



General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private

Statement Provider: Anonymous

Date: December 10, 2014

Location: Indian Island, Maine

Previous Statement? N/A

Statement Gatherer: Rachel George

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

Recording Format: Audio

Length of Recording: 1:08:11

Transcriber's Note:

This is an anonymous statement. Any redactions in the transcript, and alterations to the recording have been done at the request of the statement provider in an effort to protect his/her identity as well as the identity of certain individuals mentioned.

Recording

RG: Alright. It is December 10, 2014. We are here at Indian Island, Maine. My name is Rachel George and I'm here today with—

A: *[NAME REDACTED]*

RG: Perfect. And the file number is P 201411-00127. *[NAME REDACTED]* have you been informed, understood, and signed the consent form?

A: Yep.

RG: Great. And I have to let you know that if at any point during the recording you indicate that there is a child or an elder in need of protection, or that there is a imminent risk to an identifiable person or group, including yourself, that that information may not be protected as confidential. Do you understand?

A: Yes, yep.

RG: Okay. Can you tell me about your past employment with Tribal Child Welfare, working here on the Island.

A: Um, well when I had worked there, um—Maine families now, Maine and Wabanaki families. I think I worked there two years ago and when I worked there, I...they were going through some major changes. My past supervisor was fired and then now the new supervisor, Deb Francis and Sonya Lacoute were employed so there were a lot of changes and improvements. So there was, I think, when I had just graduated with my MSW and I did my internship through the health center here but um, since nobody here was a social MSW...didn't have their LSWs, so they couldn't supervise me I had the supervisor over at DHS supervise me. And I think literally after six days after I had graduated, she had called me up and offered me my job because she had fired the former—the former worker and um, they just needed somebody in there so they hired me. I was hired as a consultant for the longest time actually I was, for like a whole year, I was a consultant until Sonya came in and they put me on the books, and then I had to go through the whole interview process and all that. So.

RG: How long did you work there again?

A: I worked there for like, a year and four months. Yep.

RG: Can you tell me generally what your experiences were working within the department here on the Island?

A: It was bad because... it wasn't good because there wasn't really a whole lot of support and there wasn't a lot of policies and um, organization put in to the program. For instance, DHS in Bangor, they have like 3 different people doing ...first they have the initial, what do you call that, the initial assessment—someone who goes in and takes the call—and they have a long-term permanency one if it's longer than 30 days. And then they have someone to tie up the adoption process. Well, I was doing all of that with just one person and I just had one supervisor. So it was just me and my supervisor. So it was—and she was kind of new, I mean, she did work at Houlton but it was a little bit different, the setup (*sighs*). But anyways, I don't really think she knew how to like, organize or make it better, I guess, so it made it really difficult because she kind of just threw me in, “Okay, you have your MSW, you should know what to do!”

RG: Yeah.

A: You know what I mean? And she really—there was another. She hired me part time at first and then she hired someone else part time (*coughs*) and he had his LCSW and he quit before I did because he was really burnt out. Because we look to him ‘cause he’s the one who had the most experience, you know what I mean (*laughs*)? Yeah, so it was really hard because I remember when we first had our, like, official case, we had no training at all. She was like, “Go here, go to this team meeting.” And it was like all the way in Portland and she, like, expected us to drive all the way out there, drive all the way back, visit, go to the team meeting and then visit all the families involved. There was like seven kids involved and three



different—what do you call that—three different adoption people, foster parents. So we were supposed to like—and we went to every single—we weren't done until like 10:30 at night and then she expected us to drive back. So we were completely burnt out and we had to call her and say, “Look, we're burnt out, we need a hotel. You can give us a credit card because we cannot drive back, we are too tired.” But in a regular organization, that would have been set up before hand. Say, “Look, put your travel in beforehand, get a hotel, you're going to be there for a long time.” So there wasn't a lot of support for us, and it made it hard. So that was my experience in the beginning and I feel that just having us limited—someone who had just got out of school, just her, she was making all the decisions. I felt like the people—we could have done things a lot better and I'm not trying to blame—it was just, there just really wasn't a lot of support. For her too. I think she would have if she, I don't know, I think she's just so overwhelmed with everything that sometimes it just didn't get, you know what I mean? So it just made it really hard. So that was the system working through here.

RG: Do you recall what year you started working there? (*Phone noises*)

A: Um, I started to work there 2010 (*more phone noises*) because that is when I graduated. Um, yeah, I worked there from 2010 to 2011, almost 2012 'cause I quit in November so it was almost 2012.

RG: How many cases would you say that you had during that time period?

