

**NATIONAL INDIAN CHILD WELFARE ASSOCIATION
NICWAnet**

1. Project Purpose

The Problem: Of the two million American Indian people living in the United States, 696,967 (35.6%) are under the age of 18. Of these children, 38,000 were reported as maltreated in 1997 (this is believed to be a serious undercount). From 1992 to 1995, the only ethnic groups to experience increases in the rate of abuse or neglect were American Indians (18%) and Asians (6%), as measured by incidents recorded by state protective service agencies. Child abuse knows no boundaries. Whether rural, urban, on-reservation or off, all Indian communities experience this problem. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) reported 9,040 incidents of child abuse, 19,200 incidents of child neglect, and 4,567 incidents of child sexual abuse in tribes and villages in FY 1997 (the most recent data available). Off-reservation data reported by states varies widely and is acknowledged to be inaccurate in some states with large Indian populations.

Indian children in the United States are placed in substitute care by state agencies at a rate of 12.5 per thousand, compared to 6.9 per thousand for all races. There are an estimated 50,000 Indian children in placement by states, tribes, and the BIA, another 5,000 children needing permanent homes, and approximately 5,000 children eligible for, but not currently covered by, Title IV-E (federal subsidy for children in foster care or adopted).

Compounding these problems historically was the tendency of state children's services divisions and courts to inappropriately remove Indian children from their families. For decades, because of cultural misunderstanding and racism, Indian children were removed from their families and reservations and placed in non-Indian homes. In 1978, Congress enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to "protect the rights of the Indian child as an Indian and the rights of the Indian Community and tribe in retaining the child in its society..." ICWA established "a federal policy that, where possible an Indian child should remain in the Indian community" and established first rights in adoption or foster care of Indian children for family members (including extended family), members of the child's tribe, and other Indian families.

The Indian Child Welfare Act has been invaluable in protecting family rights and preserving the cultural integrity of Indian tribes. Unfortunately, the application and enforcement of ICWA has been difficult and uneven due to the widespread geographic dispersion of tribes and Indian children, the complexity of the law's provisions, and the lack of knowledge about ICWA among those who must apply it—social workers, attorneys and judges scattered across America, most of whom have never before encountered the law and don't understand it.

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) was established in 1983 in response to the need for a central source of information, advocacy, and assistance on ICWA issues (see Organizational Profile). NICWA has become the nation's central resource for people working on ICWA issues by providing information and training in ICWA, culturally appropriate social work practices, advocacy, and by linking people and organizations.

NICWA has found that its constituents are geographically scattered, often operate under strict deadlines, and frequently contact NICWA for answers without knowing exactly what they are looking for. NICWA's staff must determine the user's needs over the telephone, identify relevant documents, and fax or mail these documents—a slow and cumbersome process in cases involving the welfare of vulnerable children.

Last year, NICWA commissioned two studies to help determine how it could better serve its nationwide constituencies through technology. The *NICWA Information Needs Assessment*, by D.L. Cohen Information Services, surveyed 46 tribal and state social workers, representatives of Native American and children's welfare organizations, attorneys, and tribal representatives. The findings of this report provide much of the basis of this proposal. The second proposal, *Web-Based Training for the Indian Child Welfare Act*, provided the impetus to transform NICWA's core training from workshop-based to on-line and interactive.

The Solution: A National Indian Child Welfare Network (NICWAnet): The National Indian Child Welfare Association will create a menu of interactive tools and services that will be available on-line and accessible through a central point of entry, www.nicwa.org. This National Indian Child Welfare Association Network (NICWAnet) will provide access to information, training, registries of families and attorneys, and networking opportunities to the approximately 20,000 people nationwide who work in Indian child welfare, including 2,000 tribal social workers, state/county social workers, adoption attorneys, judges, and families.

