



Agindaso Abinoji-yag

"He/she reads or counts children"

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ICWA Compliance Newsletter Q2 2024

Foster Advocates: Amplifying Foster Voices

Founded in 2018, Foster Advocates plays a critical role in leading advocacy work for those involved in the state's foster care system. The organization envisions that everyone involved in the state's foster care system has the same access to opportunities and outcomes as their peers, that Foster voices are respected, and that community expertise is sought in every aspect of the child welfare system. To learn more about the organization and their advocacy efforts we interviewed Interim Co-Executive Director Elena Leomi.

Foster Advocates was founded by Hoang Murphy, who grew up in Minnesota foster care. "He had what was an audacious idea at the time," Elena explained, "that change in child welfare systems could and should be led by the people most impacted - those who have experienced out-of-home care. Foster Advocates isn't just our name - it's what we do. We foster advocacy, policy change, and organizing with and for Minnesota Fosters. Early leaders in our network named that foster care creates a critical cultural identity that goes unrecognized once they are reunited with family, adopted, or age out. We use the term Foster to name and claim this unique identity, and organize around it!"

As the only Foster-focused advocacy organization in Minnesota, they don't just amplify Foster voices, but make sure that Fosters have a seat at the table and are positioned to advocate from a place of power rather than pain. "What Hoang found in his early networking, and what our growing team has seen since, is that Fosters are incredibly passionate about systems change, to make sure the harms they experienced in the child welfare system don't happen to other Fosters. However, most Fosters have not had the opportunity to build the skills and strategies to match their passion for change! We work to build those skills across our programs, whether through a focus on individual advocacy and stabilization in our support programs, to a focus on systems advocacy in our Fellowship and Community Board. And we pay Fosters for their time and expertise as leaders!"

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Elena also noted that "as a Foster-founded organization, practices of centering Foster voices and challenging the status quo have been key leadership values since day one. We were able to launch our Community Board in 2021 to create structural power within our organization for Fosters in our network and allow us to move our work forward with deep certainty that we are centering Fosters at all levels. Fosters from across the state can apply to serve on the Community Board, with a goal to amplify Foster expertise on the issues that matter to our broader statewide network. In this paid role, the Community Board approves our annual legislative agenda, vets policy support requests from partners, and prioritizes issues for organization action that arise from programming and research. To provide Fosters with layers of shared ownership and decision-making power, our bylaws ensure seats on our Governing Board for co-chairs of our Community Board. Our ultimate goal is for this Community Board, alongside our larger network of Fellows and Foster leaders, to act as the key sounding-board not only for our organization, but for partners and Foster issues across the state."

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Fosters also guide their MN Promise (MNP) work. “As Minnesotans, we collectively make a promise to Fosters when the state separates them from their families, committing to taking better care of them. Unfortunately for so many Fosters this promise is not met, and generations of Fosters have been failed by deeply predictable injustices. Our child welfare system holds some of the highest racial disparities in the nation, 80% of Fosters in the Twin Cities experience homelessness by age 24, and Fosters graduate at the lowest rates in the state (you are more likely to graduate on time as a homeless student than as a Foster in Minnesota). We reject the story often told by the state that these impacts are ‘out of their hands.’ These numbers are an indictment of the system, and generations of Fosters have been failed by deeply predictable injustices. Something so predictable is also highly preventable – but only if we have the will to act.”

“We launched MN Promise in fall 2022 to address the question: What would it look like if Minnesota kept its promise to Fosters? After testing and approval by our Community Board, we spent the past 20 months hosting listening and design sessions with Fosters across the state, expanding our Foster network as well as tribal and community partnerships along the way! We’re currently in the midst of data analysis and working with our MN Promise committee (made up of participants from across the sessions) to plan for our Foster feedback sessions before the public launch of the report! We believe those closest to the problem are also closest to the solutions, and that Fosters should lead the vision for the work without having to do all the work. Our approach has shown deep success identifying needs of Fosters and turning them into reality.”