A: Not a whole lot. That was a good thing, there wasn't really a lot of cases because (*cell phone goes off*) Oh my god, I'm sorry.

RG: That's okay, I'll pause it.

A: So what was the question again?

RG: Cases, how many cases were you working with?

A: Oh I think I had about... they were all at different areas. I had like maybe three that were in permanency and like, maybe like two that were just doing the initial set up. And then, you know, I would get calls that I would just pass through because they weren't serious enough, you know? And then I started getting—things got a little better when Sonya, I think she was really good at program management. She had a lot of experience, like, managing the program. So—and for some reason I feel like the chief over here was more supportive to her for some reason. They didn't really like her obviously, that is why they got rid of her. They were clashing. So anyways, when she came in, they let her get an assistant director. And set it up. They trusted her on how to set it up the way it should be. To get more people in there. So they assigned assistant director, which was Deb. She was really good.

Yeah, so we did a little more. And then the first thing they did was saying, “Okay, you go to this training for six weeks for child welfare that all the other state workers do in the beginning.” I’m like, “Wow I wish I would’ve done that in the very beginning.” So I started to get more training and started to get a feel for the process, you know, of how to handle all this. And then—then they hired someone else, and I forgot her name, as a consultant and she was really helpful about how to work with families and stuff like that. And, um, I got to have her on hand. I’m trying to think of her name, but. She’s really famous too. She’s a Neptune, Elizabeth Neptune. Yep. So, yeah, that’s what happened, but my case was fairly low.

RG: When did you first learn about Maine’s policies related to Indian Child welfare?

A: Uh, while I was working there. We had to, the first supervisor had us, like, research the ICWA law and read it. So we had to read the whole law, which was really hard to read. I didn’t even understand half of it but we had a lawyer, and she explained a lot of it. And a lot of people got confused with that law ‘cause they think that just because you’re Native that you have to be put in a Native family or have to be put back into the reservation but we had a really interesting, um, client that—it was really interesting. And I don’t know if I’m still able to talk about it or give any information about it, you know what I mean?

RG: Uh, very generally.

A: Yeah. Well the thing was that they never grew up on the reservation and so their community wasn’t here and their foster parents...they were close knit with their foster parents through their church. So it was really interesting, to take them out of their community that they were raised in and then like, try to put them all the way over here just because they were Native didn’t seem to really make sense, you know what I mean? And so we read that one line in there, it says that the ICWA law is to have the best interests of the child at hand. And we felt that wasn’t the best interest of the children. So yeah, it’s not so black and white what people think. Oh ICWA, you have to put them ‘em in that Native family. So, and—but we did do a lot of stuff to...when we um, because I was also the consultant for...They have an ICWA consultant and we make recommendations to the court to have the families, like be attached to their families or to their reservation, you know, into their culture. So we made a lot of recommendations for that, you know. And we invited the families to come to certain events over here and we helped them get there and they did, they showed up. So it’s not like we were just not thinking about that piece too.

RG: Could you describe a situation where you felt very positive about your work on behalf of a Wabanaki child and family...involving working with the state child welfare system?

A: Um, you know what’s funny, I think there is...well I think the positive experience was actually—was when they were found homes and placed in permanency guardianship. You know, because some of them had—I think, due to all the people who were getting fired because it was like two people...families were getting left behind and forgotten about to get other people on board and this and that. And when I had seen a couple of them, they were in the system for too long and they were being left behind. And then once, you know, we got on board and I started getting training I needed, it was able to move forward, you know? And once we did that it felt good because, you know, I just feel like it’s very timely when you’re working



with kids. You can't prolong—because then they get attached, and it just makes it harder, you know. It would just make it harder. If you're with your foster parent for a year and a half and then to get them back and if they've already had an attachment to a foster parent then it makes that transition back if they were to go back to their parents, so...

RG: Yeah, absolutely. (*Knock on door, someone interrupts*)

A: I forgot what I was saying. Oh about being in the system too long. It's not good. So that was a really happy, positive experience when we can just find a family that they seem to be happy and attached to and just, you know, can just be a child and have a home. It's all they wanted, you know what I mean? So that was really positive that we could—yeah, we did that.

RG: What was your relationship with the state like, state DHHS in that situation? Or in those situations, rather.

A: Um, the state DHHS were actually really helpful. The caseworkers—but it all depends and that's what the thing with child welfare, like, nothing is like—we can't be stereotypical and say it's all bad because it always depends on the worker. You know, some workers are just, become insensitive and, you know. We're human or whatever, you're not getting enough support or they get burnt—whatever the reason. They're just not as good, I guess. So—but then you'll get other case workers that are really excellent so. I guess that's the experience. Some I would be like, “Okay, I don't like the way they handled that,” but then most of the time—I think most of the time I felt pretty good about how they handled things.