By bringing these resources together through NICWAnet and making them widely accessible on the World Wide Web, NICWA will empower geographically dispersed users, many of whom use older and slower computer equipment, through comprehensive access to easily used tools that will help them in their work to improve the lives of Indian children. NICWAnet will have an impact both nationally and locally in hundreds of communities and tribes across America.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

NICWA maintains a 4,500-volume library of documents relating to ICWA and Indian child welfare practice. The library includes books, journal articles, legal decisions, legislative background information, sample tribal ICWA codes, sample Tribe/State agreements, ICWA training materials, and more. Many of these items are rare or one-of-a-kind. This information is in high demand by social workers, attorneys working on ICWA cases, Indian parents, social work graduate students, and researchers. Access to current and comprehensive ICWA information is vital to the interests of Indian children in adoption proceedings.

NICWAnet will make this material available on-line. NICWA is currently purchasing new library software that will make its library catalog web-accessible. NICWA also recently applied for a two-year Institute of Museum and Library Services grant to digitize the library's most sought after documents in either Adobe Acrobat files or full-text formats for direct on-line access. Digitization will provide our constituents with easy, direct access to our materials through the on-line catalogue and e-mail, as well as fax or airmail (see attachment, library grant abstract).

In addition to library materials, new research reports, current statistical information on tribes and Indian children, and other new information will be posted on NICWA's website. NICWA's newsletter and journal will also be available via the web.

ACCESS TO TRAINING

NICWA is the nation's foremost trainer on ICWA issues. With over 50 contracted trainers nationwide, NICWA provides assessment of tribal training needs and training in ICWA and culturally appropriate social work practices. In addition, NICWA is in the process of developing an Indian child welfare worker certification program for tribal social workers.

NICWA will make its basic training available through a curriculum of web-based training modules. This will make the training available to geographically isolated people and to many social workers that must take unpaid time from work to travel and attend trainings. The primary audience for this training is tribal, state, and county social workers. Judges and lawyers would access legal citations and the provisions of the Act.

NICWAnet will also include a link to a web-based college course titled "Introduction to Indian Child Welfare and the Indian Child Welfare Act." This course would be taught by a NICWA colleague at Portland State University and students at tribal colleges and other schools of social work could take this class for graduate or undergraduate college credit.

In addition to web-based training, other kinds of training and technical assistance services would also be available. For instance, individuals with questions about ICWA could access a frequently asked questions page, or send specific e-mail inquiries to NICWA staff for answer or referral. Tribes could receive on-line assessment of their ICWA staff training needs. Individuals seeking more extensive training could find and register for conferences, institutes, and training workshops on-line.

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

NICWA serves as an information and referral clearinghouse for diverse constituencies that are geographically dispersed and often isolated. Because Indian children may live far from their tribe's reservation or center of government, it is often difficult to locate the appropriate tribal representatives or to find family members in ICWA cases. In order to streamline this process, NICWAnet will establish and maintain searchable databases including:

- A registry of Indian families willing to adopt or provide foster care, including their status in getting state approval for adoption or certification for foster care. (This will be a password protected site.)
- The NICWA National Directory of Tribal and Urban Indian Child Welfare Contacts, persons for social workers and attorneys to contact in ICWA cases.
- A national list of ICWA attorneys and other professionals.
- Downloadable forms, notices, and form letters with instructions based on state(s) involved.

ACCESS TO CASE MANAGEMENT AND RECORD KEEPING SOFTWARE

The Indian Child Welfare Act has specific procedures, record keeping, and reporting requirements. These are fairly complex and difficult to comply with due to the law's involvement of both states and tribes in jurisdiction and reporting requirements. It is generally acknowledged that current record keeping and reporting is inaccurate and incomplete.

To solve this problem, NICWA will contract with 1CarePlace, an application service provider that has developed extensive on-line case management software. NICWA and 1CarePlace will customize the software for ICWA and tribal needs and make it available to tribes through NICWAnet. This system will allow a tribal social worker to enter case files on standard on-line forms using a secure server, thus guaranteeing that record keeping meets ICWA requirements. The program will use this information to generate required reports for state and federal agencies. Because many tribes are small and poor, most cannot afford this computerized system on their own, but they may purchase it as a NICWAnet service on a sliding scale fee.

