

**UNITED FOR FAMILIES:
THE COLLABORATIVE CIRCLE FOR THE WELL-BEING
OF SOUTH DAKOTA'S NATIVE CHILDREN**

Background and History

Recruitment and retention of Native American resource families has been a concern for both tribes and the South Dakota Division of Child Protection Services since the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978.

In recent years, a focus has returned to this important issue and in 2002 the beginnings of a state-tribal foster and adoption work group was formed. Over the next year and a half the group met to discuss the continuing issues related to recruitment and retention: strategies to bridge barriers, and implementation of a cooperative effort between State, Tribal, and private organizations.

Although initial attendance at the tribal-state workgroup meetings was good, by the fall 2003 meeting attendance had begun to dwindle with fewer persons regularly participating in the meetings. Because of this, no meetings were scheduled until late fall 2004 in collaboration with the AdoptUsKids statewide strategic planning session. The strategic planning session, conducted by AdoptUsKids Technical Assistance consultants, Judy and John McKenzie and Kathy Deserly, was designed to address a statewide scope of issues related to recruitment and retention of all resource families in the state. A series of focus groups were held around the state to elicit information which could lay the foundation for a strategic plan.

From that initial meeting, several strategies were identified to improve recruitment and retention of resource families in South Dakota, including a strategy to renew the operation of the state-tribal foster and adoption workgroup. This was identified as key to the success of improving recruitment and retention of Native resource families. Thus began the revitalization of the state-tribal recruitment workgroup.

With outside facilitation provided by the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Organizational Improvement (Steve Preister) and AdoptUsKids (Kathy Deserly), the next workgroup meeting was held in March 2005 at Chamberlain, SD. Thirty tribal and state representatives were in attendance and decided, through a consensus of the workgroup, that it was time that the workgroup evolve into a true collaborative of tribal and state partners. The group identified interim leaders and a scope of work—developing a mission statement, organizational structure, membership and by-laws—to begin the collaborative effort.

At the second meeting of the Tribal-State Collaborative in June 2005, these tasks became reality. The group named the collaborative—*United for Families: The Collaborative Circle for the Well-Being of South Dakota's Native Children*. In

addition, the Collaborative Circle's structure and membership criteria were established.

Through only four quarterly meetings in 2005 and again in 2006—each facilitated by AdoptUsKids and the National Resource Center for Organizational Improvement—the Collaborative Circle has become a solid entity. Made up of 36 members from tribal, state, consumer and provider groups, the Collaborative Circle is moving forward to tackle the issues of recruitment, retention and child welfare concerns of its members.

The Collaborative Circle Structure

The Collaborative Circle has identified three broad areas of focus:

- Setting an agenda for addressing the needs and improving the outcomes of Native children and families in the child and family services system.
- Developing and advocating for new service strategies to address the needs of Native children and families.
- Monitoring, supporting, and reassessing these activities and maintaining accountability for ICWA implementation and compliance and for Native child and family outcomes in child protection.

These areas of focus are addressed through the work of five committees:

- ICWA Implementation and Compliance and Legislative Review
- Services and Stability
- Placement Resources
- Education, Training, and Public Relations
- Regional Collaboratives Support

Five persons comprise the elected leadership of the full Collaborative Circle:

- Two co-chairs/co-facilitators—one tribal representative and one state representative—preside over meetings
- Two alternate co-chairs/co-facilitators—one tribal representative and one state representative—preside over meetings when their counterparts are absent

- A recorder who takes minutes or causes minutes to be taken, and sends minutes and other materials, including meeting agendas, to the members

The following principles and values guide the Collaborative Circle's work:

- *We work together to promote trusting relationships within the Collaborative Circle and with other community partners, building on and using the strengths, ideas, and resources of each member.*
- *We collectively assume responsibility for achieving better outcomes for Native children and families in South Dakota.*
- *Whenever possible, we promote a preventive approach by:*
 - *Providing services and supports upfront to prevent Native children and families from coming into the child protection system.*
 - *Helping families understand their rights.*
 - *Promoting parental empowerment and participation in a cultural context.*
 - *Moving children and families out of the system as soon as it is feasibly possible.*
- *All services and supports that are provided are individualized to meet the needs of the clients, are family-centered, and culturally-based.*
- *Families are engaged as full partners in defining their needs and goals and achieving those goals. Families' extended members and other informal sources of support are also engaged in keeping the children safe, in permanent homes, and achieving well-being.*
- *All decisions regarding Native children are made in full compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) through collaboration between the Tribes, the State, and private agencies. When children need an out-of-home placement in order to be safe, relatives and other Native families are considered first.*
- *Tribes are empowered to meet their own child and family service needs, including developing the resources and infrastructure to license Native resource families on and off the reservations.*
- *We work to ensure that Native children are able to maintain their own family, community, and cultural ties when they are in out-of-home placements, and even after termination of parental rights if that becomes necessary, through various services and supports such as mentoring by Native Americans, urban cultural centers, cultural family plans and agreements, transfer protocols, family group decision-making, and training.*

The Future and Sustainability of the Collaborative Circle

After two short years, the Collaborative Circle has achieved a sturdy organizational framework. Operating under the guidance of an organizational charter, the Circle has strong leadership, steady membership, and a plan for the future. Through the active involvement of committee chairpersons and members, the focus areas of the Collaborative Circle are being addressed.

Recently, the Collaborative Circle began the initial steps of learning about “reconciliation in Indian child welfare.” Reconciliation is a movement that is gaining interest around the country as a way to improve tribal-state relationships damaged by historical practices of excessive placements of Native children in foster and adoptive placements.

While much has been accomplished, much remains to be done. Ongoing community education is needed to inform the tribal communities of South Dakota, as well as the greater statewide community, about the work of the Collaborative Circle and the issues of Native children in foster care or awaiting adoption.

Unfortunately, state and tribal resources available to the Collaborative Circle are limited. Therefore, a current focus of the Collaborative Circle is the development of a plan to finance this important work. The Circle may also consider incorporation as a non-profit organization in the future.

As the National Resource Centers gradually step back from the Collaborative Circle, the Circle has become a unique and viable resource for Native children and families in South Dakota.