

General Information

Private or Public Statement? Private

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Previous Statement? No

Statement Gatherer: Meredith Eaton

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

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Transcriber Note: This statement is anonymous at the request of the individual. Any redactions have been done with the approval of the statement provider in an effort to protect his/her confidentiality.

Recording

ME: Okay, so, today is August 5, 2014. We are in Bangor, Maine. My name is Meredith Eaton and I am a volunteer Statement Gatherer for the Wabanaki TRC. Could you state your name?

A: [00:00:13] [REDACTED]

ME: Okay. The file number is ME-201408-0079-001. [NAME REDACTED] Have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

A: Yes, I did.

ME: Okay. And I want to advise you that if at any point during this interview, you indicate that there is a child or elder in need of protection or that there is imminent risk of serious bodily harm or death to an identifiable person or group, including yourself, that information may not be protected as confidential.

A: Okay.

ME: So, I'm going to go ahead and get started with the questions, um, on this list. My first question for you today [NAME REDACTED], could you please tell me about your experiences as someone who provides services to children and families in Maine? So, first question: How many years did you work in this field?

A: I have worked in the mental health field for approximately the last, probably, 15 years in many different levels of care: I've worked hospital level, community level, a lot of residential level.

ME: Okay. And, so, can you describe the type of work you've been involved in?

A: Um –

ME: – type of agency? – agencies?

A: With different agencies? Um, it's always been either as a clinician or as an administrator, so doing a lot of individual and family work, um, with the clients or consumers that I've worked with.

ME: Okay. And, um, could you estimate or given a percentage of approximately how many child welfare cases that you've worked with involving, uh, Native American children?

A: It's a relatively small number, probably – I can't do a percentage – but, probably, over that amount of time, maybe 10 or 15 families.

ME: Okay. Um, do you know about Maine's Indian Child Welfare policies and the Indian Child Welfare Act or, or ICWA? If so, when did you first learn about Maine's, um, Indian Child Welfare policies and ICWA?

A: Um, I don't know a lot of specifics about the policies or about ICWA. I know that they're both there, um. And isn't that a sad statement in itself?

Um, but– And I know, I know kind of the, the basics of it – um, but more from people telling me, as opposed to a formal education process. When I first learned a little bit more about it would've probably been in graduate school almost 10 years ago. Um, before that, anything that I learned was really kind of picking it up as I went.

ME: Okay. So, you – The, the, I guess the next question was: Could you elaborate on the type and amount of training that you received? So, it seems like you're saying there was *less* formal training?

A: There was – I don't think I've really had *any* *formal* *training,* ah, 'This is what our policies are. This is what, um, this is what our goals are. This is what our mission statement is. This is what–' I-, I've *never* gotten any of that.

I can *surmise* some of that from just different dealings with different case managers and different supervisors within Indian Child Welfare and within– But, um, very little formal training about that.

ME: Okay. And, but through your course work, you – and graduate school, you said that there was maybe some?

A: Interestingly, not a lot through actual course work, but we had a person in the class who had – who was, um, Indian Child Welfare, who had grown up in that system. So, a lot of my information is really kind of much more personal – getting experience from someone who was a recipient – of those services, as opposed to – So, then we kind of would talk about it kind of in a broad sense that way, but no formal, ‘This is what it is.’

ME: Okay. Thank you. (*deep breath*) Could you describe a situation or situations in which you or, your agency or self, (*correcting*) –staff felt very positive about your work with a Wabanaki child and family? And, in this case, we would ask if you could just describe generally, so that, um, there's not identifying details.

A: Absolutely. I've worked with a couple families – no more than three, but, two or three, um, that when the child came into the place where I was working, and it was in a residential setting, initially, there was no way that this child was going to return *back* to the home, back to their culture, back to any of that. They were looking for this, this child to go anywhere – they didn't care.

And, through the work that we did with both the child, and then, um, at first, hesitant family members, but as they saw changes, and we worked with them, the family became very interested in, in the children returning home – the different families became interested. So that was very positive, um. ... Some of the obvious challenges along the way were not knowing a lot about their culture –

ME: Mm-hm.

