



# Agindaso Abinoji-yag

*"He/she reads or counts children"*

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By Stella Barnes, ICWA Court Monitor and Resource Navigator

ICWA Compliance Newsletter Q4 2025

## Behind the Bench: Interview with Rebecca McConkey-Greene

Rebecca McConkey-Greene brings over 18 years of experience serving Indian Country. After earning an undergraduate degree in economics and finance, she pursued law school, inspired by her family of attorneys and a passion for meaningful human rights work.

She has worked with Anishinabe Legal Services and Leech Lake Tribal Court, significantly advancing child protection, domestic violence cases, and family dependency treatment courts. Her commitment extends to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

Currently, as an attorney with the Ramsey County Attorney's Office, Rebecca advocates for effective legal solutions using her rich background in Tribal law and human rights. Her passion and respect for history, dedication to community engagement, and understanding of the law gives her story a unique perspective.



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### *What led you to become a Tribal judge?*

I went to law school kind of late in my career path. It never crossed my mind that I would end up working in Indian country or on Indian law issues at all. I was thinking more international human rights type of issues. So I started law school and while I was at law school, I had a part-time clerkship with the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center. They had an attorney that was doing domestic violence representation. I worked there for about a year. I realized that while human rights would remain important to me, I wanted to be in positions where I was dealing with and helping actual individual people, not just on a policy level.

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The policy work is really interesting and cool too. But to me, I need that engagement with individuals, to see how things are working in people's everyday lives and to know that we really are doing things that are meaningful and helpful for individual people, not just what we think in our head is going to do it, right?

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After law school, I was really honored to get a job with Anishinabe Legal Services. Their primary office is in Cass Lake, Minnesota, which is on the Leech Lake Reservation. They also have offices on the Red Lake and White Earth Reservations. I was their staff attorney on the White Earth Reservation. Legal services work is so important and so cool. And for a new attorney, it's awesome because they kind of throw you at stuff, which is simultaneously terrifying and thrilling. At least for me, that's the best way for me to learn something is to do it. I did get excellent training and mentorship, but the opportunity to have

hands on court experience was invaluable. I was working under a grant to represent victims of domestic violence and simultaneously a contract with White Earth Tribal Court to do their parents' representation on their child protection cases.

So I was the staff attorney on White Earth, and they had an office up on Leech Lake that did similar things. Around that time, Leech Lake and White Earth were both starting to do something that we refer to as the “initiative” with their child protection cases. For most tribes in Minnesota, they petition child protection cases in Tribal court, but the counties bear the financial responsibility and pay for the out of home placement and case management through Title IV benefits. At the time, White Earth and Leech Lake were both in this very new program where the federal government had authorized states to have Tribes directly provide services and access IV-E through the state instead of a county. That program started around the same time I started.

Anita Fineday was the judge for White Earth and for Leech Lake. She started what has to be one of the first family dependency treatment courts in Minnesota. Simultaneously, Judge Korey Wahwassuck was the Chief Judge for Leech Lake Tribal Court. She and Judge Smith, who was a Judge in Cass County, were doing the first joint jurisdiction wellness courts. The next year Leech Lake Tribal Court started a Joint Jurisdiction wellness court in Itasca County. Both joint jurisdiction courts are still going today, and Itasca County has recently added a joint jurisdiction mental health court. I had no idea any of these wonderful things were going on when I applied for the job at Anishinabe Legal Services, but I'm so glad I did, because I just landed into this super cool environment where everyone was doing these creative courts and services to try to really help people engage and do the things that they needed to do.

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It still follows me to this day when we think about how we should best engage and keep people engaged when they're struggling with chemical health or mental health. These courts get such fabulous one-on-one attention from their case management and resources. But then when they come to court, one of the things I could see was the benefits of having courts where the judges talk directly to people.

**“There are a lot of very wonderful, very committed and creative legal folks working with and for Tribes.”**

Judges are always talking to people in the courtroom, but there's something about when you're sitting at the same table with them, checking in with them on how they're doing, and talking about how life is going, not just the technical compliance with orders and other legal stuff, but instead chatting about day-to-day life things, and the encouragement that goes with that. That has been found to be really helpful for people when they're trying to make those really big life changes that they're making in those circumstances. It was cool. I'm constantly in awe every time I turn around, I feel like I've had these awesome experiences and things that I was introduced to.

