



Notes from the Chief

What I'm working on for You

Osiyo -

Cherokee Nation has a strong Indian Child Welfare program, and we have always emphasized the importance of protecting our children. The month of May is Foster Awareness Month nationwide, and it's important to highlight the work of our tribe's child welfare workers and so many caring Cherokee foster parents.

At this time, we are working cases on approximately 1,612 children here in Oklahoma and throughout the United States. We have almost as many cases here in our jurisdiction as we do outside it--716 children inside the 14-county jurisdiction and 896 outside the jurisdiction. Our tribal citizenship is the largest in America, and those numbers reflect the number of Cherokee children in need.

Although we have had a slow and steady increase in foster homes, it is still not near enough to have every one of our Cherokee youth in a Native home. Two years ago we only had 17 regular foster homes, and today we now have 46 who regularly step up to foster Cherokee children in need. However, we need more homes. A decent number of our children are placed with relatives, and a high percentage of those children are in non-Native foster homes.

Those kids in non-Native homes who do not reunify with their family or are placed with another Native family become eligible to be adopted by the family they are placed with. To put that into perspective, if 400 Cherokee children are in non-Native homes this year and a non-Native family adopts them, we lose 400 children. If you magnify that even more, in a 10-year span, we risk losing 4,000 Cherokee children.

The importance of placing Cherokee children in Cherokee fosters homes is vital. Children deserve the right to grow up in a safe, loving environment, and they deserve the right to maintain their tribal ties to Cherokee values and lifeways.

Our goal is to have more foster homes waiting on children than we have children waiting on homes. Unfortunately, I do not see our Indian Child Welfare department ever working themselves out of a job. We have a long way to go, but I can see progress happening in this area, especially in the past decade. We have worked aggressively with state agencies and continue to collaborate with the faith community to address this need.

Taking it a step further, Cherokee Nation employees will soon be able to use family leave time when accepting an ICW foster placement. A lack of workplace support should not be a reason families close their homes to foster children. Cherokee Nation is one of the only employers in Oklahoma and across Indian Country to enact a progressive policy enabling a family to address the unique issues with foster care: the required doctor appointments, school transfers or daycare placements, and essential bonding time. If the foster parents are unable to take time off, it compromises our employees' personal leave and paycheck and compromises our Cherokee children receiving the best care.

Cherokee culture and values teach us that we belong to each other, and we have a responsibility to take care of our children and support the adults who are caring for them. Our children deserve a permanent, safe home life. Cherokee Nation's ICW team works to create that for our children, and foster parenting must be supported in the workplace.

The very best thing for our children is reunification with their parents or placed with family. If family is not possible, then it is our duty and privilege as a tribal family to step forward and care for our Cherokee children. We all come from one fire. Our ancestors often did this without hesitation when children lost their family during the Trail of Tears and the rebuilding of our tribal society here in Oklahoma. One fact is true then and true today: Children are sacred, and their care is a shared responsibility.

If you have ever considered the path of foster care or are interested in helping in other ways, please contact Cherokee Nation Indian Child Welfare at 918-458-6900 or visit www.cherokeekids.org.

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