A: But, they were willing to teach. So that, in itself, was fascinating and very helpful. Um, so, it was great, – great experiences all over.

ME: And, so, you mentioned willingness to teach on part, the part of the families. Could you talk a little bit about your relationship with the Tribe – whether there were any employees or staff within agencies – Tribal agencies that you had relationships within those cases?

A: Um, ... I did. It, I did have some – and, again, they were always very child-specific, because that's just kind of the nature of the work that we do. Um, and like anywhere, some

were much better than others. So the good ones, you really kind of latched onto, and you tried to, to work with them, even when it wasn't necessarily their kid, because they were just a wealth of information. And they were great at helping to problem-solve. Um, so very positive experiences that way.

ME: So there were some individuals that you built relationships with and were able to collaborate with?

A: Correct.

ME: And that generally contributed to more positive outcomes for the child?

A: Correct.

ME: Okay, great.

ME: And, maybe now, if you can think of a situation, or situations in which you or your agency and staff felt less positive, um, about your work with a Wabanaki child and family, and, again, if you can leave out identifying details –

A: Mm-hm.

ME: – talking about, um, what contributed it – to it being less positive and, and what you wish had been different.

A: Yeah. Um, it, ... I think that's a tougher one, just because we don't technically talk about what are the challenges, we talk strength-based. But I think the challenges really came from ... Um, and not so much on the family's part, but it was just kind of more the providers around them, and availability of resources to help a family. That's when it becomes more challenging to work with them, so it becomes a systems thing.

So, again, it's, it's always interesting to me, when you work with this person with this agency and, you know, they're able to get all kinds of things, and then you work with the same agency, but someone else maybe across the hall, or whatever, and it's like, 'Nope, we can't do that. No, we can't do that. No, we can't – ' So, those are the parts that make it challenging. So, then, it comes back to: Is it case manager person-specific? Is it agency? Is it lack of knowledge of resources? It-, you know, there's all kinds of questions all over the place.

ME: And, what types of resources, either generally or specifically, would you be – ?

A: Sometimes it would be just helping families with transportation. Could they get from wherever the family was living to where the treatment providers were? It was usually at least a couple hours ride. So, could they – And maybe the family couldn't do that. Could they help with the family to get there? And, again, sometimes they could; sometimes they couldn't.

Sometimes it was helping – We would discover a basic need that the family had, if like food was an issue or maybe, you know, the lights had been turned off – how do we get them turned back on? How do we – It was sometimes helping to meet those needs as our agency, technically, we weren't supposed to do that, so I was never able to come up with money for the family. But there was a couple of times we were able to come up with food, or maybe clothes, or something that way. But again, it came down to the case managers we were working with and their ability to acquire services or fit the need that the family had in the moment.

ME: And, with case managers, are you talking about DHHS or Indian, um, welfare-specific –

A: (*voices overlapping*) – You know what, it's an, it's an –

ME: – on the –

A: – interesting dynamic that happens –

ME: — with the Tribe?

A: –Yeah, it's an interesting dynamic that happens with that. Um, you would think if both agencies were involved, that DHHS and Indian Child Welfare were involved, that we would have **twice** the collaborators at the table and **twice** the resources would come to the table. And often, my experience, what would happen was, DHHS would say, 'Well, no, that's ICWA or Indian Child Welfare. That's, you know, we can't do that. We're just making sure for the safety.' And, then, so you would, you know, work also with ICWA, who would say, 'Well, we can only do this part. The other part has to come from DHHS,' and so, you did a lot of, kind of, tail chasing the dog?

It was almost **impossible** to get services that way. If you just had one or the other, um, it was much easier if they were available, as opposed to both sides saying, 'No, we can't do that. That has to come from ...'

ME: So, it wasn't always clear who was in the lead, or who was responsible for what?

A: Correct, and it wasn't a collaborative effort, quite frankly.

ME: Were there times that is was? Or, in general, did you, did you find that the majority of time, it was, it was not collaborative.

A: I would – (*quick laugh*) I would like to say, (*jovial voice*) 'OF COURSE IT WAS!'

ME: Mmm.

A: But I can tell you what sticks in my mind more was that more often it was **not** collaborative.

