



Traditions *renewed*

The Mille Lacs Band
of Ojibwe Improves
Its Indian Child
Welfare Programs by
Incorporating Tribal
Family Values

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Historical Context	6
Rich Culture, Strong Values	6
Research Approach	8
What Was Achieved?	9
The Data: Observable Results	9
How Was This Achieved?:	
A Department Redefines Itself on Its Path to Safe Reduction	13
Community Input.....	13
Wraparound	14
Network of Providers	16
Family Engagement	17
Cultural Sensitivity, Relationships, and Trust.....	18
What the Future Holds	22
Bimaadziwin Early Intervention Services	22
Peacemaker Cultural Mentors.....	23
Conclusion	23
Endnotes	24

Overview

This report provides an overview of the remarkable changes implemented by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Child Welfare Program. In 2010, this American Indian tribe in Minnesota began an innovative redesign of its child welfare programs with a commitment to child safety, strong families, supportive communities, and hope. The tribe looked to experts within its community – families, elders, and spiritual leaders – to drive its reforms towards safe reduction of children in out-of-home care and of non-native placements. In so doing, the Mille Lacs Department of Family Services created a system that aligns with the American Indian values of finding virtue in every family and keeping families intact whenever possible. The purpose of this report is to document, share, and uplift areas of change and improvements that have made – and can continue to make – a positive difference in the lives of American Indian children and families. The successes and lessons learned from the Mille Lacs Band's experience are not only applicable to systems serving American Indians, but also to child welfare system reform efforts more generally.

Research Approach

This report uses the Success Case Method to strategically evaluate the reforms undertaken by the Mille Lacs Department of Family Services. It also relies on an indigenous evaluation framework that emphasizes storytelling and prioritizes experience-based knowledge from multiple American Indian perspectives. The approach consisted of two in-person site visits involving individual and group interviews with tribal stakeholders representing a wide variety of perspectives, including agency leadership and staff, tribal elders, foster and relative parents, and birth parents. The interviews took place on the Mille Lacs Band reservation and in Minneapolis during June and August 2012.

What Was Achieved?

The tribe's administrative data document increases in both trial home visits in parent's homes and placements in non-licensed relative homes between the years preceding and following the reform efforts undertaken by the tribe in 2010. Since the reforms took place the following successes occurred between 2010 and 2012:

- A significant increase in the percent of all children in Mille Lacs Band custody served in the parent's home.
- A significant increase in the percent of all out-of-home placements in non-licensed relative homes.

- A significant decrease in the percent of all children in out-of-home care served in non-native foster care.
- A significant decrease, which started before 2010, in the percent of children in out-of-home care in residential treatment.

Together, these data support the story of success in the Tribe's reform effort to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care, but, when necessary, keep them in the care of relatives or Native American caregivers.

How This Was Achieved

With community input, the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services developed and implemented a reform that is showing early signs of success. It revolves around a practice model, wraparound, that reflects a renewal of tradition in how families are respected and children are protected within the tribe. The family engagement model of child and family teams, in which families truly drive the decisions affecting them, is a key component of wraparound. A vast network of internal and external service providers was created to support wraparound, and there was an increase in the number of culturally competent staff who are committed to the family-driven service model and who are able to build relationships and trust with families.

Implications

By using the core tenets of any successful system reform – community input, family engagement, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and relationships and trust – the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe not only has set out boldly on its own path to progress but also has provided a model that other tribes and public child welfare systems can replicate and incorporate into their own practices.

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Introduction

Child welfare system reform can be declared a success when children are safe, families are strong, communities are supportive, and hope prevails. In 2010, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe an American Indian tribe in Minnesota, began an innovative redesign of its child welfare programs with a commitment to meet each of those four objectives.

This system reform marks a renewal of the American Indian tradition of an entire community caring for any family in crisis or in need. This report examines the goals of the Mille Lacs Band, beginning in 2010, to safely reduce the number of children in foster care. It focuses on the decline in the number of children who were removed from their families and sent to live in non-native foster homes where access to the tribe's culture, traditions, and ceremonies was limited or nonexistent.

Historical Context

Any examination of Indian child welfare must be considered against a backdrop of the American Indian history of forced assimilation and broken promises. In the 1930s, many Mille Lacs Band children were sent to government boarding schools where they were forbidden from speaking their language, practicing their religion, and performing their ceremonies.¹ This traumatic history of forced family separation can feed into a deep-seated mistrust of child welfare programs run by state and county systems. It is as if foster care – in particular, the forced removal of native children to live with non-native foster families – is history repeating itself.

This historical context – and the traditional American Indian value of keeping families intact – informs the priorities of Indian child welfare programs, which emphasize family reunification and oppose the termination of parental rights. It also helps explain why the Mille Lacs Band has placed such a tremendous emphasis on incorporating culture into its child welfare programs. A Mille Lacs Band elder summed it up, saying that systems have failed American Indians in the past because nobody ever took the time to find out who they were and what they were about. And no one knows the Mille Lacs Band people better than the Mille Lacs Band people themselves.

Rich Culture, Strong Values

The Mille Lacs Band is an American Indian tribe with a reservation stretching across four counties in rural east-central Minnesota. With more than 4,300 members in 2012, the tribe offers many social, educational, and cultural services to those who live on the reservation as well as American Indians living in the urban neighborhoods of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Over the years, American Indian tribes have looked to the Mille Lacs Band for guidance on administering effective child welfare programs as it was one of the first tribes to manage its own foster care program.²

Like many other tribes, the Mille Lacs Band people possess a strong desire to maintain their language, culture, and traditional ceremonies, which have endured the tribulations and triumphs of more than 250 years post-European contact. The Mille Lacs Band regard the community as a whole including elders, families, and children in high esteem. Elders embrace their obligation to teach and advise. Families are given every opportunity to stay together. In American Indian culture, the definition of family is not limited solely to biological relations but extends to everyone in the tribe. Children are viewed as sacred. In fact, the act of fighting over children is believed to take away a child's spirit.

