we kept coming to the table. That was the key... we kept coming to the table, in formal and informal ways." The connection is now so

strong that the Sitka Field Office recently invited the Tribe's Director of Social Services to be involved in the screening and hiring of Sitka's new state caseworker.

Although the Sitka ICWA Partnership is a working arrangement and not a formal change to the state's child protection system, in practice, it has led to the incorporation of tribal solutions at all stages of the child protection process. As an example, while state guidelines call for child placement permanency within 16 months, the partnership enables families to extend, oftentimes, rigid time frames needed to complete their recovery. Since the Tribe is actively involved at the beginning

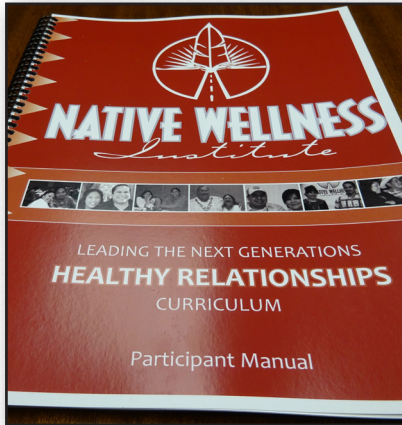
of a child protection case, there is an earlier opportunity to divert cases from the state child welfare system into tribal court or tribal services. Because of the relationships built through the Sitka ICWA Partnership, the Office of Child Services and the state court system now accept the need for a connection to the Tribe and culturally-based services as an essential part of the recovery and reunification process. As the two child protection systems continue to work more effectively together, resources can be focused on strengthening families and not wasted on discord.

# HONORING NATIONS



# LESSONS

The Indian Child Welfare Act is intended to protect and promote tribal children, however faithful implementation continues to evade many states. The Sitka ICWA Partnership turns this historically contentious relationship around, so that states and tribes are working cooperatively and more expansively toward family healing. The Partnership connects tribal children to their family and community, carrying forward the Grandparents' intention of laying the groundwork for a healthy and productive future.



By building trust, constructive lines of communication, and joint problem-solving approaches, a tribal nation and the state can arrive at a common understanding of child welfare and better ensure the safety and success of Native children and families.



A joint confidentiality agreement that permits child welfare information to be quickly and easily shared is a critical step in assisting tribal and state service providers to work well together.



Investing in a systematic practice of cross-training, cross-staffing, and relationship building creates an integrated tribal-state system that is better able to protect Native children and empower Native families.