ME: Okay. Um, in, and in these cases, um, that you're talking about – I think you've, you've mentioned it somewhat – um, but if you have anything to add about a situation that you felt less positive, um, speaking either to your working relationship with the Tribe and, and/or how this relationship contributed to the experience. And if you don't have anything to add, that's okay.

A: What contributed to it? Um, I think what I-I think there's a lot of things that contributed, contribute to those experiences, but they tend, they come down to, they're very bureaucratic. What I wish could be really different about that, is that regardless of the agency, of who you're dealing with, that there was an ability to say, 'Okay, we have a child and a family with a need. And **how** do we meet that need? And how do we reconcile? How do we put things in place so that this family can be successful?' Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, 'Today's the day I'm going to screw up my kid.'

ME: *(laughs)* Right.

A: Regardless of culture.

ME: Mm-hm.

A: You know? So how do we help families to do better with that? How do we help families to, to become more productive in what they can do, whatever that looks like? And then, how do we help their kids to become more productive? And again, whatever that looks like. And that's not trying to do it outside of a culture; that's trying to do it within a culture. That's trying to really – How do we bring all of the resources that we have to bring, that we can bring to anybody out there, instead of it becoming bureaucratic of, 'Well, that's not my issue,' or, you know, 'in a time of limited budgets.' And I get that piece, but at the same time, we're, you know, we're dealing with kids and with families.

ME: Right, so more, you wish had been different, more working together –

A: – I wish it's been much more –

ME: – to **share** the resources because, although they were limited, if they were pooled –

A: *(voices overlapping)* – pooled –

ME: – it could've been a, a better outcome –

A: – It, it could've potentially been a better, a better outcome.

ME: Mm-hm.

A: Um, we definitely would've had different resources at our disposal – whether we could have actually used them or not is always a different issue. But, yeah, I wish it would've been much more collaborative and much more working, partnering relationship.

And, again, where the partnerships were great seemed to come down to the people in it saying, 'Well, we're not supposed to, *but –*' Or, 'Let's figure out how to make this work. If we can do this part, can you do this part? If we can do –' You know? And really kind of getting agencies to work together that way.

ME: Okay. Great. I think that you mentioned this, but if you had anything to add. Um, as you think back over your experience as a service-provider, were you provided any instructions or training regarding any *special* responsibilities in working with a Native American child?

A: Boy, very little. Very little formal training or instruction. Really, where it came from is, every so often, an advocate for the child would appear – someone that the Tribe would specifically send. Or, maybe this was a, a kiddo who had been in long-term some-kind-of-services, and there was an advocate to make sure they didn't lose track of their culture. And – wealth of information. I learned *tons* from those people. Um, but that became my formal education. So, I've remained in contact with those very few people over time and said, 'Just help me to understand. Just help me to figure out what's going on. Help me to understand culture. Help me to understand.' Um, and those people are great that way, but – we don't do a great job *other* than that.

ME: Right. So it's –

A: If those people hadn't appeared –

ME: — it was less formal and never initiated by your employer or agency –

A: – Nooo.

ME: – as part of training or orientation?

A: Nope.

ME: Okay.

A: Nope.

ME: Did the placing agency encourage you, or help you link to services and resources that would help the child with his or her traditional Tribal events, spiritual customs and social activities?

A: Sadly no. Most of the kids in all of the different agencies that I've worked with, most of the kids that come through, it's initiated through DHHS. And you might get **one line** in all of what you got for information or one line in the dialog that says, 'This child is connected to **this** Tribe. So, you know, whatever you can make happen, that would be great. We think they're interested in, in learning more about that culture.' That was – If you got that much, it was very fortunate.

It was usually once you either talked with families or the kid himself or maybe a different provider, um, that **they** were the people who would say, 'There's a link here. There's, you know, there's a connection.'

And, if it was a different provider, 'This is what we've done to help them stay in touch with their culture.' Or, 'They just said last week, and we haven't had time to figure out what to do.' Um, so, sadly, that's how, that's how it's come about.

