

News **Greater Minnesota**

Red Lake Nation recognized for 'decolonized' approach to child and family services

Rooted in Anishinaabe language, culture, traditions and beliefs, Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog — the department formerly known as Red Lake Family and Children's Services — is designed to focus on intergenerational family wellness.

By [Andy Steiner](#) | Contributing Writer



The Red Lake Nation Government Center stands on the shores of Lower Red Lake in the town of Red Lake.

Courtesy of Clean Energy Economy Minnesota

Jan. 24, 2022 [Red Lake Nation](#), home of the [Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians](#), is taking a unique approach to the delivery of child and family services.

Instead of referring to the people the tribe serves as “clients,” it calls them “relatives.” Foster parents are known as “relative care community service providers,” and the process formerly known as child protection case management is now called “reunification services.” Even the department, formerly known as Red Lake Family and Children’s Services, has a new name: [Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog](#): “Uplifting All of Our Relatives.”

Rooted in [Anishinaabe](#) language, culture, traditions and beliefs, the new approach is designed to bring the department’s focus back to intergenerational family wellness, with a framework that is focused on human trauma and resiliency and grounded in the Anishinaabe worldview, explained Cheri Goodwin, Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog executive director. “We are doing the hard work of [decolonization](#),” Goodwin said.



Cheri Goodwin

The results so far have been encouraging.

“The parents are happy, the kids are happy. We provide wrap-around services within the community,” said Goodwin.

On Jan. 13, the impact of these changes was recognized when Red Lake Nation and Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog was honored with

a [Minnesota Department of Human Services \(DHS\) Commissioner's Circle of Excellence Award](#) for its work adapting services to meet the needs of the people in their community.

“This award is an acknowledgement from the Department of the ways that Red Lake Nation has been able to incorporate traditional aspects into their child welfare work,” said Tikki Brown, Minnesota DHS assistant commissioner for children and family services. “They have had great results so far. We are excited to see how this takes off.”

Family matters

When Goodwin came to the department in 2015, it was clear that the old approach wasn't working. Child protection and foster care was “actually hurting families.”

This new approach, she explained, is focused on keeping families together by looking at their strength and resiliency through a Native lens. This requires completely new approaches, a dismantling of the way these services have been delivered for decades.

That means being family-centered to its core, explained Amy RedCloud, the department's Mental health clinical treatment director. RedCloud said the terminology changes are an important acknowledgement of that fact. When department staff replaced the word “clients” with “relatives,” a healthy change in attitude occurred,

“We've held everyone up to that standard, to be using ‘relatives’ when we are talking about those that we work with — which is one of those things that have shifted us in this direction. We are now able to work from our hearts,” said RedCloud.

That focus includes a commitment to keeping Native families together, rather than separating children from their relatives and sending them to foster homes. In the not-so-distant past, RedCloud explained,

“Children in Red Lake were sent away because we didn’t have enough foster homes for them and because we needed a higher level of care.”



Amy RedCloud

A big part of the transition came when Red Lake was officially designated an [American Indian Child Welfare Initiative Tribe](#), which meant that the federal and state dollars going to tribal agencies could be used at their leaders’ discretion. That allowed RedCloud and her colleagues at Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog to make important changes that directly impacted the lives of tribal members.

“We’ve been able to improve our programming to better deliver services to relative care providers on the Nation,” she said. “We’ve also opened a youth residential facility so we can keep more children on the homeland — and bring more children *back* to the homeland.”

‘Our children pick their parents’

Taking a family-centered approach to human services requires time and an openness to approaching issues with traditional Native methods, Goodwin said.

The department’s recent work with one struggling family exemplifies the approach.

“Instead of taking the Western-style decision-making process,” Goodwin said, Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog staff, “brought in the pipes; we had prayers and songs. With that approach, the family was able to talk about the issues that they have to address to be a happy family.”

While the classic child protection approach in the past often leaned heavily on removing children from family and placing them off reservation with foster families, the goal now is to keep families together as much as possible, using alternative approaches like placing children with extended family members for temporary care.

The historical trauma of government-mandated family separation runs deep in the Native community, trauma that Goodwin’s department tries to undo with their approach. “What I’ve learned from Day 1 is when these little kids are placed out of their homes, they are always wanting mom and dad. Once these kids turn 18, where do they go? They go right back home to their parents. That is why we want to make parents a permanency option.”

RedCloud said that that perspective underpins all of her department’s work.

“We honor the sacred bond those children have with their parents,” she said. Even in the most difficult cases, “Our children pick their parents. As a system we honor that choice. We do what we can to keep families together in that way.”



Tikki Brown

Taking a holistic approach to working with every member of the family to heal problems is a strong long-term solution, said the DHS's Brown.

“If a parent needs help with food, with paying rent or paying bills, helping out with that in a way that is culturally specific and culturally relevant can be a big help and a big way to keep families intact,” said Brown.

When help comes from people who look like you, the impact can be significant in its potential for healing, Brown added. “If I would think about how I would like to be spoken to and treated, it might make a big difference. Red Lake Nation members turned the process on its head and made it work in a way people truly relate with.”

In staff trainings, RedCloud explained, “We talk about being able to step into relationships with humility and accountability and in a space we can all learn. We, as service providers, consider the families to be the experts. We're not the experts. The families are.”

Positive results

The state award “is for the whole system, not just child welfare,” Goodwin said. “It is all the services that we have initiated under my leadership, with the support of our tribal government.”

That support has meant an expansive approach to the way the tribe, and those who work with them, support members. In addition to the new approach, the department has also expanded significantly in recent years, from 22 employees when Goodwin came on in 2015 to some 115 employees today.

Members of the Red Lake Nation have a history of independence from government regulation and a deep commitment to community, Goodwin said. That history is reflected in the way she runs her department. “We follow the state guidelines,” Goodwin said, “but at the end of the day these are our kids, our families. We’ll do it our way.”

That way has seen measurable results. “From 2017-2021, children in out-of-home placement decreased by 68 percent,” said Goodwin.

Brown said that she and her colleagues at DHS believe those results show that the approach of Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog offer an important model for responding to a critical situation. “We have extreme disparities in our American Indian population when we look at our child protection numbers,” she said. “Those are the result of years and years of inequities, policies and practices that have really been problematic.”

The department’s transition to Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog, with its culturally focused approach, she said, is “an excellent step to try to address and ensure that whatever we are putting in place going forward is meaningful and relevant.”



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