



## Notes from the Chief

*What I'm working on for You*

Osiyo -

The work of our Cherokee foster parents, child welfare workers and advocates is near and dear to my heart. It is an issue that deserves our daily attention. Cherokee people have always believed our children are sacred and their care is a shared responsibility. Each and every Cherokee child is precious and ensures our collective continued existence.

Sadly, there are more than 1,800 Cherokee children in foster care, with 1,100 of those children living right here in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, we are at a crossroad, with more children in custody than Cherokee foster homes available. The importance of placing Cherokee children in Cherokee foster homes is vital. Not only do our children deserve the right to grow up in a safe, loving environment, but they deserve the right to maintain their tribal ties to Cherokee values and culture.

Removal of our people from our homelands more than 175 years ago is one of the saddest parts of not just Cherokee history, but one of the darkest chapters in all of American history. The Trail of Tears created a long-lasting trauma for generations of Cherokee people, and we are still seeing the effects of it today. One of the most gut-wrenching ways is the trauma of a child in need of family.

Since those dark days of removal, foster care has been a sad but necessary reality, and although it may look different than our tragic historic event, removal is still happening to our Cherokee children when they are plucked from unsafe environments. Unfortunately, there are times when our children are in unsafe situations and need an extra measure of support. Sometimes abuse and neglect can be repeated without interruption across several generations. When this happens, it is necessary to remove children for their well-

being in order to facilitate a healing process, with the hope of family reunification.

Temporary foster care is critical in the process. It literally saves kids and families, and without intervention there is little chance for family healing.

These rights are protected under the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which mandate certain placement preferences occur should an Indian child become deprived and warrant removal from their home. In the placement preferences listed, citizens of a child's tribe are listed as the second consideration, after family. For tribes nationwide, including the Cherokee Nation, protecting our children though ICWA is not simply a juvenile issue, it is also a tribal sovereignty and family rights issue.

Just last week, the Department of Interior issued strengthened ICWA regulations that will better protect the rights of Indian children, their parents and their tribes in state child welfare proceedings. The provisions ensure identification and tribal notification when Indian children are involved in state court custody proceedings and recognize Indian children are best served when ICWA is strictly enforced. Most important, the new regulations instruct state courts on how to provide reunification services to meet the ultimate goal in all foster care cases: reunification of the family.

If you have ever considered the path of foster care, we need Cherokee families more than ever in Oklahoma and across the nation. For more information on how you can become a Cherokee foster home or other ways to help, please contact Cherokee Nation Indian Child Welfare at 918-458-6900 or visit [www.cherokeekids.org](http://www.cherokeekids.org).

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