

10 Pearls of Wisdom from ICWA Partnership Grantees



Capacity Building
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In 2017, the Children's Bureau funded five year projects to study and develop effective partnership practice models to improve the application of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). These grants were partnerships by states and tribes as well as their respective child welfare agencies and courts. Grants were made to teams in the Minnesota, Oklahoma, and North Dakota areas. Grantees took a data-informed deep-dive into ICWA practices and identified a number of obstacles and accelerators to applying ICWA the right way, and across different domains in their child welfare system. After several years of hard work, the grantees came up with 10 Pearls of Wisdom to share with others that may want to work in partnership on ICWA. We hope these insights will support ICWA application across the country.

10 Pearls of Wisdom

(1) Don't underestimate the power of collaboration and the value of relationships and local leadership.

- The county-specific folks and their efforts make all the difference.

(2) Sometimes you have to get out of the way.

- Be self reflective.
- Be open to adopting new ways-of-being. E.g., incremental change vs. large scale change.
- Things are going to get uncomfortable. Embrace it, be ready to learn from it.

(3) You might not be the expert. The county-specific dynamics are not something for you to "solve" or to "fix."

- Your role is to facilitate, support, and build.
- It's a role not everyone is used to filling.

(4) Time is a different deal in this work.

- The process is central, esp. re: building trust and relationships.
 - You cannot rush or undercut this process.
 - Tribal Consultation is not the same as typical, Western consultation. It requires sensitivity to other ways of being.
 - You may have to create a "system within a system," based on heartwork - which may not be an intuitive concept for everyone, esp. non-tribal folks.
 - This work doesn't happen fast.
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(5) Paths to Trust

- Facing a challenge, articulating it, bringing disagreement to the fore and walking through it together.
- It's messy. But a willingness to walk through difficulty together can open the door to trust.
- Begin meetings with a clear intention (e.g., an elder may begin by casting a "sacred net" around what we're about to do or engage in).
- Engage in intentional experiences together (e.g., OK watching Sandy Whitehawk's movie) and taking the time to articulate what you see, feel, or hear with regard to the history and experience of others. This requires a spirit of vulnerability.

(6) Use culture and tribal empowerment to move families forward. Everything else is a tool to get there. The grant requirements, the checkboxes, the data, etc., are all in service to the goal of your project.

- Get clear why or how you think your specific work will drive toward the goal.
- Never lose sight of the objective.
- Look critically at your current practice and ask "Why am I doing this?" Interrogate the practices and see whether they align with what you're trying to achieve.

(7) Multidisciplinary and multi-systemic approaches: there are almost certainly different components at work to promote ICWA, but there is probably not a consortium or group of like minded folks looking at the whole package and articulating the "why" of the work; that is, why we are working to implement ICWA.

- E.g., ND institutional analysis: what is it about the structure of the system that is driving the behavior of the folks working within it?
- Don't just look at what people are doing. Look also at why they're doing it, and what institutional factors might be driving that behavior.

(8) Begin the work with a data needs assessment.

- This helps figure out whether you have the capacity to conduct the evaluation.
- But also helped identify unexpected collaborations or partners that can help your project move forward.
- Eg., the CBCC ICWA Baseline Measures Project read in light of the MN ICWA research to draw new inferences and insights.

(9) Give and share data - even preliminary data - to help inform discussions and decisions as you go.

- You don't have to wait "until the end" to look at data.
- Don't just focus on outcomes. Qualitative data is central to understanding the work and its impact on everyone.
- Focus groups help gather this kind of information.

(10) It's almost impossible to do anything without a relationship in place. Focus on it. Don't take it lightly.

- e.g., OK ICWA case staffing - get people involved early on, including tribal members, and all of you should be at the table with a voice.
- When disaster strikes (e.g., COVID) those relationships are what will sustain the work.