And sometimes they were kind of clueless. Like I got this whole thing about—they didn't really know anything about ICWA. They didn't know anything about us, and they just kind of were like, “Okay, you're here, so how can we work together?” And would not give me a hard time or would not, you know what I mean? That's kind of how it was. Or they felt like—and I had another experience too, not just in the child welfare system with my work profession. ‘Cause I ended up—I didn't adopt her ‘cause Penobscot Nation don't allow you to adopt—well they used to but I guess it depends. Now Deb and Sonya, are more like, they do the whole permanency guardianship. So, I was getting permanency guardianship over my niece and I had to work with the DHS worker as the foster parent and they were through Calais in Eastport and that experience was like—like certain things I didn't like and she would act like she had no say about what happened in my case. And ‘cause the Penobscot was involved. I'm like, “That doesn't make any sense. I know the system and that's not how it goes and just because you don't know, like this is what you are doing, no that's not okay.”

RG: What kinds of things were you not okay with in that situation?

A: Okay, the first thing was that um, she was taken away from my sister and they wouldn't place her with my mother because my mother already had two of the kids and she was going

through breast cancer. Or she was—and they felt she was too old, didn't have enough support and going through cancer, it wouldn't be good to take on another child. So when I said I would, you know, take her, I let them know in the beginning that I had—'cause it was like just recently, I said, "Okay, I will take her, but I'll have you know, I am going to California for a couple weeks so you need to help me find something for that—child care or whatever," and um, they were like, "Okay." So, um I wanted my mother because she had a relationship with my mother—the baby, you know, that's her granddaughter. And they were saying that they weren't sure if she should babysit because what they had said before was, like in the beginning of the permanency—not the permanency, the beginning of the case—was her house was condemned, which wasn't true. Somehow—and that was a big thing saying that her house was condemned, and I had a problem with that.

And, oh shoot, what was I—but I know that wasn't the reason. That wasn't the reason what was conflicting with the Penobscot because the Penobscot is the one who actually, who actually came in and stepped in and helped out and said, "Okay," because I went to Deb and said, "Look, they're saying this and I don't think that is right." I said, "She has a relationship with my mother and they want me to put her for two weeks with a stranger," you know what I mean, like that's the only one who she's really closer too. And um, so I said that don't make any sense to me, so anyway, they were like, "Okay," They'll check up on my mother or whatever. They'll check up on her and do this whole safety plan or whatever and they said they would, um, check up on the baby for the two weeks. Well, they never did for one thing (*laughs*). But anyways, it doesn't matter to me. But—so that was a and I was kind of upset with the DHS down there for that reason, but the Penobscot did help me with that.

But there was another thing that we were having issues with—it was with the visitations with her father. 'Cause we—since she was just a tiny baby and she didn't know her father, but he wanted visits, we didn't think it would be—we felt it would be better to have us there while they visited. And then during the visits we were just kind of having problems with that because he was just—like first of all, he didn't really know how to relate to her and he just kept like—like would talk about stuff you shouldn't really be talking about. Even though she is a baby and didn't really know how to speak at that age, but he was just saying and doing stuff that we just didn't feel like it was appropriate. Like, it should be focused on the baby, not be talking about your issues or whatever, you know what I mean?

So, (*laughing*) and at the time, you know, after DHS, I went and did visitations at FACT so we had this whole process. And I knew like, for my training, I knew that wouldn't be acceptable at our visitations when someone would say something. But the visitation over there—they weren't saying anything and I knew because they didn't obviously have training because they didn't train the visitation people, you know what I mean? So, I had a problem with that. And then I told the Penobscot here that, you know, "He's really saying off the wall stuff and other, any concerns that the visitation has been writing down, like seeing the same stuff that we're noticing?" And they're like, "Nope. They thought the visitations were fine." And I'm like, okay, that's so off. You know what I mean? And so what she told me was that they were basically going to wean me out. And I was pissed, and I'm like, okay I have a problem with the visitations. They're having a problem with me having a problem with that so they want to boot me out, you know what I mean? I'm like, No. I don't like that. So—'cause that's not really thinking about the child. And they didn't talk to me or discuss anything with that with me and I



was just really pissed off about that. So I went to—I went to my other caseworker in Eastport and she acted like she had no say in that.

RG: When you say your other caseworker in Eastport, do you mean through Sipayik Child Welfare?