American Indians believe strongly that their lives are part of – and inseparable from – one another and the land. In American Indian culture, communal interests transcend those of a single person or a single relationship.³ In this way, the Mille Lacs Band comes together as a community to provide hope to any family in crisis or on the cusp of it. “A little bit of hope for a family goes a long way,” said Edward St. John, Sr., who with his wife, Harriet, is caring for four young grandchildren while their parents work to straighten out their lives.

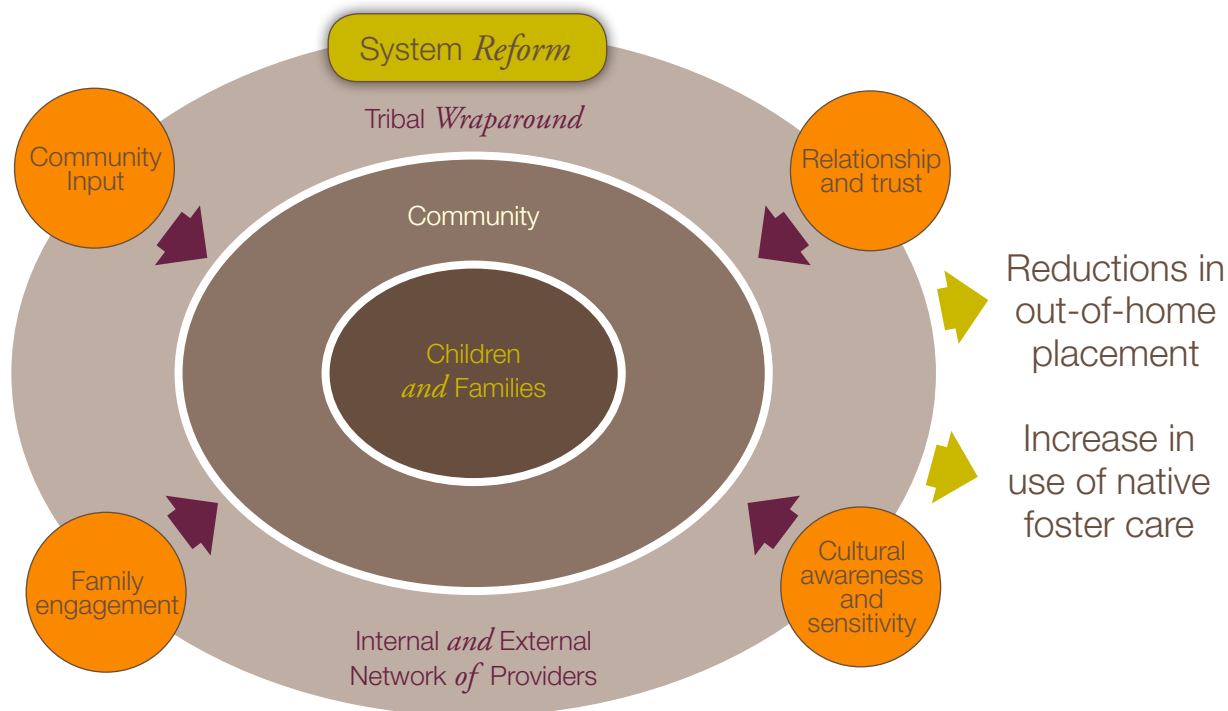
The tribe looked to experts within its community – families, elders, and spiritual leaders – to drive the reform. In doing so, the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services created a system that aligns with the American Indian values of finding virtue in every family and keeping families intact whenever possible.

This is a story of their transformation, the core principles of which are the foundations for any successful child welfare system reform:

1. Meaningful community input
2. Meaningful family engagement
3. Cultural awareness and sensitivity
4. Relationships and trust

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates this holistic model of system reform. Families and children are at the center, with the Mille Lacs Band services and the community wrapping around them in support. These critical system reform elements provide a context to enable positive outcomes to occur.

Figure 1: A Visual Representation of System Reform at the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services



This report is a story of one tribe’s efforts to achieve safe reduction and take care of their children within their community. It starts with data on the children and families served to portray what was achieved. Then it describes the specific strategies the tribes employed that embody each of these principles of system reform that likely led to the observable improvements in achieving the goals of reducing out-of-home placement and the use of non-native foster care, thus keeping families together whenever possible.

Research Approach

This report uses the success case method to strategically evaluate the reforms undertaken by the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services. The success case method is a practical alternative to a comprehensive and systematic evaluation. It relies on practical evaluation methods that move beyond hearsay and gut reactions to tell a compelling, valid, and credible story.⁴

Any evaluation of services within American Indian communities requires some rethinking of mainstream research approaches. An indigenous evaluation framework emphasizes storytelling and prioritizes knowledge from multiple American Indian perspectives based on their experiences. As a result, evaluation within this context has both a social and moral function.⁵ The approach undertaken here relies primarily on the tribal statistical data as well as observations and insights of several individuals within the Mille Lacs Band community who have had experience with the Department of Family Services and its child welfare programs. The goal of this report is to document, share, and uplift areas of change and improvement that have made – and can continue to make – a positive difference in the lives of American Indian children and families.

In this vein, the research approach consisted of two in-person site visits to the Mille Lacs reservation involving individual and group interviews with tribal stakeholders representing a wide variety of perspectives including agency leadership, staff, tribal elders, foster and relative parents, and birth parents. The group interview occurred during the second site visit and served as a forum to discuss a draft of this report with stakeholders and have them validate or modify the interpretations therein. This report also draws upon existing tribal documents, and summarizes survey and administrative data provided by the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services.