I opened my own practice in 2014, which was the McConkey-Greene Law Office. I had some Tribes I had worked for in the past as clients as well as some organizations that served Indian people. I also focused on serving individual people who truly needed help. There was an opening on Leech Lake Tribal Court for a Judge and I was hired initially as a part-time Deputy Judge. I became the Associate Judge full-time in 2022 and was there for about a year. Then Judge Day retired and I applied for and moved into his role as the chief judge. I was the chief judge for a little over a year.

***Can you tell me more about your experience as a chief Tribal judge?***

Yeah, so I am not a Native person. I have no ancestry at all, at least that I'm aware of. But when I was working for the Leech Lake Band as an attorney, my husband, who was a Leech Lake member, worked in the legal department. He wasn't an attorney, but I used to joke that he could play one on TV. And we joked about that because he was truly a treaty expert. He was very big in the 1855 treaties and going back to 1854 and GLIFWC (Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission) days. So I was very lucky to go to Leech Lake because they trained me well, I got to meet my husband and work with him, and got to work with several really excellent attorneys and Judges such as Frank Bibeau, Joe Plumer, Judge Korey Wahwassuck, and Judge Anita Fineday. And that is the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot of very wonderful, very committed and creative legal folks working with and for Tribes.

One of the things that I really loved about being at all of the Tribes I have worked with was their smaller environments, which provides more opportunities to know the people we are working with a little better. I think it's also really helpful if we know not the very basics that are shared by all humans, but more the basics of people's history, and what their families have dealt with, and what they've dealt with over time. I think that can help us make better decisions.

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***What is your experience developing ICWA Courts?***

I've gotten to do a little bit of participation when St. Louis County- Duluth, St. Louis County – Virginia and Carlton County were looking at developing ICWA Courts. It was interesting because they had brought in trainers and had excellent training that really sparked some good conversations about how to do things better. There were a couple of St. Louis County judges that were at it and their staff, county attorneys, a bunch of Tribal social workers and attorneys, social service staff from the counties and guardian ad litem.

## Behind the Bench (Continued from page 3)

I think conversations were already happening about developing ICWA Courts, but after that, momentum was gained in St. Louis County. It was really cool to see even the simple things like the decision to come off of the bench and sit in a circle with people and have everybody in the same circle. That is something I first saw Judge Wahwassuck do when I was a Tribal attorney for Leech Lake. Leech Lake certainly had a bench and council tables, but whenever we would go into court for truancy, she would come off of the bench. We would all just sit around the same table together and talk about how to handle truancy.

**“People might not be in the best place right now, but we want them to be better later. You do what you can to protect that and help people come back and stay engaged.”**

And then so too when they had juvenile delinquency that was going on—they would bring those youth in. Everybody sat around the table and would hash out what kind of restorative justice assignment the youth was going to do, and it usually involved some sort of paper or discussion as well as a good community restorative and supportive act. That was really neat, and really a good thing to see because of the way that it changes the engagement. I was happy when they adapted that in the Duluth court where we were all at the same table, because it really opens it up. We're there for the parents and the kids, of course. It's the parents that need to make the changes and they have the hardest job in the room.

There was one thing that I saw happen in that process that I hope I always emulate. The judge was really good at handling people when they were not happy, and that certainly happens in child protection court proceedings. In court, a lot of times people are happy, and sometimes you have hearings where somebody's not. I remember one particular hearing, the mom stormed out and she was clearly angry and upset. The judge just kept trying to talk her through it, help her process the information, and even though she still left the hearing, she did not disengage from the case. She staying in contact with the agency and the Tribe, jumped back into working on her case plan, and came back to hearings in the future. Because of how the judge handled it, we didn't lose that mom.

It was a really good example for me as a judge and as an attorney, to make sure that I remembered that we're in these processes for the long term. That's maybe not the right exact way to put it, but it's not just this hearing or this moment. People might not be in the best place right now, but we want them to be better later. You do what you can to protect that and help people come back and stay engaged.