A: No, through the state because it's really interest in how it happened, which I didn't give you the story but it's that—my sister—and this is really important to note, because this is how tribal stuff can not be good—but I'm also telling you how state stuff—I'm telling you how both can go wrong. So, my sister was in with the Passamaquoddy and the thing about that, because of our lack of resources, there's only one caseworker and there's only one supervisor. Well guess who the supervisor is? The supervisor is the baby's—or her—what would you call—at the time that we thought was her sister-in-law. She was with the father of the baby who was—the father was—that was his sister. Do you get that?

RG: Yes.

A: So her sister-in-law, but they weren't married but you know, was the head of DHS at the tribe. So, that's total conflict of interest and of course, they had their issues and I told my sister. I said, “You are never going to have a fair, you know, I said it's just too much, it's a conflict of interest.” And she's never going to have, what do you call that, non-biased perception of you, you know? I'm like, “If you stay with them, then you aren't going to have the chance.” I said, “If I were you, I would go with the state because the state doesn't know—is not the family. You know, they're not all that enmeshed in whatever. They don't have that bias. So they will just follow procedure.” So she did that because I was helping her out, I was trying to get her to get her baby back.

RG: Is your niece on the Penobscot census?

A: Um, she wasn't at the time. But I said, put her on the Penobscot census so the Penobscot tribe can be involved so that was in the beginning, that's what happened, then she changed to the state, and then the Penobscot were involved. Yeah, so anyway, where am I at with the story (*laughing*)?

RG: You were talking to a caseworker in Eastport.

A: Yeah, I was upset about the visitation so I talked to the caseworker in Calais or Eastport or whatever. Well, Calais, it's through DHS Calais. And I told her that this is what's happening. I don't like the visitation and now they're trying to boot me out because, you know, I was like, she's only seeing her, like—‘cause visitations were like, I think they were like once a month, you know and I mean—and she's only seen ‘em twice a month. You know what I mean, that's not even enough, and now you want to boot me out because I'm having issues? I'm like that

ain't right. I'm like, how can you help me out? "Oh we can't do nothing. I can't go against her at Penobscot."

And I'm like, "That's not true. First of all, you're my caseworker. You're the one who actually sets up the appointments and has the authority to do that." "Well, I'll talk to my supervisor but I'm not sure, I don't think I can do anything." And I'm like, "Yeah right." See, and that's the problem with the state not knowing nothing about—because the way I see it, when it comes down to it—you gotta look at the family and look—with everything. And like, saying that you just, oh you can't do nothing to help the family, that's not your job as a caseworker. Your job is to make things go well for the family. And you can't do stuff like that say, "Oh well, they're making that decision and I have no say," because that's not how it works. So I guess the point here is not being educated enough and not knowing the system enough affects families and that is how it affected me. Through all that, you know.

So, I don't know. That was like the couple things that I had problems with—with my own experience. And plus there was more, and it was so interesting when you go through perception too, because it's all about your perception, because there's something else that happened, which was really interesting. Because when I was talking to the caseworker—and this is when my sister—my sister obviously wasn't doing what she was supposed to do. She wasn't really committed to getting off, you know, her drugs or whatever. And um, she feels like she needs them and abuses them and she just wasn't ready to go through Stepping Stones. And so that—once I knew she wasn't like seeing her on a regular basis, the baby, she was like prolonging going to Stepping Stones and this and that I had to make a decision like, "Okay, I think I'm going to have to permanency guardianship." Like even though in the beginning I didn't think that would happen, I thought she would probably get her back and then she said she was committed and she was going to do everything she needed to do to get her baby but then that wasn't happening. And anyways, the point is that the caseworker over there was—I don't know, there was some issues going on about her about her not—saying that her pills were missing or didn't have enough at the thing or something like that. And so she went into the home, she went into my sister's home said something about, she was concerned about her wellbeing and that she had noticed, you know, she has blankets over the windows and stuff like that.

RG: Who was this that?

A: The caseworker from DHS in Calais. She had said she was concerned about her well being, she has blankets over the windows and she, you know, she just wonders if she's feeling depressed or whatever. And um, well, my sister took that little statement and ran with it, saying she was racist and that it was our culture because it kind of is in Rez culture when you're poor to put blankets over the windows? So (laughing) she made it into this huge thing and felt so offended and this and that and um—that's why I say, perception because I can see both sides, you know what I mean. I know talking to the caseworker that she didn't mean nothing by it, and then listening to my sister—she really did believe that the caseworker was like, making a racist comment about her and her—like, had a problem with her having blankets on the windows and, "That's how the Rez is, we all have blankets on the windows, what is the problem with that? She's just racist," blah, blah, blah, you know what I mean. So like in both



their heads they were right but it was just different perceptions (*laughing*). So, you know, it's just things like that.

