

Red Lake Nation: Child Welfare Workforce Practices



This brief is developed by the [Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Analytics \(QIC-WA\)](#). Drafted in partnership with Priscilla Day, Ph.D. for [The Indigenous Wellness Research Institute](#), and drafted under the guidance and direction of the project's National Tribal Advisory Board and the tribal sites: Red Lake Nation and Tlingit & Haida.

This brief highlights how Red Lake Nation is advancing an Anishinaabe-centered child welfare system through the Ombimindwaa (Uplifting Our Relatives) practice model and a Tribal-State Title IV-E Agreement. The brief spotlights culture-first policy shifts (kin-first, no TPR/adoption), workforce investments, and embedded analytics (Beraten; Connecteam) that strengthen prevention and family reunification while improving coordination, documentation, and supervision. Together, these approaches offer important considerations for tribal workforce development, the exercise of tribal sovereignty, improved outcomes for children and families, and long-term program sustainability.

Background



Cheri Goodwin, Red Lake Nation citizen and Ombimndwaa Executive Director.

In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed after advocacy and testimony from tribes and tribal families who had experienced disproportionate removal of children from their homes. ICWA is the primary federal tribal child welfare law that provides the gold standard for how states are required to engage tribal nations, meet specific compliance standards, and provide child welfare services to American Indian families. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351), signed on October 7, 2008, granted federally recognized Indian tribes, tribal organizations and tribal consortia access to Title IV-E funding through two mechanisms. The first is a direct Title IV-E agreement with the federal government, wherein a tribal nation is authorized by the federal Administration for Children and Families to operate as an IV-E entity and receive reimbursements for expenditures related to administration, training, and maintenance payments. A second option, which has been available to tribes since the 1990's includes the development of a Tribal-State Title IV-E Agreement, recognizes the state as the IV-E entity but allows for dollars to pass through to tribal nations to provide reimbursements for IV-E allowable costs. Many tribes elect to implement Title IV-E with a Tribal-State Title IV-E Agreement before applying to be a direct Title IV-E tribe. This was the option chosen by the Red Lake Nation when they began to implement Title IV-E as part of their overall child welfare systems change and toward increased self-governance and a return to



traditional approaches toward family centered healing. Tribes choosing the direct IV-E path must submit an approvable IV-E plan using ACF's Title IV-E pre-print as the blueprint. As part of planning, tribes assess what systems and policies are already in place, identify additions or revisions needed to meet IV-E requirements, and review tribal programs, codes, judicial processes, and financial systems to ensure alignment with federal standards. These agreements vary by tribe and state and allow states to “pass through” Title IV-E state funding to a tribe for reimbursement of costs related to foster care, administration, and training. Additionally, since ICWA did not provide funding for implementation, resulting in uneven and limited application and compliance, Minnesota passed the Minnesota Family Preservation Act in 1985 and modified it in 2023 to strengthen and provide additional guidance for ICWA cases.

Red Lake Nation

The Red Lake Nation is home to the federally recognized Red Lake Band of Chippewa and is the only “closed reservation” in Minnesota; meaning all land is held in common by the tribe. During the late 1800’s tribal leadership resisted allotment legislation and the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 resulting in Red Lake citizens retaining sovereignty over the reservation, subject only to the federal government. P.L. 83-280 grants state jurisdiction over civil and criminal matters on reservations in certain states, Minnesota among them. However, with Red Lake Nation being a true sovereign, they are exempt from P.L. 280's civil and criminal regulatory jurisdiction by the State of Minnesota. Red Lake Tribal leadership exercises sovereignty through self-governance over tribal codes, infrastructure, programs and services, to offer tribally based approaches to uplift and support its citizens. Red Lake Nation prioritizes Anishinaabe culture and lifeways, connections to the tribe, culture, language, and traditions.