**“Each individual person and family is a little bit different, and ultimately the clients are the people doing the really hard work.”**

### ***What's your biggest challenge in your work as an assistant Ramsey County Attorney?***

Well, jokingly, I'm going to say that it's a little bit of a challenge or a shift going back to an attorney role after being a judge because I have to remember deference to other people and things like that. I'm hoping that I'm doing okay at that.

And I don't say that with any criticism of the judges I've appeared in front of or people I work with. I say it kind of jokingly that giving up the judge spot is interesting. But truly, I think the hardest thing in general is getting people the services that they need at times and keeping them engaged. I have a great empathy for families and for social workers trying to navigate systems. I am truly impressed by the hard work the social workers, attorneys, and Guardian ad Litem do. I know that everybody out there is trying really hard to bring good services to people. Each individual person and family is a little bit different, and ultimately the clients are the people doing the really hard work, because they are trying to change aspects of their life, and the rest of us are just doing our best to help.

## Behind the Bench (Continued from page 4)

### **Why is ICWA important to you?**

Before I went to law school, I wanted to do human rights related work but I wasn't exactly sure how. I wanted to do it in a way where I was affecting or working with actual individual people, not just the policy aspect. I had looked at things like, could I go work for the UN or something else human rights related. Then when I did the internship with the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center and I started reading some different papers, I realized that the Indian Child Welfare Act is one of the most basic human rights issue that can exist. When we look at the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, it does include the forcible transfer of children from one ethnic group to another, which is what ICWA is attempting to prevent.

When we look back at the history, we have a boarding school history here that was rough. And we're not the only place that had that. Boarding school practices happened with Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia too. Canada I believe has had a truth commission and Australia had an unfortunately negative court decision where there was a finding that genocide had not occurred because the intentions of the government were good. That they were removing the children because they were trying to deal with some issues of disease that were happening and some other things that were going on. I realized that we don't have that here. In contrast we are a people with a government who flat out stated they "killed the Indian to save the child". And we have a long history in the United States of not only doing that, but other times when we've been genocidal towards Indian people, whether it was for land or for resources.

And unfortunately here, there's some complicated ways about suing the government, so we will never get a decision about if this was a genocidal act. But under Deb Haaland when she was the Secretary of Interior, they issued two reports which seriously dove into the boarding school issue and came out and said, yeah, that's what that was. So that can happen, of course. But early on in doing this work, I realized that at the very basic core, we need our kids. We all need our kids on an individual level. But all nations also need their kids. How do you survive as a group of people if you don't have your kids, that can carry your stories and your medicine and your practices forward to the next generation? The very basis of how folks stop existing as a people, is when they lose their people.

**"Kids should still be able to contact their family, their extended family, their Tribe, their other people that have that same background, and be able to learn truly important things about who they are and why they are important. And they are important."**

Very early on, I could see the importance of this act to make sure that that Indian children stayed Indian children. Not just their ability to enroll in their tribe, but equally important, their ability to have contact with their Tribe, with their family, even if not their parents, because every once in a while, we can't continue that contact with parents for the sake of the child. But kids should still be able to contact their family, their extended family, their Tribe, their other people that have that same background, and be able to learn truly important things about who they are and why they are important. And they are important.

**"People might not be in the best place right now, but we want them to be better later. You do what you can to protect that and help people come back and stay engaged."**

***Chi Miigwech Rebecca McConkey-Greene for sharing your story with us.***

## ICWA Meet and Greet

Metropolitan Urban Indian Directors (MUID) Family Preservation Committee hosted its annual ICWA Meet and Greet in November. It was held at the Minneapolis American Indian Center, with a total of 185 attendees. The event continues to serve as an important opportunity for professionals working in child protection to network and learn more about American Indian organizations.

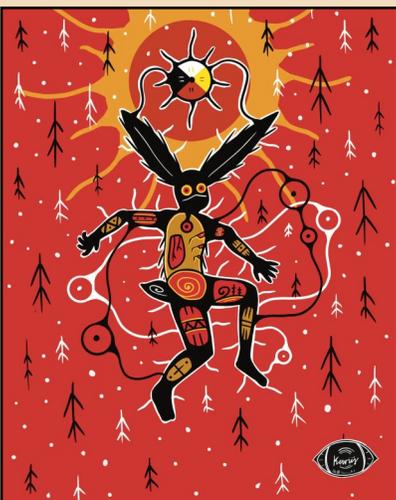


This was made possible through the support of community partners and relatives who helped create a space for building relationships and strengthening the networks that allow us to better serve families. Frybread and chili was catered by Gatherings Café.