ACCESS TO NETWORKING WITH EXPERTS AND PEERS

NICWA will establish and maintain a number of both one-way and two-way listserves as part of this Technology Opportunity Program project.

- One-way listserves: ICWA policy updates, recent ICWA-related court decisions (both state and federal), action alerts, and other information for persons interested in keeping up-to-date on specific topics. (Auto-fax will be provided for those without e-mail.)
- Two-way discussion groups: On-line, monitored, discussion groups for many interest groups (e.g., ICWA and child welfare attorneys, tribal social workers, organizations collaborating in a NICWA mental health initiative, adoptive Indian parents, etc.).

Outcomes: It is our hope and intention that NICWANet will transform Indian child welfare social work in the United States, resulting in better outcomes for Indian children and families. This will be measured by:

- Increased speed and number of adoptions of Indian children.
- Increase in numbers of ICWA trained and competent social workers.
- Increased communication among ICWA workers and interested parties.
- Increased knowledge about ICWA through easy access to the NICWA library.
- Improved case management practices and record keeping, especially among smaller tribes.
- Improved tribal, state, and national data collection and reporting on Indian children.

Targeting Underserved Communities: American Indians are the poorest ethnic group in the United States. According to the 1990 census, 31% of Native Americans earn incomes below the poverty line, compared to 10% of the general population. More than a quarter of Native American families are headed by unmarried women. Native Americans are four times more likely to die of alcoholism than other groups in the United States, and the fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) rate is six times the national average. In our advanced industrial democracy, one in five Native American families lives in a home with no toilet or telephone. More than 25% of Indian students drop out of high school—the highest percentage of all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. The life expectancy for an American Indian is 65 years, well below the national average.

Compounding these problems is the geographic dispersal of American Indians. There are 2.4 million Native Americans in the U.S. spread among 561 federally recognized tribes. Approximately half of this population lives on reservations and the other half resides mostly in urban communities. Reservations are often seated in remote rural areas, and often have weak infrastructures (i.e., lack of electricity and telephones). A national program serving this widespread population faces severe communication and outreach challenges, a problem that this proposal addresses.

2. Innovation

NICWA will utilize its website as an entry point for multiple types of services (described above) for people nationwide who are working in the field of Indian child welfare. The use of the World Wide Web will provide the broadest possible access to a geographically dispersed population with widely varying resources and computer knowledge. By linking several functions (training, information and referral, case management, information databases, etc.) and

using NICWAnet as a portal for seamless usage over the Internet, NICWA will make a complete set of ICWA services accessible to anyone with a computer and Internet connection.

NICWAnet builds upon the work of several successful TOP awardees, such as Second Harvest's national network of food banks, which connected separate organizations across the country, and the Fund for the City of New York's juvenile justice information sharing project, which connects schools, agencies, parents, courts and others to work with individual children. NICWAnet is moving into new territory, however, by providing a broad range of on-line services through a single web site. Potential users include both known and targeted organizations as well as numerous social workers, families, attorneys, and others who will contact NICWA on their own.

Social services and legal professionals will utilize NICWAnet to conduct research and provide services to clients. For example, a social worker in Iowa who is working with an Indian child in need of adoption may learn that he is from a tribe in Washington State and is covered under ICWA, of which the social worker has only vague understanding. The social worker can then go to the NICWA website, look under "frequently asked questions" to determine what her next steps are, and e-mail NICWA staff for advice. She can then download necessary forms from the NICWA library to use in the case. Using NICWA databases, she can find the appropriate ICWA tribal contact and the name of a local adoption attorney who has ICWA experience to work on the case. Through the password protected website, the social worker may gain professional access to the database of Indian families seeking to adopt. After contacting several possible families, the child and an appropriate Indian family are matched and the child is adopted. As a result of this experience, the social worker may want to learn more about ICWA and so searches the NICWA library catalog, downloads some articles to read, and finds a book which she can purchase locally. She decides to learn more, so she signs up and completes the NICWA on-line training and becomes ICWA Certified.