Ombimindwaa Gidanawemaaganinaadog Intergenerational Family Wellness Program

Through a Tribal–State Title IV-E Agreement, Red Lake Nation became an initiative tribe in Minnesota, enabling the Nation to access funding and exercise primary authority over child welfare on the reservation. Beginning in 2021, Red Lake Nation started serving families directly. Guided by the Ombimindwaa Gidanawemaaganinaadog practice model, which centers



Children from Red Lake Nation participate in and enjoy a community event.

intergenerational, kin-based supports and community engagement, Red Lake Nation has transformed its system. Since launching the initiative, out-of-home placements have declined by more than 70%. Red Lake Nation now screens out approximately 78% of child welfare reports, compared with 49.7% in the local county, 58.7% statewide, and 48.5% nationally (Day, 2023; Red Lake Data Report to the Legislature).

One of the first tasks new leadership undertook was to create a new narrative through relationship development and shifting practice to a relative approach. They renamed the agency to reflect a new Anishinaabe practice model-Ombimindwaa Gidanawemaaganidog-Uplifting our Relatives. They worked to develop institutional capacity through infrastructure development, data collection, adding and realigning staff, practice model development, and training for staff and relative care providers. Red Lake Nation’s child welfare practice model centers on family preservation, not child removal. The model included utilizing traditional family circles (Family Group Decision Making) to address and mitigate emergency concerns for families that would otherwise lead to potential involvement with child protection. Increasing natural supports to family members promotes a return to Indigenous community practice and successful indigenous models of family preservation. The practice model re-defined many of the mainstream administrative terms inherited from county practice and reframed them in cultural ways consistent with treating those served as relatives; because culturally, they are relatives. To

further reinforce this shift, they changed program names including:

- Client → Relative,
- Staff → Community Service Providers,
- Foster Parents → Relative Care Providers,
- Investigation → Intake and Response,
- and Child Protection Case Managers → Reunification Service Providers.

Ombimindwaa believes that ‘culture is the cure’ and that when families are connected to culture many risk factors are minimized or mitigated. This is accomplished through the systemic integration of culture throughout agency structures, policies, and practices based on indigenous worldviews and lifeways. The agency’s intergenerational services are rooted in Anishinaabe worldview, language, knowledge, history, teachings, and technology. Each one of the Community Service Providers are equipped with a unique set of skills and qualifications that emphasize an Anishinaabe way of life. When working with families, staff work to embrace the seven Anishinaabe grandfather teachings - Zaagi’idiwin (love); Manaaji’idiwin (respect); Debwewin (truth); Gwayakwaadiziwin (honesty); Inendizowin (humility); Nibwaakaawin (wisdom); and Zoongide’ewin (bravery). Culturally integrative accomplishments include:

- Development and use of an indigenous way of practice that enables workers to successfully connect with families.
- Staff training to instill knowledge and relay an expectation that staff will practice in a culturally based manner.
- A commitment at Intake and Response to divert cases to family preservation, provide emergency resources to families, focus on crisis stabilization, and develop ongoing support as reflected in the high number of screened out cases.
- Focus on intensive family engagement, family group decision making, assessing maltreatment risk and resiliency, providing services and resources to address issues that place families at risk of entering the child protection system.
- Active efforts link relatives to spiritual services such as ceremonies that strengthen, heal, and stabilize families in

crisis and restore natural helping systems. Red Lake Nation provides many resources to address the needs of families living in poverty.

- Increasing the numbers of voluntary cases and self-referrals to meet family needs and prevent involuntary cases.
- Services include ongoing case management, financial and programmatic resources that keep families from entering the child system and address factors that can lead to a report.
- Access to services to build protective factors within the family for wellness and long-term stability.

In 2023, Ombimindwaa started to develop an outdoor prevention program called Izaadaa Agwajiing- Let’s go Outside. The program put up two buildings on wooded property and developed outdoor trails for use by families and the community. They supply

equipment such as cross-country skis, snowshoes, ice skates, mountain bikes, and other things required to enjoy the outdoor space. The buildings often host staff and other meetings in a natural forest setting. Attention to restorative prevention practices serve as strong prevention opportunities needed for long-term change.

“Our vision is to return to our healthy and harmonious way of life, living within our clans, within our communities, in traditional family structures where everyone between our youth and elders are reconnected. Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog restores wellness and healing through traditional Anishinaabe family preservation where we build and strengthen family connections while overcoming barriers.”