And, then, um, it's a challenge sometimes to find stuff for them to do afterward – 'cause the kids don't know what's going on and where it is and where – And then depending on who your contact is with the placing agency and, again, **very rarely** is it, um, ICWA that's the placing agency. So then, we have, you know, DHHS and they're like, (*voice changes*) 'Well, we don't know.' All right. So, it's sad.

ME: Um. ... Okay. (*pause*)

A: So, can I just kind of offer –

ME: Sure.

A: – understanding of what the child in, wanted – in terms of connection with their Tribal community? Um, of the few kids that I've worked with, often initially, the kid just kind of wants to ... fit in? Um, so they may not be, 'This is my heritage. This is my culture. I want to go to ... whatever.' If **we** know, then we kinda start finding stuff. Um, and, we put it out there, usually to the whole community, 'Who would like to go to – ' whatever it is that we find, so that it becomes a community cultural event. And usually we can kind of hook a kid in, almost like through the back door.

ME: Mm-hm.

A: And then once they go to one or two, and they see that we're willing to go with them, and we're willing to find them, then they become much more engaged in, 'I want to go to more of ... ' whatever it is. Ah, 'To more – ' Um, so that's been kind of cool doing it that way.

ME: Presenting them with the option in –

A: Correct.

ME: – in support vs. feeling like it's something that they're doing in isolation.

A: Right, and they –

ME: – and they're doing it as part of a supportive environment that –

A: – Right, as opposed to – you know, weren't not going to this because it's specifically a Jewish event. Or we're going to this because it's a, a Catholic event. Or this because it's now, you know, a Native American event. It's just, 'This is what we're doing. If people want to go, then let's go. It could be fun. We could learn something. We could–' You know. Um, so it's been very good that way.

ME: Great. (*sound of papers*) Do you experience any challenges in caring for a child who comes under the Indian Child Welfare Act guidelines? For example, challenges might include working with agencies, the legal system or other service providers, or meeting the needs of the child.

A: I, I think the only challenges are really what we've spoken about before. Um, and it really comes down to lack of resources. Um, that's really been – my experience has been – our biggest, biggest challenge in working, um, with these kiddos. It's just, there's just *no* resources out there.

ME: Okay. Did you have contact with the Tribal Child Welfare staff and, if so, what were the strengths of those contacts and what were the challenges? And I think you did refer to that, but if you have anything to add.

A: Mmm. No. I think it's just, it –. Yeah, I think it's just really what I've already talked about. It's already – You know? So, some of it, some of it was really great, and some of it was just really big challenges.

ME: Right. And it, it often came down to the relationships –

A: – Personal specific –

ME: – with those individuals.

A: –Yep.

ME: Okay.

A: –Yep.

ME: Were there ways that the DHHS staff provided support for your work with Native American children? Did you wish you had something more or different from the staff?

A: (*bursts out laughing*) I *always* wish I had something more or different from the staff! (*laughing*) And, again, regardless of which DHHS agency, because they're limited in what they can do, and they're limited in resources and they're limited in – So, could I, would I like to have something more and different? Absolutely! I want them to provide what this kids needs, so they can be successful. Um, I want us to be a *stop* in their journey, as opposed to a destination for a while. So let's get everybody back together as quickly as we can, (*patting the table*) instead of, 'Oh, they're there. They're safe for while. Let me do whatever else.' That's what I would like to have different.

ME: Okay. What State Child Welfare policies, practices or events influenced your work with Wabanaki children and families?

A: Ah-eyyyah. Again, not knowing specific policies? I – I can't answer that. What really influences my work with Wabanaki children and families? I want to see kids reunited with their families. Kids belong at home. So how do we make that happen? I, that's about all that I've got.

ME: Mm-hm.

A: You know. So, if it means I have to learn very quickly? And to get up to speed to figure out how to make that happen, so be it. Um, but I couldn't, I-I can't speak to policy.

ME: And it sounds like you're saying that's a guiding philosophy in the work that you do, regardless of the, the culture or heritage –

A: Correct.

ME: – of the child? –

A: Right.

ME: – Okay –

A: Right.

ME: Mm-hm. Um, but you also mentioned, um, not specifically a policy or practice or event, but also the individual you met while you were in graduate school as being somebody that had been influential –

A: Right.