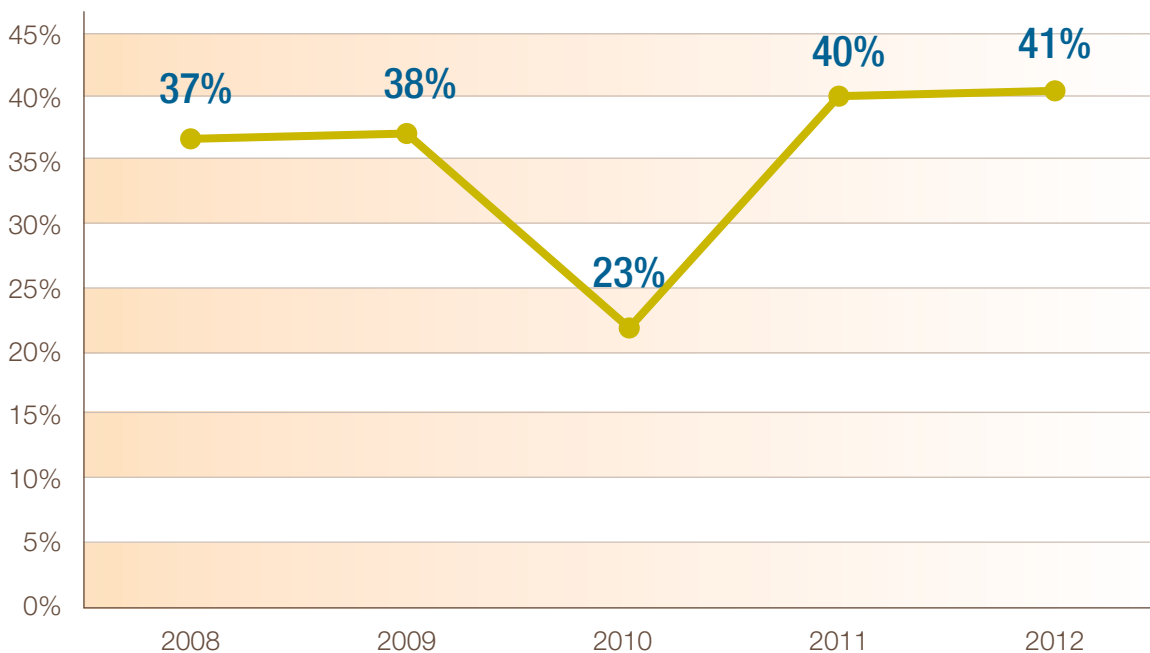
What Was Achieved?

The Data: Observable Results

The administrative data of the tribe support the story of this transformation. The figures below present five years of data, when possible -- the two years preceding the year these changes were made (2010) and the two years following. All the estimates are point-in-time estimates, indicating they represent a count or percentage for a single time period—the end of December for years 2008 – 2011 and the end of September for 2012. As such, these estimates do not capture any month-to-month fluctuation. In the results described below, tests of proportions were used to determine what changes from year-to-year were not likely to occur from chance alone with 95% confidence.

Percent of Children in Tribal Custody in a Parent's Home: Trial Home Visits. One overarching goal of the tribe is to keep children safely at home or with their extended family. When children in tribal custody are placed with their biological parents it is called a “trial home visit.” Figure 2 displays the percent of all children in Mille Lacs Band custody in trial home visits in their parent's home. The percent of children in tribal custody cared for in their parent's home decreased significantly in 2010 from the previous two years. However, after 2010, there was a significant increase in the percent of children in tribal custody able to remain at home through trial home visits from 23% in 2010 to 40% and 41% in 2011 and 2012, respectively. This illustrates a significant improvement in the percent of children in Mille Lacs Band custody who are able to remain in their parent's home.

Figure 2: Percent of All Children in Tribal Custody Cared for in Their Parent's Home (Tribal Home Visit) by Year

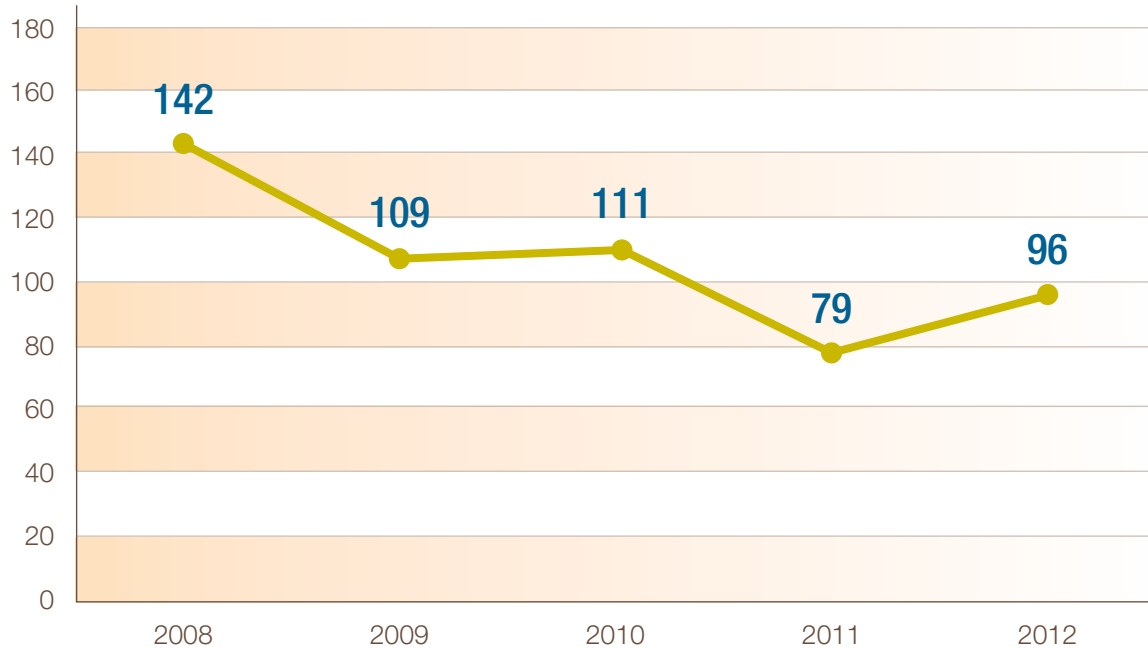


Number of children in Tribal Home Visits	84	67	33	53	66
Number of children in tribal custody	226	176	144	132	162