3. Diffusion Potential

NICWA has a national diffusion plan for this project. The project will be very visible in "Indian Country" and will generate interest among tribes and Native American organizations.

NICWAnet will reach out to everyone working on Indian child welfare issues and cases (an estimated 20,000 potential users). NICWA will involve the 14 partner agencies it is currently working with in the implementation of the project, and will brief our 38 agency "friends" with whom NICWA regularly communicates and collaborates. All tribal ICWA contacts, ICWA attorneys, and potential Indian adoptive families listed in our databases will receive e-mails about the project. NICWA's 700+ members will learn of it through e-mail and our quarterly newsletter, *NICWA News*. In addition, major articles will also be published in NICWA's practice digest *Pathways*. Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services will be briefed on the project. NICWA will also make presentations about the project at its annual conference and at other child welfare conferences NICWA staff attend annually. NICWA will include a segment on using NICWAnet in the 20+ ICWA training institutes it conducts nationally every year. Potential adoptive families, social workers, and others will be reached through the "Social Marketing" public education campaign promoting ICWA that NICWA will be conducting with Casey Family Programs.

This project has national diffusion potential, not only to other Native American and child welfare organizations, but to other regional or national organizations that work with many agencies or directly with individuals (e.g., social workers). Because NICWAnet is designed for easy web access using proven technology, it will be easy to duplicate and adapt to the particular needs of

other organizations. Through NICWAnet, we will learn how to develop national networks for geographically dispersed users with average Internet equipment and skills.

4. Project Feasibility

Technical Approach: NICWA's strategy in implementing this project has been to make access to this project as broadly available as possible by using technology currently available to end-users. This begins by using the NICWA website as the point of entry and the tool for accessing all services, because the World Wide Web is accessible to anyone with a computer and Internet access. NICWA will be emphasizing non-graphic-intensive web pages for fast downloading, since many users, especially those living on rural reservations, will be using dial-up services on low bandwidth phone lines—not to mention older computers and 28K modems.

1. **Interoperability:** All of the services available through this project will be accessible to anyone with access to the World Wide Web. Some of the services will be on password protected secure sites (i.e., client records, lists of families, and credit card ordering).
2. **Technical alternatives:** This web-based approach was chosen in order to make a broad range of services available to a number of types of users operating under differing conditions.
3. **Maintaining the system:** NICWA will utilize easily available off-the-shelf programs or proven software developed and maintained by others in order to provide for low maintenance and future upgrades.
4. **Scalability:** Because NICWA's website is hosted on Earthlink, a large and established Internet Service Provider, it has the capacity to accommodate significant growth in numbers of users. 1CarePlace, our ASP partner, addresses its scalability in its attachments. By using the website as the core of the project, NICWA has the capacity to add new services through links, and to take advantage of new technology as it is developed.

A description of the hardware and software for the project are included as an attachment.

Applicant Qualifications: NICWA has a 24-member staff, over 50 contract trainers and consultants, a \$4 million budget, and over 700 members. It has a 20-year history of successfully managing multiple projects, including federal grants. Almost all of NICWAnet's components are programs that NICWA already provides, adapted for the web. NICWA's staff is deeply knowledgeable about the information that will be provided.

NICWA has chosen to use readily available software for this project, to host it on an established ISP (Earthlink), and to partner with a strong ASP (1CarePlace) to provide the most interactive service. These highly qualified partners provide the foundation for NICWAnet. NICWA is contracting with skilled and experienced consultants to design and install the individual components of NICWAnet. NICWA staff and consultants will maintain the information and web page content.

Resumes of key NICWA staff and consultants are included in the attachments.