ME: – so that the experiences and the relationships have influenced you.

A: Absolutely. And their story – and, you know, again, while trying to maintain their confidentiality – was that they were, for, for whatever reason, had come into a DHHS system – it was in a different state – but then when they were adopted out, they were told, as they were growing up, that they were Polish? Instead of Native American. It wasn't until much later. So, really had their whole identity stripped from them? And that's just not, that's just *so not okay.*

And it wasn't until she was a *much* older adolescent – almost young adult – that she figured out she indeed was *not* Polish, but was Native American, and this was the Tribe that she belonged to, and these were what her culture *should have* been.

And, so it was a lot of, 'How, how do we do that to people? How do we– ' You know, so that, yes, was a big guiding force for me – but again – regardless of culture. People shouldn't lose their culture because they need assistance or they need services provided by a particular agency.

ME: Mm-hm. And, just as an aside, in the majority of the cases you worked with, were the children, um, members of Wabanaki Tribes here in this State? Or did you also work with – have work with any Native American children that were part of either a Canadian Tribe, or somewhere else in the United States? And, and did that change the way that the services were –

A: – Um, the kids that I've worked with, um, some have been Wabanaki; some have been Micmac; some have been Penobscot–

ME: Mm-hm.

A: And I, I think the change in services provided depends on, um. It-it, I don't, well, uhhh. It's a dicey one. It's not so much Tribe-specific, it-it, as more as it in which Tribes had more resources available to them.

ME: Mm-hm.

A: Um, because, again, it – People want to do well by their kids regardless of which Tribe, regardless of – So, it came down to who had resources available, that had more resources to, resources to then expend towards the family and/or their kids. That was probably the only difference.

ME: Okay. Um, over the course of your work – do you see barriers to the successful implementation of Maine's Indian Child Welfare policies, and, and can you describe those barriers?

A: I, I think barriers, challenges, whichever, really come down to financial services available. Um, it-it, that's really what it come down to because, again, individual relationships – you know, you've got people trying, bending over backwards, doing whatever they can desperately to, for families to provide services. But if different agencies within, within a Tribe, outside of the Tribe, don't have the resources that the family needs, it – you can't provide what you don't have. I think those are the barriers. Those are the challenges.

ME: Okay. So I have a few closing questions for you. Um, do you think ICWA does enough to protect the rights of Indian children and/or Indian Tribes?

A: I think it's one of those, I think it's one of those dicey questions in that children have very little voice in any system. So if we're talking about the rights of Indian children, a lot of times that gets masked by the rights of their parents, or their parents' wants and needs. Um, so, and that's why I think it's dicey question, because children often have absolutely no voice.

Depending on how old they are into, literally, middle adolescence, um, even in the processes through which we work, for kids to come into a placement, it's the parent that tells the story. And, if the child disagrees, then that becomes, 'See, I told you. They're, they're oppositional. They're this. They're that. They lie. They don't tell the story straight. They don't–' Um, so, eh, can we do more to protect the children in those instances? Yes, we can. Do we have to be very careful with that at the same time? Yes, we do. Um, so that's that double-edged sword to it. But, yes, I always think we can do more, as a general statement.

ME: Okay. How could the State Child Welfare system improve in terms of ICWA?

A: Oh, boy! (*laughter*) Um, and I, I laugh just because, there just are so many ways. How do we improve child welfare systems – period. Um, and again, if we take away that piece of, if it's – and I know you guys are ICWA, but, there's a lot of ways to improve it. Um. I-I think, I think there's a lot of good *intent* behind child welfare. I think sometimes how it gets carried *out* is very different from *intent.* And I understand why bureaucracy, and those pieces, are there, but at the same time, they almost get in the way of the people that they're trying to help. So, making a way that it is much more direct for the families to get the help that they actually need; the kids that they need, while keeping them *where* they need to be, I mean, you know, that's just a big piece to it. There's not a lot of services available locally for the Tribes, for the families. Get some services out there.

ME: And do you have specifics in mind of, of which services are, have gaps?

A: All of 'em.