RG: Yeah, absolutely. My next question is kind of a long one. I'm going to ask you about what experiences you've had or challenges that you've had in a number of different aspects of working with the Indian Child Welfare Act. If there's any that you don't have experience with or you don't want to comment on, just let me know and we will move on to the next one. What were your experiences in or challenges you found in initial identification of a child as a Native American?

A: Say that again, I'm sorry.

RG: Any experiences or challenges you found in initial identification of a child as Native American?

A: I think I just answered those question. Those were my challenges.

RG: Yep. What was your experience in—or challenges that you saw in having the state notify Penobscot when they became aware of a child that was Native American?

A: Oh, when I worked there, they would call me and let us know. So I didn't see no problems there. And um—yeah.

RG: How about in child custody hearings? Any experiences or challenges you found in that area?

A: Um, I had a problem with, what was it the, the permanency worker. 'Cause after that girl I was talking about who was initial caseworker—because I had three, you know I had three different ones. And the first one was only there for like 30 days and then they transferred to the second one and she was the one I had the most relationship with. And then she would come up once a month and just meet with us, you know. And I had to like, if I needed child care, I had to prove it through them first, if I needed anything—Medicare, MaineCare, doctor's appointments, I had to do everything through them. And that was always a pain in the butt (*laughing*). But nothing to do with anything, it's just the system. And the third one, I had a trouble with because I didn't like her attitude. She was almost, like, threatening me because—and I'll tell you why because she—she, oh for childcare? They were paying childcare. Well first of all, childcare for like a month is \$800, it was like \$600 or \$800. Well, I don't have that kind of money extra to pay for childcare. And so I told her, "I can't afford childcare." Well, "You're doing permanency guardianship, we no longer can fund for your childcare." I'm like, "What am I supposed to do?" "I don't know." And I was like freaking out, I'm like, "What the hell am I going to do?" I can't quit my job or whatever. It just didn't make any sense.

So I was going to her again and I told her, “Look, I went to these places, they can't give me childcare. I'm on a waiting list, I only have two weeks left.” You know what I mean? I'm like, “You guys didn't give me enough time to apply.” “Well you should have known this was going to—and I'm like, “No, I didn't know, and you didn't tell me until like two weeks, and now you're giving me two weeks to find childcare, that's bullshit, basically.” (Laughing) And so she was like, “That's not going to look good.” She was like, “If we tell the judge this, it's not going to look good on your end. I'll just have you know that.” I'm like, “Well I don't care if it's going to look good, this is what's happening. I can't afford childcare, and that's it.” And she's just like, “Well,” and to me it's like, “Well I don't know basically what I can do.” So I was like, “Holy god, this woman sucks.” Like basically telling me nothing, saying too bad, basically, and it's not going to look good on you with the judge.

And I'm like, what is that—so what are you going to do, take [NAME REDACTED] my baby away because I can't afford childcare? After she's been with me for six months, you know what I mean? So I was just like, “Whatever, they can't bully me, I know the system,” you know. But if that was somebody else, that wouldn't have gone off good. If it was somebody that doesn't know that it, it would have made them totally have a breakdown or something. But because I knew more, you can't tell me or threaten me anything because I already know. And so I went to the Penobscot nation. So there were places where I didn't like what they did and then there were places where they really helped out. A couple times they helped out. And then they got me into childcare over her so you know. They were like, “Is she getting potty trained?” And I'm like, “Yes,” because she was just at that age. So they somehow got me in there and I was like, thank god, and she's been there ever since. So they really had my back there. And the state didn't. So those are just a couple things. Those were my major beefs through the whole thing.

RG: Yeah. When you were working with tribal child welfare here, what were your experiences in or challenges that you found in arranging foster care placements for kids on your caseload?

A: Well the thing is that that whole place needed to be revamped with policies and procedures and no one had time for that. It was always for crisis. They had me, like, implementing policies, and making up forms. Which was really not my job title but that was what I was doing. We were like organizing stuff and then they were working on this whole thing about MACWIS. ‘Cause we didn't even have a data system. You know, every system has a data system you put everything in the computer, this and that, so we didn't even have that and we were just working on that. They were making up the system of what works best for them. I don't know if they're doing it now, probably, but when I was working there, they didn't even have that. So that was a huge thing to like, not even have any of that. Like I was just putting stuff on Word, you know, and just making up forms on Word you know about assessments that I did and all (laughing) that so that was ridiculous. So that was a major challenge.

