

**Honorable Chairperson Karen Weisz
House Human Services Committee Hearing
January 23, 2023, 10:15 AM, Pioneer Room
House Bill No. 153**

I write in strong support of HB 1536, which would enact a state Indian Child Welfare Act into North Dakota Century Code. My name is Carenlee Barkdull (PhD, LMSW), and I am a Professor of Social Work in my 18th year at the University of North Dakota. Over the course of my career, I have had the honor to work with Tribal communities on projects to build child welfare capacity and to improve outcomes for Native children and families both on and off reservation communities.

Over the past six years, I have been the co-Principal Investigator of a federal grant-- one of three awarded nationally --to strengthen implementation of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). It builds on the work of former UND faculty member Dr. Melanie Sage and her contract with the North Dakota Supreme Court to audit state compliance with the federal law. Data from this project supported plans for court improvements related to training and support of personnel and identified other areas for cross-system partnerships to improve ICWA implementation and child welfare outcomes for Native children and families.

Through collaborative work that has included Tribal ICWA offices, North Dakota's Children and Family Services Division, the state's Tribal Court Improvement Project, human service zone leaders and child welfare workers, and the Children and Family Services Training Center, the ICWA Partnership Project has improved understanding and implementation of ICWA standards. Further, an outcome of this project, the ICWA Family Preservationist (IFP) Program, an innovation recently piloted in Grand Forks and Burleigh counties, shows great promise for substantially reducing the disproportionate number of Native children in the foster care system. With support from North Dakota's Children and Family Services Division through a contract with the Native American Training Institute (NATI), the IFP program holds promise as a national model.

Adoption of a state ICWA statute would safeguard much of the positive progress already attained by the partnership of North Dakota human services workers and officials, court administrators, and Tribal partners to improve child welfare outcomes for Native children in our state. ICWA is considered the “gold standard” of child welfare practice as it engages with families and their support systems to divert children from the foster care system or to reduce their time in care wherever possible. This is a research based “best practice” to improve life outcomes for children in the child welfare system. and support the well-being of children in relation to foster care and adoptive services.

I urge the committee's support of this legislation to uphold and expand the positive work of state employees and the state's investments in partnership with North Dakota's Tribes. Other Upper Plains states that have enacted ICWA provisions into state law include Minnesota and Wisconsin. Additional Midwestern states that have done so include Iowa, Nebraska and Oklahoma.

Thank your time and attention, and I welcome any questions or clarifications regarding this testimony.

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