



Putting Families First Playbook Tribal Child Welfare Agencies

Tribes have long understood the value of keeping children with their families and connected to their community. Many tribes highly respect children and many community members may have certain roles and responsibilities in child-rearing practices. Congress found, in the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), in 1978, “that there is no resource that is more vital to the continued existence and integrity of Indian tribes than their children...” The Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act (WICWA) codified ICWA into state statute in 2009 and added some clarity to the term “active efforts.” After over 40 years, ICWA is regarded by many as a “gold standard” of child welfare practice.

*Oneida Nation’s Family
Service Department’s
mission statement:*

*Tsyakitsy^tha – Healing
families together.*

Putting Families First provides an opportunity to extend a similar standard of care to all children and families across Wisconsin. Tribal child welfare agencies are experts in advocacy for in-home services and kinship placements. Their example is one that can lead the way as we move towards a more family-centered approach to child welfare.

Food for thought: *Child welfare professionals with experience in working with Indian children and their families will be more familiar with the requirement of “active efforts” to prevent the breakup of the Indian family and reunify children with their families. These efforts include, but are not limited to, implementing family preservation strategies, connecting families to supportive community resources, identifying extended family as a placement resource or support and arranging family interactions.*

In some ways, the framework of “active efforts” is a way to understand the transformation of Putting Families First. Therefore, this practice is not “new,” but rather an expansion of these practices that have long been advocated for by tribal leaders and required in the field with Indian children and families.

Local agencies can forge even stronger partnerships with tribal child welfare professionals and agencies by demonstrating a strong, lasting commitment to high quality case practice in every interaction. As we continue to improve outcomes for children and families by keeping children within their families and communities, we live up to the promise of ICWA and Putting Families First.





What Can Tribal Child Welfare Agencies Expect Around Putting Families First?

Because active efforts are already a requirement for working with Indian children and their families, little is changing with regards to expectations around case practice with Indian families outside of stronger compliance with the long-standing ICWA requirements.

DCF and many local jurisdictions are choosing to invest in additional support for families that are specifically directed toward keeping children in their home whenever possible. Targeted Safety Support Funds (TSSF), available to counties and tribes, offers flexible funding for concrete supports that have not been available previously, in addition to increased case management time and resources for supervision within the home/family. This flexible funding is showing early signs of success, with 77% of TSSF enrolled families never experiencing removal. Across the child welfare system, policies, practices and trainings are being reviewed and updated to support the goal of keeping children with their families and within their communities.

Make it personal: Spend time engaging partners within tribal child welfare agencies. Consider discussions on local level changes, including changes to funding structures, services and efforts to train staff on best practices under Putting Families First. Consider having conversations around how both agencies are using funds, such as TSSF to support families.



The Putting Families First transformation commits Wisconsin's child welfare system to building services to support families in their homes in an effort to keep children in family settings whenever possible. This work has long been underway in tribal child welfare agencies, where child welfare professionals recognize the importance of culture and tradition in strengthening families.

In one situation, tribal and county child welfare professionals supported a mother after her child was removed after a domestic violence incident. The child welfare professional determined the mother needed to complete alcohol and drug abuse and mental health assessments as a condition for return.

Understanding how meaningful maintaining family connections can be during these challenges, the professionals partnered with the tribe to involve extended relatives in visitation. They were also respectful of the family's boundaries and privacy while they pursued traditional healing methods.

Because this space for the mother to seek healing was created, she did not need further treatment, and her child was returned to her care. By leaning into their partnership and engaging with the tribe's culture and tradition, tribal and county child welfare professionals were able to not only reunify this family but also create strong, lasting supports.

How Can Local Child Welfare Agencies Engage Tribal Child Welfare Agencies to Support Putting Families First?

Local county child welfare agencies have a legal requirement to comply with ICWA and WICWA, including active efforts and placement preferences. Although the legal onus falls to the county agency, tribal child welfare professionals are an asset in informing the accomplishment of this goal.

Here are a few ways in which local child welfare professionals can partner with tribal child welfare professionals to support the work of Putting Families First:

- Seek tribal input in how to efficiently identify family, like-kin, community supports and placement resources;
- Seek tribal feedback on available culturally-appropriate family preservation strategies;
- Consult tribal partners and provide opportunities for them to advocate for children and families;
- Discuss creative efforts to keep children with their families with tribal partners;
- and provide the opportunity for tribal partners to address challenging conversations and incorporate their feedback in the case practice with Indian families.

As every county and tribal child welfare agency coordinates together differently, how this impacts the tribal child welfare agency may look different. Talking about case process locally can be helpful in addressing local nuances.

Additional Resources

The following resources are available to assist local agencies in creating strong partnerships with tribal child welfare agencies and ensuring compliance with WICWA.

- [WICWA Online Resource for Case Workers](#) – an orientation to ICWA and WICWA.
- [Active Efforts Guide](#) – a guide for meeting the WICWA “active efforts” requirement.
- [Capacity Building Center for Tribes: Building an Effective Tribal-State Child Welfare Partnership](#) – a resource supporting relationships between tribal and county child welfare agencies and professionals.
- [National Indian Child Welfare Association](#) – an organization working to “support the safety, health, and spiritual strength of American Indian and Alaska Native children.”