“One of the big things Native participants from across our sessions focused on were more guided cultural connections, and having specific cultural mentors when they turn 18 so they know where to go to ask questions, have facilitated connections to tribal and other cultural resources, and support them finding (or go with them!) to different cultural events. There’s a lot more in the data, and we’re excited to be able to highlight that when our report launches!”

“Native Fosters have been a part of our network from the beginning, and across our programs we try to recognize the unique historical and current child welfare system harms on Native communities and honor Native Fosters unique experiences (whether their case was ICWA eligible or not). As examples, in our last design leadership program, focused on overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit Fosters in foster care in Minnesota, half of our leaders were Native and able share really important individual and community expertise. When our Community Board approved our MN Promise vision, they requested we have at least one session specific for Native Fosters (we were able to host two!). We look forward to more ways we can engage with Native Fosters (and partner organizations) in the future!”

Foster Advocates has passed seven laws in the past six years, including the Fostering Higher Education Act and establishing the Office of the Ombudsperson for Foster Youth (OOFY).



Foster Advocates hosted MN Promise sessions throughout the state, including Bemidji, pictured here.



The Foster Advocates Fellowship connects Fosters across Minnesota through a paid opportunity to transform into activists and activators.

Foster Advocates: Amplifying Foster Voices (Continued from page 2)

“In 2021, we passed the Fostering Higher Education Act, creating the most comprehensive college support program for Fosters in the country through the Fostering Independence Grants (FIG)! FIG covers tuition AND living expenses at public and private Minnesota colleges for anyone who was in Minnesota foster care after the age of 13. In 2021, we were told this Act was impossible, and that we should stick with trying to replicate limited tuition voucher legislation out of other states. But we knew this bold Foster vision deserved a shot - and through the power of our Foster testifiers, we passed this \$4 million-per-year appropriation for free college in one legislative session! This past year, over 600 Fosters received FIG grants to support their college journeys!”



Governor Walz signs the bill to create the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson.

“In 2022, our law established the Office of the Ombudsperson for Foster Youth (mn.gov/oofy/), an independent agency to give Fosters a direct resource when facing challenges or abuses in the foster care system. Our advocacy ensured the majority of seats on the Ombuds Advisory Board are held by Fosters, ensuring ongoing equity and expertise in informing this office!”



Foster leaders gather at the Capitol for a day of legislator education and advocacy this spring.

“An important thing we’ve seen is how we can shift the narrative around Fosters, in the community and at the Capitol. It felt really lonely in 2021 when we started presenting on how many Fosters experience homelessness, but now, multiple funders are prioritizing this population for homelessness prevention! Because of the way we center Foster voices and rights in policy advocacy, we’ve seen discussions around Fosters change at the Capitol, with more legislators focused on Fosters and asking for our networks’ expertise on matters that impact them. All the data shows that the ways Fosters struggle are not due to individual issues, but to systemic moral failings, and it’s important to keep reframing how and which systems are accountable for these broken promises.”

“One of our grounding principles is: *Cultivating community and advocacy are inherently intertwined; advocacy happens within relationships and is transformational to individuals and communities.* The relationships across our Foster network, and with community partners, are just as essential as our specific advocacy goals. We saw this at the legislature this spring, when we had quickly organize to prevent a funding gap for FIG recipients for the 2024-25 school year. Because of our relational advocacy approach, our network was quick to show up and engage in action, and that got this issue on the radar of many legislators. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief as the deficit was fixed during the final hours of the 2024 legislative session!”

“By investing in and organizing a network of Fosters leaders, as well as a deep range of community partners as collaborators, we ensure this movement and change-work is not limited to Fosters’ time engaging with us, nor to just our organization. MN Promise is a comprehensive vision for systems-change from MN Fosters – it will truly take a movement to turn that vision into reality!”

