



Many parents in the child welfare system struggle with issues of substances abuse. American Indian and Alaska Native parents struggle with this issue at a higher rate, and have less access to effective treatment, than their non-Native counterparts. This disparity in access to treatment services is often coupled with trends in state child welfare systems that favor removing American Indian and Alaska Native children from substance abusing homes more often than their non-Native counterparts. These non-native families are also more likely to be supported with in-home family preservation services that reduce the need for removing children from their homes. Nonetheless, tribal child welfare agencies are leading the way with innovative family-centered, in-home services that focus on the intersection of substance abuse and child welfare and serve as models to state child welfare programs working with American Indian and Alaska Native families.

Substance Abuse and Child Welfare in American Indian and Alaska Native Families

American Indian and Alaska Native families are more likely to struggle with substance abuse.

- 18.0% of American Indian and Alaska Native adults needed treatment for an alcohol or drug use problem in the past year compared to the national average of 9.6%. (Office of Applied Statistics, 2009)
- Alcohol (52%), methamphetamine (15%), marijuana (13%), and cocaine/crack (7%) are the most common causes for American Indian and Alaska Native admission to substance abuse treatment. (SAHMSA, 2004)
- Approximately 85% of all American Indian and Alaska Native child welfare cases are related to substance abuse (Bigfoot et al., 2005).

The sense of powerlessness and hopelessness associated with historical trauma contributes to high rates of alcoholism, and substance abuse in American Indian and Alaska Native Families.

- Historical trauma is based on shared experiences by American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) people of historic traumatic events like displacement, forced assimilation, language and culture suppression, and boarding schools. This trauma, especially when untreated or unresolved, is passed down through generations. (SAMHSA, Native American Center for Excellence)

American Indian and Alaska Native families are less likely to have access to effective mental health services.

- The Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health reveals the availability of approximately 101 mental healthcare professionals per 100,000 American Indian and Alaska Native in contrast to the 173 available per 100,000 for white persons. (Indian Health Services, 2009)
- In order to successfully treat mental health concerns in the AI/AN population, mental healthcare professionals must understand the challenges associated with developing a positive AI/AN identity within the larger mainstream society and the impact of the loss of culture and traditional ways has on the development of mental health disorders within this population. This also includes the importance of traditional and cultural practices as a part of the treatment and prevention process. Unfortunately, there are limited providers and programs that incorporate these elements (Indian Health Services, 2009)

American Indian and Alaska Native families struggling with substance abuse face bias in state child welfare systems.

- In general, in state child welfare systems where families are referred for a variety of reasons, American Indian and Alaska Native children are **3 times** more likely to be removed from their homes, instead of receiving in-home family preservation services than non-Native children (Hill, 2007)
- Specific to substance abuse, one study has found that in state child welfare systems when the family is referred because of a substance abuse problem, American Indian and Alaska Native children are **8 times** more likely to be removed from their home instead of receiving in home family preservation services than non-Native children (Carter, 2009)

Tribes are leading the way by creating innovated programs that integrate substance abuse treatment and child welfare services.

- Child welfare programs in tribal communities are working to keep American Indian and Alaska Native children safely in their homes while directly addressing how substance abuse is effecting the whole family and ensuring that the family is able to access the wrap around services necessary for their success.

- Of the 53 programs, funded in 2006 by the Social Security Act Title IV-B discretionary grant program entitled, *Regional Partnerships to Improve Outcomes for Children Affected by Parental Substance Abuse Grants*, 6 were led by tribal governments or tribal organizations.

Policy Strategies to Improve Outcomes of American Indian and Alaska Native Families Struggling with Substance Abuse

- **Expand funding under the discretionary grant program “Regional Partnerships to Improve Outcomes for Children Affected by Parental Substance Abuse Grants” under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act.** Tribes have taken advantage of this program to create innovative services that better integrate their child welfare and substance abuse services. The tribal programs and treatment modalities born from this grant have served as model programs to other non-tribal grantees and to tribal child welfare programs nationwide.
- **Increase substance abuse and cultural competence training requirements for state child welfare workers.** Substance abuse is a complex issues that effects more than just the person abusing drugs or alcohol. State child welfare workers need to be better equipped to work with families struggling with substance abuse to ensure successful treatment for families in the system. For American Indian and Alaska Native families that requires specific knowledge about culture, historical trauma, and extended family structures to ensure the best treatment of every family in the system.
- **Improve data collection to identify jurisdictions with high numbers of foster care placement and low numbers of in-home service provision for families struggling with substance abuse.** Where the availability and appropriate use of in-home services exists children are more likely to not have to experience the trauma of being removed from their homes and their parents are more likely to see incentives to addressing their substance abuse. In addition, bias cannot be tolerated in our child welfare system, agencies must be held accountable and required to treat children and families of all backgrounds equitably. Federal oversight via the Child and Family Service Reviews could require states to report these numbers and provide plans to ensure treatment and in-home services be provided upon the same basis regardless of a family’s racial background.
- **Ensure tribes have equitable access to all major federal child welfare and substance abuse prevention and treatment programs to help increase their capacity to address child abuse issues within substance abusing families.** Tribes must have the resources necessary to manage the complex issues faced by families in child welfare, specifically those families struggling with substance abuse. Currently tribes are forced to do a lot more with a lot less. Providing tribes with the resources necessary to care for their children will decrease the American Indian families in state child welfare systems preventing them from facing the bias which is currently present.

For additional information please visit:

National Indian Child Welfare Association:

http://www.nicwa.org/children_families/

National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare Tribal Resource page:

<http://www.ncsacw.samhsa.gov/resources/resources-tribal.aspx>

SAMHSA’s Native American Center for Excellence:

<http://nace.samhsa.gov/SubstanceAbusePrevention.aspx>

###

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) is a national American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) non-profit organization located in Portland, Oregon. NICWA has over 24 years of experience providing technical assistance and training to tribes, states, and federal agencies on issues that impact Indian Child Welfare and children’s mental health. NICWA provides leadership in the development of public policy that supports tribal self-determination in child welfare and children’s mental health systems as well as compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act. NICWA also engages in research that supports and informs improved services for AI/AN children and families. NICWA is the nation’s most comprehensive source of information on American Indian child welfare working on behalf of Indian children and families.