Starting in 2023, Ombimindwaa developed its own annual summer training event. This all-staff meeting held on site provides professional development for all staff. In addition, there are two community-based events associated with the training. One is a community picnic where the staff provide food, entertainment, and cultural resources to the community on the shores of Red Lake. The other event is a community feast and give away at the pow-wow grounds. Both events serve to increase staff knowledge and break down barriers between the agency and community and demonstrate the relational model of practice. In 2023, over 1,500 community members attended the annual picnic and give away. In 2024 and 2025, there were over 3,000 community members at the annual picnic indicating a growing acceptance and trust towards the Ombimindwaa program and staff.

That same year, the agency developed and administered a survey to learn about how their workforce felt about workplace climate. Findings were published in a report that shares staff reflections

and shines a light on the important process of employing a practice model that reflects relational teachings and values that have been a cornerstone of Anishinaabeg lifeways since time immemorial. As part of this important work, the concept of lateral goodness helped shape and undergird the importance of relationality in all that Red Lake Nation does, including the inherent interconnectedness between the child and their family, extended family, culture, community, staff, and tribal nation. Most staff shared the following examples of engaging in communication that reflect lateral goodness while at work:

- Experiencing positive and open comments from colleagues (91%)
- Sharing information and resources in the workplace (88%)
- Feeling listened to by colleagues (86%)
- Time for self-care (84%)

Staff experience lateral goodness (95%) more than lateral oppression (5%), which strongly indicates a workplace that is implementing the tenets of the Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog Practice Model.

Red Lake Nation and the QIC-WA Project

In 2024, Red Lake Nation entered into an agreement to be part of the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Analytics. Through this project, data was collected during a site visit to learn about baseline workforce information. The report found that Ombimindwaa continues to increase its staff to reduce caseload burdens and further encourage their relationship development with the relatives they are serving. This includes adding cultural staff whose responsibility is to translate practices into the Ojibwe language, support staff, and offer traditional ceremonies to relatives in need. Ombimindwaa also partners with several local universities and offers internships to promising students (many native) to continually develop the workforce. Other findings include:

- Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog has grown significantly since 2021, starting with around 20 staff and now up to over 180.
- Almost all employees are American Indian, with many Red Lake Nation tribal members employed.
- Caseload size varies depending on the department but fall within Child Welfare League of America recommended caseloads (15) for child welfare staff- which are significantly less than the national state average of 24-31 children.

- Smaller caseloads may reflect Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog’s focus on active efforts and spending more time assisting families.
- Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog continues to grow its workforce with 9 new workers hired over the past year (2024).
- Workforce turnover appears low with only about 2% of the workforce leaving over the last year (2024).
- The vacancy rate is 0%, which may speak to high retention and job satisfaction.
- Supervisors have slightly more longevity than line workers as might be expected but of those interviewed, most staff had between 4.5-5 years at the agency.

The Utilization of Workforce Analytics

Red Lake Nation is strengthening day-to-day decision-making by converting routine workforce data into actionable insights that improve coordination, training, and documentation. Baseline interviews highlighted consistent themes: staff want clearer training and support, better awareness of agency activities, stronger documentation practices, and a more integrated data environment to actually use the information the agency already collects. These findings define the focus of the current effort to build practical workforce analytics that inform operations. To target those needs, Red Lake Nation has organized the work around three focus areas: communication, dissemination, and tracking/documentation, so that analytics are directly tied to how staff work and share information across the agency, including Ombimindwaa teams.

Ombimindwaa is implementing two complementary tools to operationalize these priorities: Beraten for workflow

“The generosity, compassion, humor, positivity, support and safety demonstrated within Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog are unparalleled to all previous organization or business I've worked for. Having this support in the workplace provides the foundation to uplift our relatives in the field”

- Ombimindwaa worker

management and Connecteam for centralized communication and training. Together, these platforms create a single source of truth for tasks, training, and reporting, reducing duplicative effort

and making it easier for supervisors and staff to see what's due, what's done, and what needs attention.