RG: While you were working there, did the tribe ever decline to intervene—did Penobscot Nation ever decline to intervene in a child custody proceeding covered by ICWA that you know of?

A: Um, what was really interesting because I think when we were on there, we did intervene, I think what was happening because there was only one caseworker, a lot of things were getting left not being addressed. I think the state would make like one call and then, “Oh they didn't



call me back so we'll just move forward.” So they weren't making enough follow-up effort, and we were not making effort or whatever. So it was both of us, so a lot—like, people were getting—you know there was Native families getting—and we didn't get notified and somehow it came up again and they were already halfway almost through the case until we were on board, which it should have been the very beginning.

RG: Yeah absolutely.

A: But I think when I was working there it was starting to get better, it was definitely improving. I don't know, maybe 2010 when they started doing all this. I think that's when TRC started too. It was like in the beginning stages so I know a lot has improved since then but when I was there, it wasn't good. It was just starting to like, change.

RG: What do you see as strengths and weaknesses in the State Child Welfare system for ensuring ICWA compliance?

A: What do I see as what?

RG: Strengths and weaknesses that the state possesses?

A: The state possesses—they have a good network, I think, and a lot of resources. And I think when we can work with them it works good. ‘Cause they can be very helpful. But when... I think what's hard is that—what I know for sure about all the problems I had— that there wasn't enough education out there. With the caseworkers. And there was just this brief, even in our six week training that we had. First of all, it was too long. Second of all, you forget having a training way too long like that, and you totally need follow-up. And they had like a little blurb about ICWA which is totally not enough. So—and that's all we had. So that's what I'm—that's the cause of a lot of this, is that you got state workers that are just not educated, you got tribal workers that are not funded or don't have enough support and resources either. I mean, we have like with the TRC and with the MACWIS coming in. But the way I see it is that, it should be set up like how the state is set up. And they did—I think they did hire somebody that does the training or whatever to do—to do the initial visits. Or when the call comes in and you're going to make the report. They have that. I forgot what the name is called. They have that worker, then they have the one for permanency. But you know what they definitely need improvement on over there is the foster care, and I think I rambled on but I don't know what I said. But I tend to ramble (*laughing*).

But anyways, the foster care was really bad. It was so hard to find a family, really hard to find—a lot of them like saying, “Oh we need Native families, Native foster families,” but we didn't have a lot. And it's different—there was some of these, some of these family members that were like not even raised on the reservation but they were Native and some of ‘em happened to be here and some of them didn't. But um, it just—there just wasn't enough. Like

some of them didn't even have family and if they didn't have family—and then all their family were just like not good, you know, just dysfunctional. So it was really hard to find placements. I remember one time it was really—oh (exclamation). And we called several different places and that is not good, that is not good, to just call up somebody on the fly, last minute saying, can you take this kid? You know what I mean? It's like, can you imagine being a kid?

And that's the one thing about the whole system that sucks. I really feel like we need to put more emphasis on because we did—with child welfare—what we learned was the system. What we didn't learn about enough was about children's, like, early childhood development. You know, what works best, how they learn, because it's so different. Because the job I'm in now is all about early childhood development and we learn about infant mental health. And you put that with child welfare, taking these kids out and doing these—like if they don't enough, if you're a worker, they don't do the transitions well. And you're just uprooting and it just—I just feel like we can do a lot better with transitions.

‘Cause that is where the trauma comes in too. If you know about mental health and know about trauma, it's kinda how it's done more than the act itself. And not having the support. Even with TRC, you know. And that's what they learn too, they are having people tell traumatic stories but not having that support afterwards. Well that's kind of the same thing with taking these kids out, not having that support afterwards with their families and all that. So, that's just something that totally needs to be worked on. And we should be putting more focus on those parts—the transitioning and making it easier and better for families and trying to get more education out there to foster parents, to childcare workers. And there's also like—we have AFFM, right? And if you're going through the tribe, you don't have any of that. I'm like, they're offering free workshops, they're offering, you know, education and this and that. No wonder we have no foster parents, you know. There's no—we don't have any of that support so I think that would be really useful.

RG: That's an excellent suggestion.