Source: Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services

Total Number of Children in Out-of-Home Care. As shown in Figure 3, similar positive changes were observed for the overall number of children in out-of-home care. This number was at its highest (i.e., 142 children) in 2008 and then declined steadily until 2011 to 79 children. However, in 2012, this count increased slightly, indicating a need for the Mille Lacs Band to carefully examine both policies and practices related to out-of-home care placements in the aggregate to prevent further potential increases in these numbers.

Figure 3: Total Number of Children in Out-of-Home Care^a by Year



^aOut-of-home care includes all children who receive services outside of their parent's home. Placement types include: unlicensed relative care, licensed relative foster care, native foster care, non-relative native foster care, independent living services, and residential facilities.

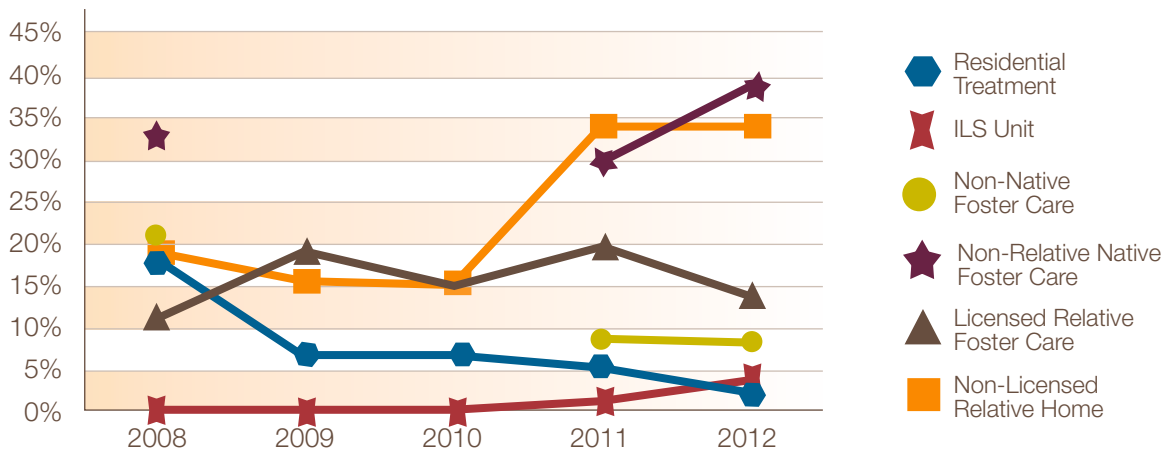
Source: Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services

Figure 4 displays the percent of all children in out-of-home placements by placement type for each year. These findings include:

- **Non-Licensed Relative Home.** After 2010 when the reform efforts occurred, the results indicate a significant increase in the percent of all out-of-home placements in non-licensed relative homes, from a five year low of 14% in 2010 to 34% in 2011 and 2012. Similar to the significant increases in trial home visits in parent's homes, these findings reflect progress in keeping children in relative care through the use of non-licensed relative homes consistent with the reform goals.
- **Licensed Relative Foster Care.** Despite small fluctuations in the percent of all children in out-of-home care in licensed relative foster care, no significant differences between years for this type of care was detected across the five year period. Relatives are defined as those individuals who are considered as family to the parents.

- **Non-Relative Native Foster Care.** Significant changes from 2008 to 2011 and 2012 were not observed for the percent of all children in out-of-home care in non-relative, native foster care. (Caregivers self-identify as Native American). While not significant, there is a slight upward trend for a larger percent of children placed in non-relative, native foster care in 2012 compared to 2008 and 2011. (Foster care placements for 2009 and 2010 were not broken down by native or non-native, so this information is unavailable).
- **Non-Native Foster Care.** Prior to 2010, before the reforms took place, there was a significant increase in the percent of all children in out-of-home care placed in non-native foster care. Importantly, since the reform effort in 2010, there was a large and significant decrease in the percent of children in this type of care from 64% in 2010 to 9% and 8% in 2011 and 2012, respectively. This finding is likely related to the significant increases observed for non-licensed relative care and trial home visits from 2008 to 2011 and 2012. (Foster care placements for 2009 and 2010 were not broken down by native or non-native, so this information is unavailable).
- **Residential Treatment.** There was a significant decrease in the percent of all children in out-of-home care in residential treatment placements from 2008 to every subsequent year, with a low of 2% in 2012.
- **Independent Living Services.** A significant increase in the percent of children in out-of-home care in independent living services was observed in 2012 (4%), as compared to no children in 2008 and 2009 and one percent of all children in 2010, though the number of children in this type of care is still very small.

Figure 4: Percent of All Children in Out-of-Home Placements by Placement Type and Year



Data in 2009 and 2010 did not allow distinguishing between native and non-native foster care, so these estimates were not available.

