

Testimony on the Issues of Child Welfare and Jurisdiction on Child Welfare, Tribal-State Collaboration and Jurisdictional Issues, and Building Tribal Capacity

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Honorable Committee Chairperson O’Neill, committee members, and staff:

My name is Christopher Sharp, I am a Clinical Assistant Professor and Director of the Office of American Indian Projects within the ASU School of Social Work. I would like to thank the Committee for allowing me to share my perspectives today and welcome you to the Southwest, for those of you that are from other regions of this great nation. I am from the Mohave tribe, descendant of the Frog Clan (Bouh'th) and a citizen of the Colorado River Indian Tribes. My career experience has been working for and with American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribes and Tribal populations in Arizona and throughout the United States. OAIP projects are primarily focused on AI/AN communities and programs in areas of research, evaluation, and technical assistance. I also teach, serve as a field instructor, field liaison, and mentor to American Indian students and other students interested in working with AI/AN populations.

The Office of American Indian Projects was established in 1977 with the purpose to develop the capacity of American Indian Communities and programs. The Mission of OAIP includes the development of a site where American Indian research and grant projects can be conducted, coordinated and monitored to ensure a focus that is beneficial to the tribes and one that reinforces a government-to-government approach. The Mission also includes recruiting American Indian social work students and faculty, mentoring students, and providing American Indian people with a friendly reception within Arizona State University. The Vision of the OAIP is to develop strengths in both individuals and systems within the social work arenas of American Indian communities, in conjunction with the ongoing federal mandate for tribes to assume responsibility for the delivery of social services to American Indian people.

OAIP was established during a momentous time as only two years prior to its establishment the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act (PL 93-638) was passed and the Indian Child Welfare Act (PL 95-608) would be passed in the next year. In fact, it was here in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, that a sovereign tribe first contracted with the federal government through the “638” mechanism to deliver social services. Prior to that SRPMIC and other tribes delivered services through the Buy Indian Act, which was passed in 1910.

Shortly after the passage of PL 93-638 a group of stakeholders including Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Navajo Nation, Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Phoenix Indian Center, Indian Health Services, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs held a meeting with the director

of our school at the time. They were able to convince the director to establish the Office of American Indian Projects and the School brought in Eddie Brown to be the first Director in 1977, followed by Syd Beane from 1980-1983, then Edwin Gonzalez-Santin until recently; and all three were part of the establishment efforts. Those visionary leaders understood the need to educate and train American Indian people in the delivery social services and the need for a site within ASU for Tribal capacity-building projects to have a home. From that point on OAIP has maintained its approach as one that acknowledges and reinforces the government-to-government relationships between Tribes and the federal government, as well as between ASU as a state university and Tribes as sovereign nations and communities. When I tell this story I make a point to emphasize that our office did not create itself, that it was born out of the advocacy of the community stakeholders, and thus as an office we have an obligation to continue to meet the best interests of Tribes in working toward our Mission.

On a year-to-year basis, our School graduates more American Indian/Alaska Natives earning their BSW and MSW degrees than any other institution. We ensure that those students are provided a welcoming environment and are afforded the opportunity to develop as social workers in Tribal settings through their field placement and subsequent employment in those agencies. OAIP recently completed a stipend and scholarship project through the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) called University Partnerships (UP), through which ASU partnered with Gila River Indian Community (lead agency), Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Navajo Nation, and Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation to provide field placement in child welfare settings with a goal for graduates to transition-to-work in one of the partner agencies or another Tribal child welfare agency. The project was a success, as we have NCWWI UP graduates working at each of those community partners. If I were to tell you the biggest lesson learned from that project is that we – OAIP and the School of Social Work – have to do better at coordinating with the Tribes around transition-to-work after graduation, which would result in the increased professionalization of the Tribal child welfare workforce.

Mechanisms need to be created to facilitate seamless transitions from graduation with a degree to entry into the Tribal child welfare workforce. This can be addressed at multiple levels from coordination between Tribal entities and universities, the establishment of retention-focused traineeship positions in Tribal child welfare departments, incentivizing current workers to obtain their degrees, increasing professional qualifications, etc. Ultimately this will require an investment of federal funding dedicated to increase the professionalization of the workforce. I believe that this up-front investment of resources would result in less spending down the road by reducing turnover and improving outcomes for Tribal children and families.

We should especially be focused on our rural and resource limited Tribes, where barriers to recruitment of qualified staff are coupled with high turnover and low wage levels that make it difficult to recruit even their own community members that went off to college. We often refer to this problem as “brain drain”. If we ask our American Indian/Alaska Native students what their goal is after they graduate they tend to want to contribute to the betterment of their communities, but often become discouraged when they encounter barriers to gainful employment in their home communities. I believe that we – academia, Tribal social services,

federal agencies, and other stakeholders such as national organizations and institutes – can establish partnerships to address the unique workforce issues facing Tribes. Examples of such partnerships are currently underway through three Tribal NCWWI Workforce Excellence Sites that include partnerships between: 1.) the Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation and University of North Dakota, 2.) the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and University of Minnesota-Duluth, and 3.) the Muscogee Creek Nation and the University of Oklahoma. Here in Arizona we have established the Navajo Nation and Arizona State University Title IV-E partnership as a part of our sustainability plan for the NCWWI UP project, which I will talk about later.

We know from research that caseworkers with a degree in social work that were recipients of Title IV-E stipends have been more likely to remain employed in child welfare for longer periods of time (Madden, et al., 2014). Yet nearly 12 years after Tribes were first authorized to receive direct Title IV-E funding, less than three percent (17 out of 574) of all federally-recognized Tribes have an approved plan. It is clear that more needs to be done whether it's addressing the Title IV-E requirements at the Congressional level, revising the technical assistance delivery provided to Tribes, or investing in the Tribal infrastructure to meet the data system requirements; to name a few areas of consideration.