Implementation:

YEAR 1: Startup

- Design and installation of NICWAnet components
- Beta testing and user surveys for ease of use
- Selected tribes test NICWAnet 1CarePlace Case Management Software
- Staff training in each component
- Modification of components based on user feedback

YEAR 2: Full Implementation

- Public announcements
- Outreach as described in Diffusion section
- Reallocate staff time to service increased NICWAnet usage
- Market NICWAnet 1CarePlace Case Management Software to tribes
- Continuing modifications based on user feedback

YEAR 3: Institutionalization

- Integrate NICWAnet into all new NICWA initiatives
- Evaluation

Privacy

- Both Earthlink (ISP) and 1CarePlace, NICWA's offsite servers, have extensive 24-hour physical and electronic security.
- All private sections of the site will be secure and password protected.
- NICWA will develop staff protocols for ensuring privacy in all appropriate transactions.
- All credit card transactions will be done through a third party service, with NICWA capturing no credit card information.

Sustainability:

- NICWAnet will be supported by NICWA's operating funds and program grants, as it supports NICWA's mission and carries out work currently being done by other less efficient means.
- Some NICWAnet components (i.e., on-line training, conference registration, and on-line case management) will be income generating, with income going back into operating NICWAnet.

5. Community Involvement

This project grew out of questions and requests from tribes and social workers who wanted easier and quicker access to information and training for working with Indian children. In response to this demand and staff suggestions, NICWA commissioned two studies to help determine how it could better serve its nationwide constituencies through technology. The *NICWA Information Needs Assessment* by D. L. Cohen Information Services surveyed 46 tribal and state social workers, representatives of Native American and children's welfare organizations, attorneys, and tribal representatives (see list, attachment). The findings of this report provide much of the basis of this proposal. The other study, *Web-Based Training for the Indian Child Welfare Act*, provided the impetus to transform NICWA's training from on-site workshop-based to on-line and interactive.

NICWA's program involves it intimately with the community of people and organizations working on Indian Child Welfare issues. Social workers, attorneys and families continually contact NICWA for advice, information and assistance. By listening and responding to their

to increase the number of adoptions of American Indian children by kin and other Indian families. This project includes extensive outreach and public education, training for tribal social workers, and creating a database that links Indian children needing foster and adoptive homes with Indian families who want children. NICWAnet will put this database on the World Wide Web. 2) The Child Welfare League of America and NICWA “Tribal Child Welfare Technology Capacity, Use and Need” shows a low usage of technology for case management in tribal child welfare offices and a ready market for the service which as NICWAnet will offer through 1CarePlace.

Support for End Users: NICWA will continue community involvement in this project by training end users. Because the project is web based, many will already know how to use the basic tools. The programs will include online training and answers to frequently asked questions about using each part of the site. A component on using the website will be included at all NICWA trainings. A workshop on using the web site will be presented at NICWA conferences. Detailed articles on using the site will be published in the *NICWA Newsletter* and *Pathways* journal.

6. Evaluation

NICWA will utilize an independent outside evaluator for this project. The format of the evaluation for this project will be: 1) test each service with focus groups at three stages of development and use feedback to inform design, 2) assess the completion of the project objectives through activity logs and narrative documentation, 3) document the volume of user participation and user satisfaction with on-line evaluation and suggestion forms, including a guest book and follow up e-mails, 4) use qualitative, key informant methodology for professional review of materials and presentation methods, and use feedback to improve design, 5) assess the impact of NICWAnet activities on services for Indian children and families, testing impact on case outcomes in a select sample of test users.

Looking at these five areas will give a good picture of the success of the project in a cost effective way. This method of evaluation incorporates continuous quality improvement designs to inform and improve the project as it proceeds. It also provides a rich data source to inform the outcome evaluation. Each service component will be evaluated using evidence of completion, evidence of use and evidence of worth (outcome). By using focus groups and on-line surveys designed to gather information about user response and satisfaction, quality of delivery, usefulness and impact NICWA will be able to assess how NICWAnet is doing quarterly. In addition users will be asked for permission to contact them for a six-month follow up. The outside consultant will contact a sample of NICWAnet’s users by e-mail and/or telephone and report. This combination of methods will provide a clear impression of our users opinions. The services impact component is a unique feature and will employ a small sample of users recruited through follow up contacts. Using case study methodology, in depth interviews will assess the

impact of the services on the outcomes of their cases. The outside evaluator will complete a final evaluation of the project. (A resume for the outside evaluator is included in the attachments).