

Testimony of Elisia Manuel
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Before the House Committee on Ways & Means
“Empowering Native American and Rural Communities”
Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community
Scottsdale, Arizona
May 10, 2024

Dagot’ee (hello in Apache). Thank you, Honorable Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and members of the Ways and Means Full Committee for this opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Elisia Manuel and my traditional Apache name is Beautiful Sunflower. I’m Mexican and Apache born and raised in Arizona. I’m the founder of Three Precious Miracles, a nonprofit organization to support Native children affected by foster care. The organization has been thriving for just about ten years, providing basic resources and cultural opportunities to keep children connected to culture. I also currently work for StepStone Family Youth & Services as the Foster Care Recruitment Manager. I’m married to my high school sweetheart Tecumseh Running Deer Manuel, an enrolled member of Gila River Indian Community. We will be celebrating 20 years of marriage on June 3rd, 2024. We are proud parents of three beautiful children who were all once part of the Department Child Safety and Tribal Social Services system.

In addition to my regular job and running a nonprofit, I oversee two Prevention Councils with the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS), one in Pinal County in the Gila River Area and another in Apache County serving the White Mountain Apache Community. I also serve on the DCS Advisory Committee and am the Chair of the Phoenix Indian Center Urban Indian Coalition Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Subcommittee. I am a board member of the First Things First Gila River Indian Community Partnership Council, serve on the Arizona Friends in Foster Care Scholarship Committee, the Johnson O’Malley Program committee in Casa Grande, and the Native American Women’s Conference. My organization, Three Precious Miracles, is also a founding member with the National Youth Engagement Advisory Council, which works in collaboration with US Department of Health and Human Services Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY). It is charged with advancing child welfare

programs and practice to ensure that they are authentically engaging and empowering children and youth in foster care throughout the U.S., especially in relation to permanency decisions. I'm proud to say that through my advocacy to get more Native communities involved, we have three Native American/ Hawaiian Natives groups represented in the QIC-EY pilot sites --The State of Hawaii, Oklahoma Southern Plains CPT Consortium, and Yakama Nation.

Our family has been very thankful for the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). ICWA was enacted in 1978 in the response to the crisis affecting American Indian and Alaska Native children, families, and tribes. Large numbers of Native children were being separated from their parents, extended families, and communities by state child welfare and private adoption agencies. ICWA is an important protection for Native children and families. It allows tribal governments to intervene in these cases and work collaboratively with states to ensure that appropriate services and placements are available.

I became involved with the child welfare system when I started volunteering at the local Residential Youth Home on the Gila River Indian Community. In January 2013, we became licensed foster parents for the community and received our first two foster children the second week in January. On February 27th, 2013, Tribal Social Services contacted us that they had a baby boy that would need a forever home. His biological mother already had eight children in the system and his case plan would be adoption. He was identified as a failure to thrive preemie exposed to methamphetamines. We immediately agreed that that we would move forward with the adoption process.

When we were at the hospital for our son, we were told that a baby girl needed an ICWA-compliant home and asked if we would be willing to take her. She had been placed into foster care by a non-ICWA case manager and had been placed with a non-native family. We had several court hearings to request that the Department of Child Safety (DCS) transfer her case to the ICWA unit. On June 24th, 2013, the judge ruled in favor and placed her with us. I received a text message later that day from the foster mom and we met at a Walmart parking lot. The family handed our daughter to my husband with a few items – a baby blanket, two outfits, newborn pictures, a bottle, and a bottle of formula. And suddenly we were the parents of two babies only a week apart and two foster children. So, in the matter of four months we became parents to four children all under the age of two years old and all still wearing diapers.

Our son Micah came to us about a year later, on February 12th 2014. He was two days old, and it was just 2 days before our daughter's first birthday and 10 days before our son's first birthday. When the caseworker called to advise us that they had another baby that needed a forever home, I giggled and told her that I hoped she could find him a home. And then she told me he was my son's biological brother and mom had #10. So, we agreed with open arms although all our children haven't even turned 1 yet. Tecumseh and I always tease that we have three children that are the same age for four days every year. All my children were born in February, so we have a birthday party every week that month!

Our daughter became forever ours because of ICWA's "gold standard" of keeping Indian children in homes which reflect the unique values of Indian culture. I feel ICWA is so important because it helps preserve our culture, prevent the loss of tribal connections, and ensure our well-being within our communities. I believe that having a sense of where we come from through our cultural connections promotes a sense of purpose, belonging, and a healthier life. Honoring and preserving my own cultural heritage has been a powerful tool in promoting holistic health and addressing societal inequities. I'm still learning as an adult how culture makes me feel strength, resilience and lead a strong path for my ancestors. The adoption process for my family was amazing and I'm so thankful that we were blessed.

Across the country, Tribes and States are increasingly finding ways to improve ICWA's implementation. In Arizona, we have made progress by delivering ICWA trainings conducted by the ICWA unit liaison who provides information on child welfare systems. There was also an amazing ICWA conference hosted by Pascua Yaqui Tribe Office of the Attorney General that I personally enjoyed attending. On July 15th, 2023, I helped plan and facilitate an ICWA symposium at the Phoenix Indian School Memorial Hall to share information on ICWA, the court system, the Haaland v. Brackeen decision, and how to get licensed to become a foster parent. Cultural competency training has also been designed to support child welfare professionals to work with diverse families.