A: (*Gets water*) ‘Cause you know what, I was thinking about when I got my baby, well [REDACTED] Well, when I got her—see, this is what they did with the transition and this is more about the beginning of the story. We, once my sister had decided to go with the state DHS, the new worker came in and we had just found out that the father—they did a paternity test on the father—was not the father. So they were placed with family members of the father. So now, they're not even family biologically. And since there were so many issues, like they didn't even come contact me, they didn't even give us a choice and we were having problems with that family, that foster family because they were—the father was Native and the mother was white, the foster parents. Of the foster parents.

So the mother who was mainly white who we dealt with the most because she, you know, the mother does everything (*laughing*)—most of the care taking and all that. She was having issues with my mother. Saying like—accusing her of stuff. Saying, like, she had burnt her tongue, and she had to take her to the hospital after a visit, she had noticed she had burnt her tongue and my mother is like a Nazi, she's always telling us, you know, check the bottle, this and that—and I know my mother and I know that she wouldn't do that. So I was like, she's trying to put the



blame on us, she probably did that and is putting the blame on us and nobody could say nothing because you know whatever.

It's just hearsay right? So we were upset about that, we were like, okay that's not right, you know what I mean. She's making it harder for my mother to see her—because my mother was also getting visitation rights. So they made it where my mother would have to go to the office so nobody could say nothing or whatever. So when we had a new team meeting to put all the new players on board, now it was the state first of all—that was the thing about Passamaquoddy down there. They never had one team meeting. And if they did, they never invited any of the family members. Actually they didn't even have a team meeting because my sister would have told me. They didn't even have a team meeting. And they were in her custody for like six months, or yeah, seven months. They were in her custody and never had a team meeting. And I'm like, that is so messed up. So anyways when I got in there and involved because I guess she was—oh no, forget that, I gotta get my thoughts straight. What was I saying?

RG: The state came in...

A: Okay, the state came in, we had our thing—oh because I'm talking about transitions—see I'm getting off (laughing). So we had our meeting, right, and they had decided at that meeting since the baby was not with family and that we had so many issues and that I was willing to take the baby that their priority was to place babies with the family. So I got the baby. And with that transition was, they were like, “Okay, pick up the baby as soon as possible.” That's it. My baby [NAME REDACTED] was with that foster family for seven months and to just like say, “pick her up,” no transitions, no nothing, you know what I mean? And um, I mean, she knew me because I would go to visits and visit [NAME REDACTED] while she was taking care of the baby. But still there was no thought there and before—I had just started this job with early childhood development and now I'm learning all this stuff and before I didn't know what I know now after I took, like, this infant mental health class, I noticed how she was upset. I didn't think she was upset. I'm like, this is so weird, here she is, you know, she came to me, and she's not upset. And then I noticed the signs after the fact—that she was having a hard time with that. You know what I mean? It was just like little signs.

And after working at FACT too, like just kind of, because we did a lot of training too with attachment, babies and stuff like that. And just kind of looking for cues where you wouldn't think and one of them was like, she would rock. And we would often play music—we thought she was just dancing to the music but sometimes I thought it was strange, and it was just like “Oh, that's interesting she's rocking and there's no music,” and then she would kind of like, you could tell when she was upset she would play with her ears. And they said that that's what they do sometimes when they are in distress and I was like, “Oh my god she was doing that.” And just because she wasn't having fits of crying and stuff like that, but she did show signs of like, you know. Being distressed.

And that just makes me sad, you know what I mean? ‘Cause—and I mean that's the bull shit, that's the stuff that child welfare doesn't even think about. And even the way they treated me, trying to push me out, I'm like, “I don't even care, you need to be more thoughtful about transitions.” And to push me out after three visits and she's only seen the dad a total of three times is not enough, you know? Because what it comes down to is attachment and that is always what I looked for. It don't matter if your Native, white, or whatever. If you have a good attachment—and you can be attached to your abusers too, you know. But if you're doing well and you have a good attachment, then it makes sense to be with that family opposed to—you know what I mean? And that's something I struggle with too because that was the thing, a lot of the people that I was working with were abusive but they had the attachment. And that was the hardest thing as a caseworker to really look at. Because ultimately you have to be safe, but—it's just one of those hard things. But those are some things that I felt would have really helped me as a caseworker to kind of see those little cues, you know what I mean, when kids are under distress. Because sometimes—I thought she was fine until I went back and really thought about and was like, holy shit, she was distressed. So, yeah.

RG: In addition to that, thinking back—or actually maybe more specific to your personal involvement with child welfare, both tribal and state—what would you have wanted or needed from your caseworkers to have made that situation better for you and for your family and for your daughter?