Each year we have the opportunity to honor those who demonstrate unwavering commitment to keeping families together. Among this year's honorees were Shannon Smith, Executive Director with ICWA Law Center, Angel Daher, Deputy Solicitor General for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, and Sadie Hart, Policy and Advocacy Director with Ain Dah Yung Center. Each one of these women has consistently gone above and beyond in their roles. They continue to show the type of leadership that inspires those around them to be leaders as well. They were honored with blankets for their legacy in child welfare.

## Winter Storytelling

Ain Dah Yung Center hosted its 2026 Winter Storytelling on January 6 and February 3, continuing a tradition that helps our children start the year in a good way. Winter is a time to slow down, come together, and reflect, making it a powerful way to connect young people to who they are and where they come from. When children and families gather to listen, they share more than warmth and food, they share teachings that nurture healthy identity and belonging. Storytelling is foundational to cultural practices that foster identity development in children, serving as a powerful tool for prevention and keeping youth on positive paths.



Storytelling offers children space to ask questions, see themselves in characters, and understand how their actions impact others. Tricksters like Nanabush (Anishinabe) and Inktomi (Dakota) are cultural heroes despite their flaws. They use humor, mishaps, and mischief to reveal greed, carelessness, or disrespect, while modeling better choices and paths to rebuilding. Through these winter stories, children learn to navigate challenges, honor relationships, and carry ancestors' wisdom forward.

Told in winter, trickster tales teach balance and timing, with the land resting and less activity, it's safer and more respectful to share powerful spirits' deep lessons. Winter's darkness and family closeness help children listen, laugh, and reflect on mistakes without distraction, reinforcing that teachings thrive when aligned with nature's seasons.

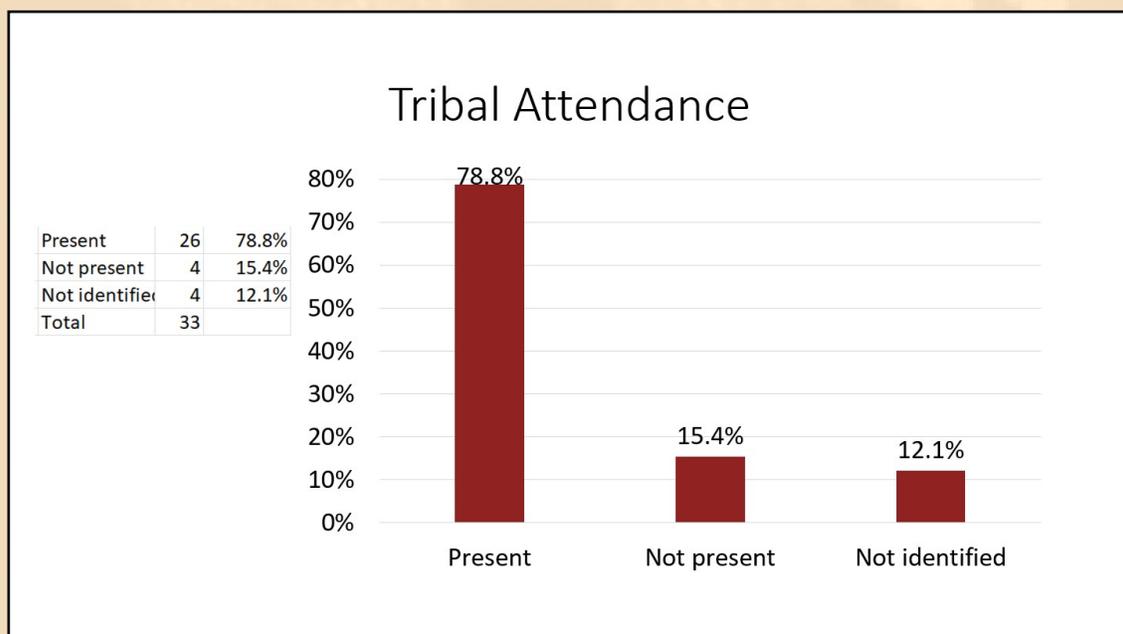
## About the Quarter 4 Data

Data was collected from October 1, 2025 to December 31, 2025.