Of those direct Title IV-E recipient Tribes, Navajo Nation has established a Title IV-E partnership with ASU through a Memorandum of Agreement signed in September 2018. The purpose of this agreement is two-fold: 1.) To establish a program that includes tuition and stipend assistance to persons employed or seeking employment with the Navajo Nation Department of Family Services (DFS) and 2.) To improve the training for new and ongoing workers and other eligible training recipients. Currently Navajo Nation is funding three MSW students at ASU that will transition into full-time employment upon graduation and we are in discussions with DFS as to the development of a robust training system that meets the unique cultural and linguistic needs of Navajo children and families. Long-term goals include a partnership with Dine College to establish a social work program so that Navajo Nation citizens and their families don't have to leave their home communities to obtain a high-quality social work degree and enter the Navajo child welfare workforce. This is important because Tribes are striving to develop and implement programs that meet the complex requirements of Title IV-E, while fitting the programs and services into the unique cultural context of their communities. They need highly qualified workers – in areas of both program design and cultural competence – to carry out these tasks. We are asking a lot of our future workforce but I believe they have the ability to meeting the challenges that lay ahead. What I would like to suggest is to establish a federal-tribal-academic task force under the Capacity Building Centers to begin planning and peer sharing to scale up Tribal Title IV-E stipend and scholarship programs which will ultimately improve Title IV-E implementation.

Research has shown that organizational factors that impact workforce retention include workload/caseloads, supervision and support, ongoing training related to improving practice, and professional development and advancement opportunities (Gomez, et al., 2010; Madden, et al., 2014). Many of the Tribal programs are lacking the resources to improve their organizational environments in a way that improves workforce and family outcomes. When I

refer to resources, Yes I am referring to funding levels, but I am also referring to resources around technical assistance, training, and program guidance. Recently I conducted a scan of Tribal welfare position openings, some of the position descriptions included references to 66-BIAM, which is a chapter on social services in the BIA manual that was last updated in 1990, now thirty years ago. I then conducted an online search for the current BIA Manual and the social services chapter was not available. I would like to encourage us to think about this as an opportunity to revisit, rethink, and revise the BIA social services guidelines in a way goes beyond a compliance-focus to include a focus promotes the establishment of service models focused on community-wide prevention, trauma-informed and culturally-informed services, and effective supervision.

We know that there is no one-size-fits all model for all Tribes so the guidelines would not identify a specific model but provide areas of consideration around establishing their own Tribally-specific practice models. If we can do this then the approaches to services at all Tribes can shift from providing reactive services for families that have reached full blown crisis to providing proactive services that prevent the separation of Tribal children from their families and their subsequent placement in foster care system. This new approach is articulated in the Family First Prevention and Services Act (FFPSA) and what I am saying today is that the Bureau of Indian Affairs can and should revise its approach to social services in alignment with FFPSA. If we need to seek more resources to do this then let's make that commitment today. This seems like a monumental task but we need to set our standards high for our Tribal children and families.

In addition to the guidelines discussed above, implementation of updated guidelines could be facilitated on through the establishment of national resource center, which was proposed initially in with the Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Act in 1991, but only funded for one year. The Native American Child Protection Act (H.R. 4957) proposed by Representative Ruben Gallego (AZ 7th District), is currently being considered in the House of Representatives and proposes the establishment of the National Indian Child Resource and Family Center. Such an initiative is long needed in Indian Country and would be a step in the right direction toward facilitating improvement of the Tribal child welfare workforce and establishment of Tribal child welfare service models on a national scale.

The establishment of the National Indian Child Resource and Family Center (NICRFC) would allow the Capacity Building Center for Tribes to be more focused on its goals of working with Title IV-B Tribes on capacity building toward become IV-E eligible and Title IV-E Tribes on implementation. The NICRFC could then work with Tribes toward establishing service models and resource focused on prevention, early childhood development, addressing family violence, trauma-informed services, culturally responsive-systems, family and youth empowerment, and coordination of services including substance abuse and mental health. In regard to prevention, my recommendation is to provide resources that facilitate community-wide processes to design community-driven, cross-departmental efforts that include a multi-generational empowerment approach, prenatal and early childhood services, and culturally-informed services that focus on resilience and healing.

There are many possible stakeholders that can be brought into this effort obviously beginning with Tribes and national AI/AN organizations such as NICWA, NIHB, NIEA, etc. On the federal level we have the partners such as BIA, IHS, and Children's Bureau/Capacity Building Centers. The federal stakeholder group should also include ACF programs such as Head Start, Child Care, and Tribal MIECHV; other HHS agencies such as SAMHSA and HRSA to name a few and I'm sure there are more. In academia, I would highly recommend involving NCWWI and inviting the Workforce Excellence Sites to future hearings. We also have an association of scholars, the Indigenous and Tribal Social Work Educators Association (ITSWEA), for which I sit on the Governing Council, and we have three AI/AN members of ITSWEA that are currently on the Board of Directors for the Council on Social Work Education. We have opportunity to make an impact and as Hunkpapa Lakota Chief Sitting Bull once said, *"Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children."*

In conclusion, while the issues and challenges for social services are widely known, we also have opportunities to make concrete and sustainable changes through a focus on workforce capacity building and the development of resources that are in alignment with the paradigm shift in the child welfare system toward a focus on prevention. Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today.