A: I would have liked that they would have been just as educated. You know what I mean? And I felt like, I did really good because I already knew the system so that helped me a lot but it was still—it was still hard, like what could they have done better? I think the best thing that they—that they did but didn't always do, but when they did do it—was just listen to me. ‘Cause I'm the one who is with the baby 24/7. I know what's best, what works and what doesn't. And, I think that kind of becomes the hard part because I remember working with families and the parents would want to say on what the kids like and the foster parents would totally disrespect that because they were just, “Whatever, I'll do it my way. Oh well.” You know what I mean?

And I think as caseworkers, we didn't always do that either: listen to the parents. Because even if it ain't something right, it's what they believe is right and we need to give them that same respect. Whether we agree with them or not is besides the point. I wouldn't have cared whatever they do, whatever they do, they make their decisions but if they are really showed, like they cared and validated what I felt like should be done, then that—because ultimately, I did get my way. And I thought it would be easier if they had just listened to me the first time instead of having to, like fight for it, you know what I mean? Like with my mother. They should have just said okay. Hello, I'm not going to put her in a place where I didn't think there was danger. I knew what was best. She has an attachment with her. That's where she should be. That's her grandmother, you know what I mean? She'd be better off there than going with a stranger. You should just listen to me. And not make it difficult for me.

And the same with visitations over there. Look, I'm sorry your visitation aide isn't trained enough and so she thinks they're fine and dandy, but they're not. I'm a trained person who knows, you should listen to me, you know what I mean? And don't make it hard or throw me off or just say, “We're going to try and push you out,” because you feel that I am just having—I think what she felt is that I was having—I don't know, because a lot of foster parents do



that—they complain about everything and sometimes they think DHS, DHS will think what's right for them. But ultimately, we should listen to the foster parents because they are with them and if they are taking care of them, it's all about parent empowerment. You've got to listen to the one who's, you know. Unless it's totally way off, you know, but it's usually not. I think we could have avoided all those challenges if they would've just listened to me to begin with but they made it hard in some cases and when they didn't make it hard and when they were supporting me and were helping me, that made everything easier—for the baby, for me, for everyone. You know what I mean? Because, the way I see it, when you're working with kids, you always need to work with the parents. If you can't support those parents, you're making it harder for the baby. So, yeah. So that's my spiel in a nutshell (*laughing*).

RG: If you could change anything or make anything happen for a child that is involved with child welfare under the Indian Child Welfare Act, at the state, tribal, or federal level, what would you do?

A: If I could—?

RG: Change anything or make anything happen for a child involved in ICWA.

A: I think I would develop some kind of training or something based—and I think would be awesome for caseworkers—based out of love and compassion. And always have it ongoing because I think as you become a caseworker, it's hard not to get hard. I mean it totally—it changed my perspective and it made me be like—I used to be all for the parents and now I'm kind of slowly changing my perspective. But there's always that part of me where I feel like I don't have compassion. Like, “Well, they're doing this and that, that's what they deserve.” But, I don't think that's good. I'm seeing it now. Even with my sister. I had to really go through this whole thing to just kind of forgive. And then kind of really see that it's all about perception. And really isn't—like sometimes people think you're being lying to—but in their heads they really believe that, you know what I mean? And to just kind of understand that and not get mad at it, I guess.

So (*laughing*) that's hard to do but that's what we have to be reminded. To keep that compassion. Because if we don't have that compassion, if we don't have that education either—then we're just going to keep traumatizing people and it's not going to—and that's going to create more need for resources. 'Cause they're always complaining about money this, money that, and I think we all need to be supported and I just feel the way, unfortunately, with mental health and caseworkers—I feel they're treating us with not enough respect either. Because what makes it worse than having a burned out freaking caseworker. You have a burned out caseworker, then everything goes wrong. It trickles down to the family and to the kid that you're trying to help. So, everyone needs that support, all the way up. And sometimes I feel like we get so freaking—it's the system.

Like if I were to change, I would change the system, the way they just bombard us with paperwork and writing 20 things the same time. If they can somehow make it easier where you don't have to repeat yourself 20 hundred times and you can just do your jobs and work with the family (*laughing*), that would be better. That's what I would change. I would change the system, the higher-ups, to make it better for the caseworkers and families. So. They need to really need to get someone there efficient, too, because I feel like they waste a lot of money. They complain they don't have anyway but they waste it like no other. And it's like, okay you say you can't help foster families with childcare but you'll spend whatever on this stupid training that you don't need, you know? So (*laughing*) that's where the real problems are. The legislator, tell them that.

RG: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: Um mm (*negative*).

RG: Thank you so much for your time.

A: Thanks. Am I done? Holy, that was long (*laughing*).

[END OF RECORDING]