But there is still a need for more training specific to the implementation of ICWA. There are areas where implementation of ICWA is inconsistent and Native children are not receiving the protections under the law, such as placement with relatives or preventive efforts to avoid placement in foster care systems. As of a month ago, there are approximately 9,000 kids in foster care in Arizona and 11% are Native children. A rate that disproportionately higher than the

4.5% of Native Americans in Arizona's population, meaning Native children are at higher risk of coming to the attention of DCS. But there are also thousands more children in Tribal foster care that are not reported to our state system. For example, we have 22 beautiful tribes here in Arizona and we don't report tribal cases to the state because of sovereignty. Through my work and advocacy working with different tribal communities, I have found that we potentially have an additional 3,000 children in foster care.

Lack of data about ICWA implementation and lack of targeted assistance for states and tribes is a consistent barrier to improvements. From the federal level, I think you could encourage states to thoughtfully implement ICWA through the *Strengthening Tribal Families Act of 2023*. It would help by requiring states to develop an ICWA state plan and to regularly assess their strengths and areas for improvement. People want to understand the law and make it work, but we need more data, training, and consistent implementation. Native children across the country need to be protected, and they deserve our best efforts to keep them connected to their families and communities. I'm very thankful that my work has allowed me to teach a basic cultural training to staff and new foster parents to help them understand the importance of culture and ICWA.

We could help so many more families and Native children if tribal communities had some of the same resources as nontribal communities. My nonprofit scrambles every day to support tribal families taking in children. Too often our foster and kinship families don't have access to basic resources they need to take care for children, including beds, clothing, car seats, diapers, and more. But it's more than what our small nonprofit can provide through help from volunteers and donations. In our case, we were able to adopt our children because they came through the state child welfare system in conjunction with Tribal ICWA. As a result, they were eligible for the adoption subsidy and other resources such as childcare assistance and adoption tax credit. My husband and I work very hard to provide for three babies less than a year apart and thankful for the additional support we were offered, and it made a difference. However, from my experience, a child who is under Tribal Social Services and not the state system is not eligible for those same benefits and resources. A few years ago, we were called by the Tribal Social Services Department and asked if we would foster our daughter's little sister. I was the 18th person they called to find a placement. But, after talking to my husband, we agreed that we would take her only if she came through the state system so that she could receive the same benefits. We felt it was in the best interest for baby to be offered all resources to properly care for her. We never heard back and, last we heard, she is still in foster care, years later.

I believe that many more tribal families would be willing to care for children in foster care if the right support was in place. As my story demonstrates, there are inequities in who receives adoption subsidies, adoption tax credits, childcare resources, kinship support and more. If we want to deliver on the purpose of ICWA and have Native children stay in their communities, we need more equity between Tribal and non-Tribal child welfare. Right now, children have to stay in the state system to get these resources.

This lack of resources also leads to more Native children needlessly coming into child welfare. We need to give families what they need so they never encounter foster care. We need strategies and resources to address parental trauma and support parents who are facing a crisis. Many of the prevention resources available in nontribal communities are nonexistent in tribes. In partnership with Prevent Child Abuse Arizona, we are working to implement much-needed family resources centers statewide. In tribal communities, we would also need to make sure resource centers are equipped to address basic needs or be able to connect families to community-based services. To fill the gaps, I currently have a small warehouse in Sacaton and work with several community nonprofits to provide resources to Native families around the state.

To comprehensively support tribal families and children, I strongly encourage you to reauthorize and strengthen Title IV-B. This federal program provides flexible funding to prevent maltreatment, support kinship and foster caregivers, and strengthen families so children and youth can live safely at home -- three areas that are vital yet under-resourced in tribal communities. Tribes need more funding and fewer administrative burdens to access and maximize Title IV-B.

With greater and more equitable access to Title IV-B, Tribes could accomplish a lot. We know what our Native families and children need – resources and culturally attuned programs that prevent and heal maltreatment. Another example from my experience includes cultural sweat ceremonies and positive parenting workshops that we held for Native parents who are battling substance use and trauma and may have had their children removed. The parents have expressed feeling supported by their community brothers and sisters and culturally connected. This paves the pathway to recovery and for getting the help they need. I also volunteer in a local residential treatment center for youth, holding a culture group class for Native youth that are between the ages of 10 and 17. We provide invaluable emotional support and encouragement

during times of separation and loss while they are living away from tribal communities and family. We have a traditional facilitator who coordinates and incorporates cultural medicine to help preserve and honor ancestral knowledge and healing practices that have been passed down through generations. The clinician at the residential facility has witnessed firsthand the transformative power of embracing cultural medicine in promoting their well-being. I'm honored to work with Indian youth and parents and help them connect to their culture, begin to heal, and prevent any further involvement in child welfare. I wholeheartedly believe culture is prevention and can empower our life and belonging. Title IV-B is an opportunity for you to provide more equitable funding to Tribes so that, in turn, we can provide support for our families and children and prevent crises.

Embracing and celebrating my culture has not only enriched my life but has also empowered me to lead a more fulfilling and meaningful existence to help my children and others. I would like to thank the committee for allowing me to share a piece of my life through this testimony. I will continue to be an advocate for Native children and families, child welfare and ICWA as I feel our forever family has been blessed, and we will bless others.