Source: Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services

Safe reduction is the goal of the Mille Lacs Band; thus, child safety in relation to these changes is critical to track. One measure of safety is whether there is a recurrence of maltreatment. Nationally, recurrence of maltreatment has declined at the same time that significant reductions in children who are removed from their homes have occurred⁶. Unfortunately, measures of safety, or reoccurrence of maltreatment, are not available in the aggregate at this time from the Mille Lacs Department of Family Services. However, a 2012 report noted that in 2011, the re-entry rate within 12 months of reunification was only 1.2%, much below the state average.⁷ Nonetheless, these initial data provide preliminary support for the success of these reforms undertaken by the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services.

These data paint a picture of the tribe accomplishing its goals: reducing the number of out-of-home placements and increasing the percent of children in tribal custody cared for at home through trial home visits or with relatives in non-licensed foster care.

How Was This Achieved?: A Department Redefines Itself on Its Path to Safe Reduction

Community Input

In 2010, an alarmingly high number of children were being removed from their families, being placed in non-native foster homes, and eventually being adopted by non-Indians.⁸ The tribe also had taken note of a Minnesota Department of Human Services report in 2010 showing that American Indian children in 2008 were placed in foster care at a rate “more than twice that of any other group, and [were] more than 12 times more likely than a white child to spend time in placement.”⁹

During spring 2010, the tribe embarked on a deliberate effort to reform its approach to providing child welfare programs to meet these goals through informal and formal means, which included a survey. Understanding that many people in the tribe would not respond to a written survey, the department also presented it at community gatherings, powwows, and district meetings to elicit as many responses as possible. As a result of the community presentations, in some instances, people outside of the tribe, without first-hand experience or knowledge of the Mille Lacs Band’s Department of Family Services, provided feedback. Nonetheless, taken together, findings from the survey provide a window into community sentiment about child welfare programs for native families although they may not mirror the services exactly.

The community members let it be known that families should have a significant say in the critical decisions affecting their children. The community made it clear that children who must be removed from their families in order to remain safe should be placed with other American Indian families as opposed to non-native foster families. The community also said that the tribe’s culture should be incorporated into child welfare programs and that services would be enhanced if social workers (now

called care coordinators) were American Indian so that the culture and values of the Mille Lacs Band would be respected.

Specifically, the Mille Lacs Band's survey results included the following:

- More than 90 percent of survey respondents agreed that children who had to be removed from their homes needed to be placed in native, instead of non-native, foster homes.
- About 80 percent agreed that family services workers needed to be American Indian.
- More than 80 percent agreed that traditional ceremonies and cultural outings should be offered to families working with the department.
- More than 90 percent agreed that families involved in child welfare cases should play a significant role in making decisions concerning their children.

Wraparound is a practice model that prioritizes family involvement while creating support networks to help strengthen families and keep children safe. It is a family-driven approach to child welfare based on the notion of "unconditional care."

What became clear through the course of interviews and the review of department policies and procedures is that the tribal community is at the heart of the Mille Lacs Band's family services unit. The department designed its reform strategies specifically to increase the number of safe and successful family reunifications. As detailed below, they did this through creation of a formal support system for families, increased family engagement through the use of "child and family teams," built relationships, which in turn engendered trust, and increased cultural awareness and sensitivity through its workforce composition and cultural practices.

Wraparound

The survey results fueled a different mindset toward how the department delivers child welfare programs. Congruent with the Elder Child Welfare Commission's desire to provide more comprehensive services, the department moved forward with developing and implementing a comprehensive reform through wraparound with training and support through a contract with Milwaukee Wraparound (see <http://county.milwaukee.gov/WraparoundMilwaukee.htm>). This program makes safety of children the highest priority while keeping the onus on families to make the critical decisions affecting their children.

Wraparound is a practice model that prioritizes family involvement while creating support networks to help strengthen families and keep children safe.

It is a family-driven approach to child welfare based on the notion of "unconditional care." Those served are neither referred to – nor treated as – clients. Instead, they simply are "families." Care coordinators are not authoritarians. The focus is on relationships – the building of trust between the care coordinators and the families - as well as nurturing the connections between families and the tribal community.

Wraparound also aims to safely reduce the number of children entering foster care by addressing the daily needs of families so that child neglect or abuse never occurs. For example, wraparound assists families with basic needs such as housing or food, thus maintaining safe shelter and good nutrition for children so that removal for neglect may not be necessary. In this way, wraparound renewed the Mille Lacs Band's tradition of taking care of its own families, a practice that dates back generations.

Suzanne Wise, a recent past Director of the department, has 20 years of experience as a care coordinator. She said she was trained under the philosophy that in state child protection practice, being punitive was the equivalent of being helpful. As a result, she said, she initially was skeptical of wraparound. She now is one of its biggest advocates: "The days of shaming and guiltning our people have to be over," Wise said.

Anne LaFrinier-Ritchie, a department care coordinator, said progress from wraparound is slow because of complex historical and family issues, but she says:

"Things are getting better. Some of the families are dealing with third-generation historical trauma. You can't just come in, say a few things and make it all better. What's needed is more than a Band-Aid. For some families, it will take longer."

A department handbook for families describes the vision of wraparound: "To help build healthy and strong communities by enhancing children's and families' ability to meet life's challenges and to foster resiliency and hope for a better future."

The Department's Family Handbook lists the five missions of wraparound:

1. To serve each youth and family with respect and dignity acknowledging their strengths, needs and preferences.
2. To partner with the agencies who work with families to create one plan for a better life.
3. To support youth and their families to remain safely in their homes and communities.
4. To provide quality care that is culturally responsive to the diverse needs of the families we serve.
5. To provide leadership in creating lasting resources for families in their communities.