## Tribal Attendance

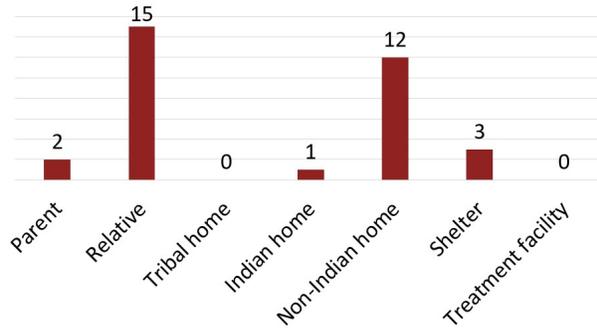
The following chart indicates the tribes involved in ICWA cases during Quarter 4. The chart includes the tribes involved, the number of hearings that occurred, and the number of times the tribe attended hearings. This data reflects hearings the court monitor attended in Ramsey County.

TRIBE	NUMBER OF HEARINGS	TRIBE PRESENT
Blackfeet Tribe	2	2
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	7	6
Lower Sioux Indian Community	1	1
Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe	2	2
Oglala Sioux Tribe	3	3
Red Lake Nation	4	4
Muskogee Nation	1	0
White Earth Nation	6	6
Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska	1	1
Unknown/Tribe Not Identified	11	-



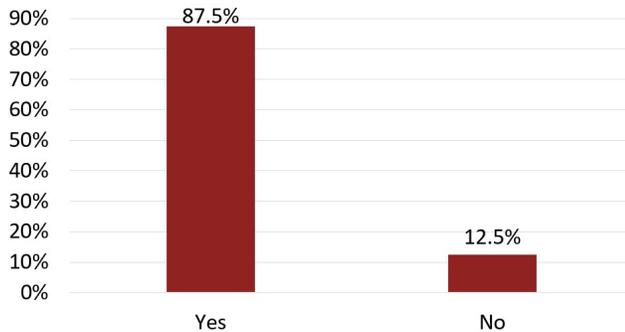
## Placements

Parent	2	6.1%
Relative	15	45.5%
Tribal home	0	0.0%
Indian home	1	3.0%
Non-Indian home	12	36.4%
Shelter	3	9.1%
Treatment facility	0	0.0%
Total	33	



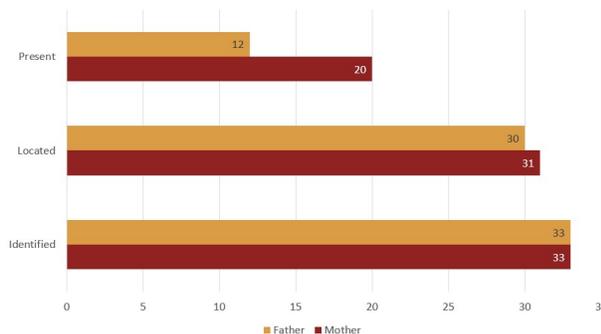
## Was there discussion as to why the child was not placed with a relative?

Yes	14	87.5%
No	2	12.5%



## Were mother and father present?

	Mother	Father
Identified	33	33
Located	31	30
Present	20	12



## Placements and Case Planning

Children in out-of-home placement were placed with relatives 45.5% of the time, and with non-custodial parents 6.1% of the time. For the 12 non-Indian home placements, the court made a finding that there was good cause to deviate from the ICWA placement preferences.

When children were not placed with relatives, there was discussion 87.5% of the time about the reasons preventing relative placement. This includes preference from the child or parent (34%), and extraordinary needs of the child (25%). Non-relative placements were approved by the tribe or custodial parent 100% of the time. Qualified Expert Witness testimony for placement was provided 100% of the time.

For hearings that took place, mother was present 60.6% of the time, and father was present 36.4% of the time. For hearings that occurred without one parent, there was discussion about efforts to get the parent involved.

## Contact Information

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