Measuring the status of each of these components will blend qualitative and quantitative streams. Qualitatively, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and process reviews will document what is working, what is not, and how the tools affect collaboration, training, and workflow. Quantitatively, the team will track:

- Staff engagement with internal communications
- Platform visit rates and case-task completion timeliness
- Training completion and progression
- Learning management system (LMS) audits to verify alignment with workforce processes and reporting need

Red Lake Nation is using workforce analytics to operationalize the Anishinaabe practice model, by placing culture, kin, and continuous learning at the center of everyday work. Beraten standardizes relational, kin-first workflows so supervisors and staff can see what's due, what's completed, and where help is needed. Connectteam serves as the communication and learning hub, hosting seasonal teachings, language resources, and required trainings while keeping units and cultural advisors aligned. Data governance is embedded in both tools to uphold tribal data sovereignty and ensure that documentation meets tribal, state, and federal standards without compromising cultural safety.

Beraten	Connectteam
On the workflow side, Beraten is being rolled out with regular implementation audits and targeted coaching to ensure consistent use across units. As processes are standardized, Beraten will automate routine steps and make case-related task status visible, shortening feedback loops and improving the timeliness and completeness of workforce data needed for reporting.	For communication and learning, Connectteam serves as the hub. It consolidates announcements, unit updates, and hosts a master training calendar so staff can see requirements, enroll promptly, and track completions in one place. It will also be central to building out Ombimindwaa’s continuous quality improvement initiatives.
Data governance is built into daily practice- tribal, state, and federal documentation standards are reinforced within the tools, and staff are trained to capture necessary fields at the point of work. This improves data quality and reduces time spent searching for information. With cleaner inputs, the agency can generate near-real-time operational reports on training progress, task completion, and other workforce metrics that directly support supervision.	

These metrics will be scheduled at practical cadences (monthly or quarterly) so supervisors can see trends without adding burden. Analytically, Red Lake plans to triangulate data each quarter, linking trends in platform use or task completion to qualitative feedback about content relevance or usability-to identify bottlenecks, calibrate training, and refine workflows. Periodic LMS compliance checks on workforce data accuracy ensure the analytics stay trustworthy and decision-grade. The initiative does not treat analytics as a standalone dashboard project; it embeds measurement and feedback into everyday tools and routines.

Measurement blends stories and statistics. This approach turns routine data into insight, which works to strengthen prevention and reunification, and "lifts up relatives" through a system that is culturally grounded, transparent, and sustainable.

“Ombimindwaa Gidinawemaaganinaadog is more than an agency name...it is a way of living”
- Ombimindwaa worker

Resources

Smithsonian National Museum of American Indians
<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/about/understandings>

National Indian Child Welfare Association:
<https://www.nicwa.org/what-is-icwa/>

Minnesota Family Preservation Act law in 1985 and modified it in 2023 <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/260.762>

US Children's Bureau <https://acf.gov/cb/focus-areas/tribes>

Title IV-E pre-print Children's Bureau
www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/pi1507

Pathways to Tribal IV-E: Tribal Title IV-E Options, Children's Bureau, ACF, Capacity Building Center for Tribes, (Oct. 2017).
https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/sites/default/files/media_pdf/tribal-title-ive-cp-00168.pdf

Pathways to Tribal Title IV-E
[Pathways to Tribal Title IV-E](#)

Minnesota Family Preservation Act in 1985 (2023)
[Sec. 260.762 MN Statutes](#)

Family Group Decision Making
<https://kempecenter.org/impact-areas/evidence-based-research-informed-approaches/family-group-decision-making/>

Beraten's Work with Tribal Governments
<https://www.beratensoftware.com/>

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Workforce Analytics

The goal of the QIC-WA is to develop evidence around how to address child welfare workforce needs by working with state/public and tribal child welfare agency sites to 1) implement and evaluate a process to advance agency use of workforce analytics in order to 2) create data-driven workforce processes and interventions to 3) improve workforce recruitment, performance, retention, and well-being.



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