The handbook also describes wraparound's commitment and beliefs in serving families:

1. Wraparound believes that families know their children best!
2. Wraparound will help you get your child's needs met in your neighborhood, community, and surrounding area.
3. Family and community resources such as relatives, neighbors, friends, and spiritual advisors are usually the most helpful.
4. Many different types of services and supports may be needed because children and families come from different cultures and backgrounds.
5. Parents of children with severe emotional needs have a right to learn more about their child's diagnosis and individual needs.
6. The Wraparound Care Coordinator must make sure that the child and family are the main people putting together their Care Plan.
7. Chances of success are better when ALL of the Team members work together.
8. When children and families are given the help they ask for and need, they can solve many problems.

Network of Providers

The tribe also created a vast internal and external network of providers to address the basic needs of families and support the wraparound approach. This was accomplished by tapping existing Mille Lacs Band resources, such as mental health services, as well various community-based providers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The goal of the network is to help safely reduce the number of children entering foster care and promote family reunification for those children already removed. One provider offers a "parent assistant" who may spend as much as six hours a day inside the home to teach positive American Indian parenting techniques and be a role model, advocate, and friend to the parent. Other family needs that are addressed include mentoring, tutoring, transportation, independent life skills coaching, job coaching, crisis stabilization, and benefits assistance.

The Mille Lacs Band has a long history of self-governance and providing for its people. The tribe has relied on some of those resources to build this internal support network that enhances wraparound. These services are funded through Child Welfare Targeted Case Management, tribal, and Title IV-E revenue streams. The IV-E funds are disbursed via an agreement between the State of Minnesota and the tribe.

Family Engagement

Wraparound uses child and family teams, a consensus-based family engagement model in which families drive the decisions affecting them, including critical decisions related to placement and care of their children. The team helps families create plans for obtaining necessary resources in order to provide safe homes for raising children. The hope is that the team can be a strong support network for a family long after the case is closed – ideally forever.

Families select members of their team. Besides parents and children, teams may include relatives, close friends, elders, spiritual advisors, cultural mentors, and service providers. The family's care coordinator (and, if applicable, the probation officer and guardian ad litem) is a required member of the team but their role is limited to coordinating the team, helping to facilitate brainstorming, and offering resources. The care coordinator, however, can reject any recommendation from the team that could put the child in imminent harm or that violates tribal policy or law. Each team member is considered equal and is recognized for the expertise that he or she brings to the table.

The child and family teams contain several elements aligned with the best practice Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) recommendations developed in 2010 by an international consortium of experts.¹⁰ The teams use a consensus-based engagement approach in which families drive the decisions affecting them and their children. In most instances, the team accepts – and the department and the court follows – their recommendations. A care coordinator serves as the team coordinator and facilitates brainstorming and offering of resources. Department staff effectively are asking: “How can we assist/help the family as the family identifies our roles and purpose?”

Within two weeks of the first team meeting, the family – in collaboration with the team – develops a crisis plan that addresses ongoing safety concerns for the child. This level of collaboration did not happen prior to wraparound. Within 30 days of the first meeting, the team develops a plan of care in which the family lays out a vision for a successful future. In the plan, a family:

- Describes where it hopes to be – and the progress it hopes to make – in six months or a year.
- Details its underlying needs that must be addressed.
- Identifies strategies on how the team can help the family meet its needs.

The team updates this plan of care every 60 days, or more if needed. Prior to wraparound, updates typically occurred once a year.

With the use of child and family teams, families are asked to be the architects of their own reunification plan acting from a place of empowerment. Families are put in the position of taking full responsibility for the reunification plan as opposed to taking issue with it as sometimes can be the case when a court or an agency developed a plan on their behalf. This family engagement model embraces the American Indian values of restoring relationships and being a good relative. It also positions families and communities to reclaim the customary practice of resolving issues within their extended family circle.

In addition, the engagement process can elicit introspection and self-discovery on a larger and more collective scale. This can happen simply by having family members sit at the table, supporting the parents in spite of any conflict between them that may have occurred in the past. “There’s Dad, and he’s there for you,” LaFrinier-Ritchie said. “That’s pretty powerful.”

Team members are asked not to accuse or place blame. St. John, the elder caring for his grandchildren, said he had initial concern that the birth parents – his children – would be subject to putdowns during the meetings and therefore turn defensive. But he was pleased to witness the opposite. He said that the most effective way to deal with families in crisis is to avoid further confrontation:

“You have to be positive in order to bring people out of their negative hole,” he said. “You need to reward parents when they make positive changes in their lives – like giving them home visits with the children. The more positive that the parents view themselves, the less negative their behaviors will be.”

A parent working toward reunification with her children said she was first opposed to the idea of including relatives on her team: “Why the hell is it any of their business anyway? But then I got to thinking: This is my family, and I usually tell them what’s going on with me. In the end, they are helping me get my kids back.”

Wise said the move toward family engagement “was a difficult one to make for some families that had been in the system a while. They had been conditioned to be told what to do. A typical thing we’d hear from parents was: ‘Just tell me what I need to do to get my kids back.’ They didn’t know what else to do.”

Cultural Sensitivity, Relationships, and Trust

Other changes have occurred as well. The attention to culture, as reflected in the Community Survey results, has helped drive the reduction in the number of native children placed in non-native foster homes and changed the composition of staff. Wraparound’s unwavering family-driven approach contributed to department staff resignations by workers who felt they could not fully buy into the model.

In the first year after implementing wraparound, the department experienced a 78 percent staff turnover rate. The turnover rate during the three years since implementation has leveled off to 48 percent. The initially high staff turnover allowed the department to initiate a targeted recruitment and hiring of American Indian care coordinators. In July 2012, 22 of the department's 24 workers were American Indian, including 7 who are Mille Lacs Band members. In 2009, prior to the system reform, only half of the workers were American Indians – and none were from the Mille Lacs Band.