Miigwech, Pidamayaye, Pilamayaye, Pinigigi (thank you) to Elena and Foster Advocates for answering our questions and we look forward to the advocacy impacts Fosters will continue to make in the years to come!

Ain Dah Yung Center and Minnesota Second Judicial District Dinner

The Ain Dah Yung Center hosted a dinner for judicial officers from the Second Judicial District to honor their strong partnership within the court system. Attendees met staff to learn more about Ain Dah Yung Center's services, the importance of offering cultural services to families in the court system, as well as how these services can help families heal and move forward. Ain Dah Yung Center Princess Cheryl Goodman shared a jingle dress dance with attendees.

We are so thankful to have such a great relationship with the judicial officers who serve our American Indian families and look forward to continuing to build this partnership. Thank you all for attending!



ADYC Princess Cheryl Goodman and Zack Red Bear shared a jingle dress dance and song with attendees.

Smudge Kits for Youth in Foster Care



ADYC staff assembling smudge kits.

In June Ain Dah Yung Center staff assembled smudge kits for youth in foster care to help ensure American Indian youth have access to cultural resources and sacred medicines during their foster care experience. Each kit includes a shell, sage, cedar oil, and a prayer tie blessed by Elder Nelda Goodman.

The kits also include information about the four sacred medicines, smudging, how to gather sage, and brochures from American Indian youth services across the metro. Thank you to the Children's Law Center, American Indian Family and Children's Services (AIFACS), and the ICWA Guardian ad Litem Program for helping distribute these kits to youth in foster care!

Court Updates

This newsletter includes positive observations from ICWA hearings as well as highlights that demonstrate the great work happening in Ramsey County.

Observation: The foster parents reported that the youth's new favorite word was "dunk" because he has a new basketball hoop.

Observation: The social worker helped set up a roller skating date for mom and daughter.

Observation: The youth's attorney shared that since moving to his new placement the youth started taking boxing classes, driver's education classes, earned his GED, and started a seasonal job.

Observation: At the last hearing before the young adult aged out of extended foster care, the social worker said he looked forward to seeing his bright future and everything he would accomplish.

Observation: The proposed non-Native custodians have been actively reaching out to tribal and cultural connections to ensure the youth have access to active participation in their culture. The tribal representative thanked everyone who has worked with the family and upheld the spirit of ICWA.

Observation: The youth's attorney expressed appreciation for the social worker, especially her efforts to ensure the two youth were able to spend time together when they were in different placements that were geographically distant.

Observation: The tribal social worker thanked the foster parents for providing for the child and noted that he was very loved and cared for in the home.

About the Quarter 2 Data

Data was collected from April 1, 2024 to June 30, 2024. This data was collected by the court monitor at hearings, talking to the parties involved, and reading case files. This data reflects hearings the court monitor attended and does not include all Ramsey County ICWA hearings.

Tribal Attendance

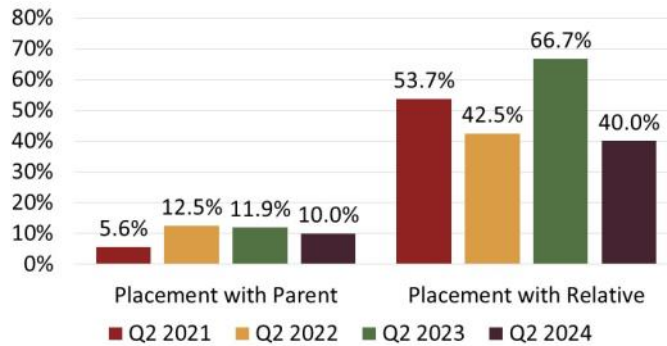
The following chart indicates the tribes involved in ICWA cases in Ramsey County during Quarter 2. The chart includes the tribes involved, the number of hearings that occurred, and the number of times the tribe attended hearings. This data reflects hearings the court monitor attended and does not include all Ramsey County ICWA hearings.

