

ICWA Advisory Council Meeting Summary

May 27, 2026 | Teams Meeting

Attendees:

Appointed Council Members Present

Matt Althoff, DSS Cabinet Secretary
Donita Loudner, CCST ICWA, Crow Creek
Jessica Morson, FSST CPS/ICWA, Flandreau
Alicia Mousseau, OST Vice President
Mickey Divine – CPS ICWA Director for Sisseton

Not in attendance:

Senator Tamara Grove
Representative Peri Pourier

Other Attendees

Susan Shrader, Oglala Director / ICWA
Michelle Harrison – ICWA Director SRST
Algin Young, Cabinet Secretary, Department of Tribal Relations
Sara Kelly, Court Improvement Coordinator, UJS
Tiffany Wolfgang, DSS Chief of Children and Families
Jeremy Lippert, DSS Director of Legal Services
Becky Nelson, Administrator, DSS Office of Licensing and Accreditation
Pamela Bennett, DSS/CPS Division Director
Joseph Ashley, DSS/CPS ICWA Program Specialist
Sara Sheppick, DSS/CPS Deputy Director
Ashley Asmus, CQI and Outcomes Administrator Department of Social Services
John Hult reporter for South Dakota Searchlight

Meeting Overview

Secretary Matt Althoff welcomed members and guests and thanked participants for attending. After introductions by attendees, the agenda was reviewed and adopted by consensus.

CFSR Program Improvement Plan (PIP) Update

An overview of the Administration for Children and Families, “A Home for Every Child” national initiative was discussed. <https://acf.gov/media/press/2025/acf-unveils-new-initiative-strengthen-american-families-home-every-child>

Secretary Althoff reviewed South Dakota’s Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement Plan (PIP), which focuses on:

- Increasing licensed kinship providers and foster homes
- Expanding psychiatric and PRTF services
- Strengthening prevention and family support efforts

Discussion centered on the “Science of Hope” framework, emphasizing:

- Shared goals
- Clear pathways identified for individual families based on their unique circumstances that will lead to successful safekeeping of their children
- Building personal agency and resilience within families and staff

Council members discussed the importance of culturally responsive services, prevention efforts, and ensuring families have access to supportive resources. It was clarified that the framework complements—not replaces—the Stronger Families Together initiative.

Court Improvement Program – Community of Practice

Sara Kelly provided an update on the federally funded Court Improvement Program and the development of an ICWA-focused Community of Practice.

The Community of Practice is intended to:

- Bring together professionals working to support Native American children and families
- Create opportunities for peer learning and collaboration
- Provide ongoing discussions focused on real-world child welfare challenges

The effort will include regular gatherings, rotating hosts, and collaborative agenda-setting. Participants expressed strong support and enthusiasm for the initiative.

Stronger Families Together Strategic Planning Update

Sara Sheppick shared updates on foster care and kinship recruitment efforts, including:

- Expanding safe and culturally supportive placements
- Prioritizing kinship care
- Increasing Native American foster homes
- Supporting recruitment and retention of foster families

Key updates included:

- 240 new kinship-specific foster care licenses issued from June 1, 2025 to April 30, 2026.
- 80% increase in licensed kinship placements from June 1, 2025 to April 30, 2026.

- Increase in Native American licensed foster homes from 90 to 134 from July 1, 2025-February 28, 2026.
- Increase in total foster homes statewide from 793 to 908 from July 1, 2025 to February 28, 2026.

The Council also discussed:

- Licensing flexibility for kinship caregivers
- Ongoing collaboration with tribes and community partners
- Future recruitment and training strategies
- Potential expansion of tribal kinship locator roles

Quarterly ICWA meetings and collaborative training opportunities between state and tribal partners will continue moving forward.

Additional Discussion

Secretary Althoff recognized Pamela Bennett for her upcoming retirement and thanked her for her leadership, service, and contributions to Child Protection Services and the ICWA Advisory Council. Council members expressed appreciation for her dedication and lasting impact on the department and CQI efforts.

The Council also discussed upcoming statutory appointment and reappointment processes for Council membership.

Adjournment

Secretary Althoff thanked members for their continued partnership and commitment to improving outcomes for Native American children and families. The meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m. CDT.