Most American Indian care coordinators are embedded in the lives of the families they serve. They attend cultural outings and practice traditions in their homes, which often carries over into their workplace. For example, care coordinators will burn sage with parents as a medicine for healing. Together, they ask the spirits for guidance and also for help in having the child and family team process go smoothly:

“We recognize that our families have their own culture,” Wise said. “Indians are very compassionate, loving, and funny people. It’s who I am as a person and who I am as a social worker. Families appreciate our honesty and our efforts to be genuine.”

A tribal elder confirmed the importance of this change and said it is extremely difficult for non-natives to work effectively with families that never have left the reservation, saying that immersion into the culture – not just training from books and classes – is what it takes to truly understand the people.

LaFrinier-Ritchie said living within the community, attending community events, and simply being an American Indian is hugely important in establishing relationships and trust with the families she serves. A mother working with LaFrinier-Ritchie described her as someone “who I can turn to when I need her.” She thinks nothing of popping by LaFrinier-Ritchie’s office just to say hello when she’s out for a walk. The mother, who as a child was removed from her family, said she is working hard to break the generational cycle of family separation. Instead of continuing her behavior of pushing away everyone who cares about her, this mother is letting close family members help her out – in addition to inviting LaFrinier-Ritchie to stand beside her as an advocate.

LaFrinier-Ritchie used to work with a county child welfare system and observed that the relationship there between worker and client was very different. “There can be a lot of negativity. There is no polite talk or laughing. That’s where you get turmoil.” The approach she takes to her work is evident during her first meeting with families. “I’m not there to say, ‘You have a problem.’ I’m there to listen. I say, ‘Tell me what you need. Tell me about your past, your kids.’” This approach promotes trust.

The department encourages its care coordinators to learn the personalities and experiences of the families and to share their own – including personal histories, good and bad. Traditionally, social workers (care coordinators) are discouraged from divulging to clients information about their own family situations and backgrounds. LaFrinier-Ritchie said she tells families about her own child, and even about her own past battles with substance abuse and clinical depression. “I don’t hide anything,” she said. “That’s who I am. I’m not going to be dishonest with them.”

Mille Lacs Band Family Services care coordinator, Emma Lofgren, was assigned a case involving a mother she had heard bad things about. “I was told that she was a lost cause and would never get her kids back. I tried to go in with an open mind. The change has been remarkable. She’s a different person.”

The mother, who has a history of addiction to crack cocaine, has custody of her youngest child and is working toward reunifying with her oldest son. She said she never got along with her county caseworker and didn’t follow through on her case plan. “What’s working for me now is that I want to do this and get my kids back, and I’m working with someone who I can understand and I can trust – and that’s Emma. Even if I’m doing something wrong, I feel that I can tell her anything.”

The mother is an American Indian living in Minneapolis and said it doesn’t really matter to her that Lofgren is native – what matters is she can trust her. “I wouldn’t hesitate to call her, come in, sit down and say, ‘Emma, I need help with something.’ I even feel like if I had a relapse, I could tell her. I wouldn’t want my family telling her before I tell her.”

The relationships between families and caseworkers have become so deeply rooted in trust that the department now is able to be more effective in strengthening and reunifying families, which were prevailing objectives that sparked the reform in the first place.

Lofgren said building a trusting relationship with a family “just comes down to listening to what the family needs. Look, nobody’s perfect, so I try to keep an open mind. I think it’s important not to give up on families.”

The relationships between families and care coordinators have become so deeply rooted in trust that the department now is able to be more effective in strengthening and reunifying families, which were prevailing objectives that sparked the reform in the first place.

In addition, the department has successfully increased the number of relative caregivers and foster families who are American Indians. The department reports more than 40 native foster providers, many of whom are tribal elders, including grandparents and other older relatives of the children in care. The department’s efforts to recruit more relative caregivers – foster and non-foster – was made possible because the department provided ongoing support that relatives needed to raise those children. Relative and native foster families provide housing for children, facilitate visits with birth parents, take children to ceremonial and cultural outings, and often are the parents’ biggest advocates to promote reunification. Some relative caregivers have extended their arms even further by becoming foster parents for other native, non-tribal member children.

Explicit policy changes underlie these reforms toward more relative and native placements. For children who have been removed from their parents, the goal is safe reunification or, if that is not possible, placing children with relatives through temporary or permanent guardianship. Placement of children in non-native foster homes – once the standard of care – is now treated as a last resort. When reunification is not possible, the care coordinator is required to find permanency by looking to other members of the tribe and then to other native families outside the Mille Lacs Band. This policy is consistent with the intent of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

The tribe also provides permanency options through permanent or temporary guardianships. In permanent guardianship, parents are actively involved in their children's lives but do not have primary custody. In temporary guardianship, the intent is to reunify the family when the parents are able to care for the children safely. Temporary guardianship aligns well with the traditional tribal practice of keeping families intact. It also puts the decision on when to reunify into the hands of the family and relatives, not on the department, consistent with the Mille Lacs Band philosophy of families being the best experts on themselves.

Skip and Donna Churchill are elders who have raised eight children, including three native children they fostered at young ages and then adopted. All three children, who now are adults, had been placed in non-native homes off the reservation. "How would they have been raised had they not been returned to a Native American family?" Skip Churchill asked. "They would not have been given access to our values. They would not have understood the close-knit nature of Indian people. They would not have understood that they actually belong somewhere." He said he has passed on to all of his children the values he learned from his parents and grandparents. The couple's motive to foster and ultimately adopt the children "was out of love and concern for our people, especially our children. Our kids will not be thrown away," he said.