TRIBE	NUMBER OF HEARINGS	TRIBE PRESENT
Bois Forte Band of Chippewa	1	1
Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe	5	5
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma	2	2
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	11	11
Lower Sioux Indian Community	2	2
Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe	3	3
Oglala Sioux Tribe	2	2
Red Lake Nation	6	6
Rosebud Sioux Tribe	2	2
Spirit Lake Tribe	3	2
White Earth Nation	8	5
Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska	2	2
Yankton Sioux Tribe	1	1
Unknown/Tribe Not Identified	7	-

Placements with Parent and Relative

Placement with Parent		
Q2 2021	3/54	5.6%
Q2 2022	5/40	12.5%
Q2 2023	5/42	11.9%
Q2 2024	4/40	10.0%

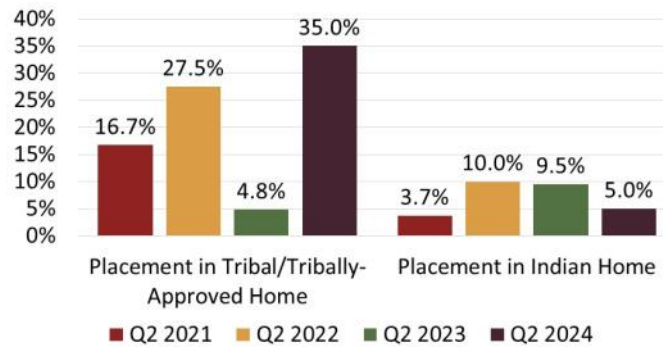
Placement with Relative		
Q2 2021	29/54	53.7%
Q2 2022	17/40	42.5%
Q2 2023	28/42	66.7%
Q2 2024	16/40	40.0%



Placements in Tribal or Indian Home

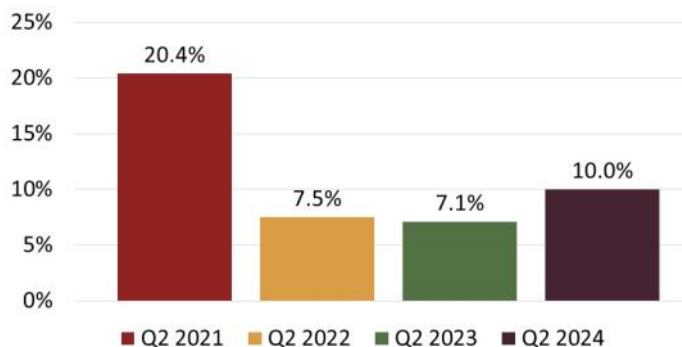
Placement in Tribal/ Tribally-Approved Home		
Q2 2021	9/54	16.7%
Q2 2022	11/40	27.5%
Q2 2023	2/42	4.8%
Q2 2024	14/40	35.0%

Placement in Indian Home		
Q2 2021	2/54	3.7%
Q2 2022	4/40	10.0%
Q2 2023	4/42	9.5%
Q2 2024	2/40	5.0%



Non-ICWA Placements

Q2 2021	11/54	20.4%
Q2 2022	3/40	7.5%
Q2 2023	3/42	7.1%
Q2 2024	4/40	10.0%



Placement

Placements with the custodial or non-custodial parent have increased slightly from 5.6% of the time in Q2 2021 to 10% of the time in Q2 2024.

While placements with relatives have decreased from 53.7% of the time in Q2 2021 to 40% of the time in Q2 2024, placements in tribal/tribally-approved homes increased from 16.7% of the time in Q2 2021 to 35% of the time in Q2 2024. This shows the collaboration between tribes and social services to determine placement options when relative placements are not available.

Placements in non-ICWA homes have decreased from 20.4% of the time in Q2 2021 to 10% of the time in Q2 2024. Reasons for non-ICWA placements include the objection of the parent or child, high medical needs of the child, or the lack of Native foster homes.

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