Donna Churchill remembers her own grandmother's willingness to take care of any family that needed help:

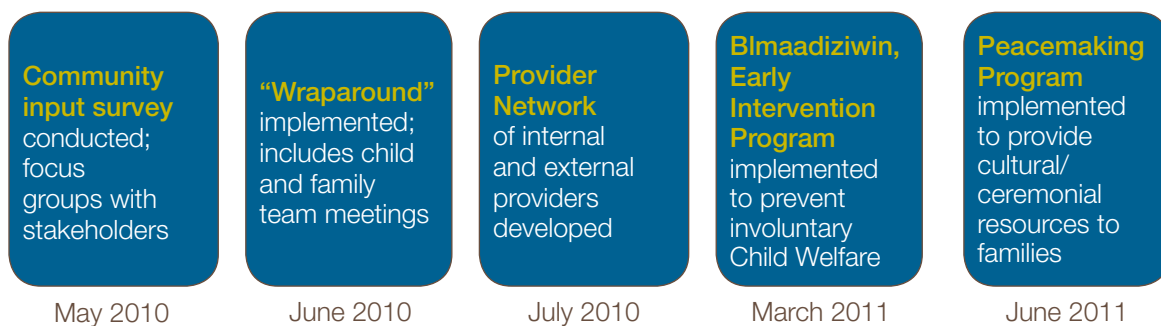
"It's traditional for Native Americans to take care of their own people. We've unfortunately lost some of that due to generations of alcohol and drug abuse, which has created a warped sense of what constitutes normal parenting. We need to break that cycle."

Skip Churchill added that in the old days, "if anything happened to the family across the road, the entire community would come together to try to keep that family together. If a family needed help, everyone would come together to help."

Finally, the Mille Lacs Band court system has also embraced the family-driven concepts that define wraparound – a buy-in that has been vital to the reform’s success. By having confidence in the decisions of families, judges have acted differently in child welfare cases. Rather than laying out a laundry list of orders for parents to follow – such as submitting to regular urinalysis testing or attending parenting skills classes – the judge lets the child and family teams come up with those requirements in partnership with the department. The judge is left to make one simple order: that parents comply with the plan that the child and family team created – a plan the family already owns.

Figure 5 presents a timeline of the changes that are perceived as having led to the successes.

Figure 5: Timeline of Key Events



What the Future Holds

Bimaadziwin Early Intervention Services

As wraparound becomes more ingrained in the practices of the Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services, staff and community members are hopeful that progress can continue and safe reductions in foster care can be achieved, documented, and sustained. The department continues to implement new programs designed to reduce the risk of child maltreatment so that children will rarely, if ever, need to be removed from their families and placed into foster care.

For example, the department implemented Bimaadziwin in March 2011. Bimaadziwin, which means “the good life” in the Ojibwe language, is an early intervention program that provides voluntary services to families with children at risk of entering foster care. These services focus on family strengths.

As described in the Bimaadiziwin brochure, the program consists of:

- Working with families to develop a family vision.
- Bringing together community support.
- Helping families develop tools to provide healthy, caring homes.
- Developing and strengthening relationships with extended family and with the community.
- Valuing traditional teachings.
- Offering services to meet family needs.

Peacemaker Cultural Mentors

In addition to the implementation of Bimaadiziwin, the Mille Lacs Band Family Services department in summer 2011 received a Minnesota Department of Human Services grant for a “Peacemaker”- a cultural mentor who shares and teaches families and children the spiritual concepts, principles, values, and virtues of the Mille Lacs Band. The Peacemaker program aligns with the department’s philosophy toward holistic healing options for families. By focusing on culture and tradition, the Peacemaker provides another pathway to get at the root cause of many family problems and offer cultural solutions.

As of April 2012, Peacemakers had worked with 32 birth families and 11 foster families. The Peacemaker helps birth families and foster families access traditional ceremonies and cultural outings for the children in their care. For example, the Peacemaker helps families participate in sweat lodge, a “renewal of life” ceremony that taps the spiritual energy within earth, air, fire, and water so that families may find peace, harmony, and balance in mind, body, and spirit. The Peacemaker also handles conflict resolution in court proceedings and on the child and family teams.

Conclusion

As noted above, child welfare system reform can be declared successful when children are safe, families are strong, communities are supportive, and hope triumphs. The Mille Lacs Band Department of Family Services developed and implemented a reform that is showing early signs of success, as documented by the tribe’s administrative data, which show a higher percent of children in tribal custody served in their parent’s home and with non-licensed relatives and a lower percent of children cared for by non-native foster care providers since the reform. It revolves around a practice model, wraparound, that reflects a renewal of tradition in how families are respected and children are protected within the tribe. The family engagement model of child and family teams, in which families truly drive the decisions affecting them, is a key component of wraparound.

By using the core tenets of any successful system reform – community input, family engagement, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and relationships and trust – the Mille Lacs Band not only has set out boldly on its own path to progress but also has provided a model that other tribes and public child welfare systems can replicate and incorporate into their own practices.

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about *casey*

About Casey Family Programs

The concept of an entire community coming together to build hope for the families and children within it is a fundamental American Indian value. It also is a core value of Casey Family Programs, a national operating foundation investing significant resources toward "Building Communities of Hope," an effort to create communities that can support strong families and safe children across America. All children in America deserve to be raised in safe and healthy communities that nurture the potential that rests within all children.

The foundation's work in Indian child welfare aims to safely reduce the disproportionate number of American Indian children in foster care by improving tribal, state, and county child welfare systems. Casey Family Programs partners with American Indian communities to promote, improve, and ultimately prevent the need for foster care. Casey's Indian child welfare research portfolio is focused on sharing information about effective prevention and permanency models for tribal child welfare systems so that they may be replicated across the country.





Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation whose work is focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building communities of hope for all of America's children and families. We work in partnership with child welfare systems, families and communities across the nation to prevent child abuse and neglect and to find safe, permanent and loving families for all children. We believe every child deserves a family of their own and a community of hope.

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