ME: Okay. (*laughs*)



A: All of 'em. (*laughs*) There's not a lot of early intervention, which, research has proven – helps *immensely.* There just *isn't.* There just is not a lot of early intervention services up there. Educational systems, um, are not always what they could be. And again, regardless of, of whatever, there's a lot of gaps in educational systems, especially as we get to some of the new policies in place in other areas. (*laughing*) I, yeah. It comes back to, you know, services available to isolated populations.

ME: Okay, so really rural areas, isolated pop–

A: Right.

ME: – close –

A: Right.

ME: – close – Okay.

A: If all of us lived in Portland, there's more services available. We're not. We're in Bangor North.

ME: Mm-hm. Okay. Um, if you could change anything, or make anything happen for Native American children involved in ICWA, what would you do?

A: I would make resources available to them, so that they do not have to leave where Mom and Dad are, to be hours away to get the services that they need, with people who are not familiar with their culture, their family set-up, their family, um – that's just such an important piece, and we take that away from them. So, how do we, how do we put those pieces in place so that they are able to get the help that they need within the context that makes sense for them.

ME: And, so, would you be talking, specifically, things like foster homes or residential homes for them to *be* within close proximity, or is that –

A: (*overlapping*) – It, well, that's a, that's a second part to it.

ME: Okay.

A: But even that first part. Um, you know, if they have in-home services –

ME: Okay.

A: – who's coming in?

ME: Right.

A: Who's – And again, so, you know, I, I feel for those families in that they want help for their kids, but then they spend so much time educating every new provider that comes through the door, um, that it's very easy to then lose focus on why is that provider really there. And really, they just want help with whatever it is that's going on with the family. It shouldn't then be their responsibility to keep training people who rotate around very quickly, um, so, even starting on that level.

ME: Okay. Great.

A: How do we do that?

ME: Great. So, my final question for you: What else do you want the Maine Wabanaki TRC to know about your experience as a service provider, um, to children and families in Maine? So really, anything else that we haven't asked that you would like to share.

A: Yep. No, I think, I think this council is really long overdue, because I think it, I guess, I think, for a couple of reasons. (*exhale*) I think it's, um. (*taps table*) And it, really trying to, it, it just always keeps coming down to: How do we help families in a way that's meaningful; that fits their need; that, um, does best by *them.*

So, just assuming that kids are kids, and we will send all kids to the same place, doesn't fit a need. We've *learned* that over time-and-time-and-time. So, for this council to be here to say, 'Hey, wait a minute. We're doing a disservice to our kids and our families and generations. And how do we make that right? And what do we do about that?' Um, I think that's a phenomenal thing.

And I think, the secondary piece to that is what the rest of us can learn about how we're doing what we're doing, so not only do we get better at it – that's really the secondary piece – um, but we've shut ourselves out from a culture, and how do we learn more about that, which then makes us better providers back to, back to this culture, back to these people.

And keep these kids at home. Keep them at home. They don't need the 'me' in their life if we can provide their service at home. We do a great job and, you know, all of those pieces, but let's teach the family to do it. Let's teach the community to do it. It takes a village. If it takes a village, you know, to raise a child, it takes a Tribe to raise a child. It takes all of that. Let's figure out how to do that.

ME: Great. Great.

A: So, that's my thought.

ME: Wonderful. Well, I, I want to thank you, um, for coming today. I know, you know, maybe you – I don't know whether you were apprehensive or not or, you know, kind of weren't sure what to expect, and so, um, regardless of, of how much you feel you have to contribute, you



know, what you have contributed does, um, you know, it provides just another piece of this entire work that the TRC is doing and creating and, and hope that you will continue to stay apprised of, of what's happening in the final report, when it's issued. And they'll be some sort of closing ceremony at the end and –

A: That would be great.

ME: – and you'll be, um, welcome to attend that and, and continue to be involved in the work of, of the TRC for the next few years, and then the work of Wabanaki REACH –

A: Mm-hm.

ME: – um, is expected to continue *indefinitely* because, as we've discussed, there's a lot of work to be done.

A: Right. Right.

ME: So, to the level that you are interested and feel invested, I hope that you will continue to participate and, and be aware of what's, what's happening. And, so, again, want to thank you for coming today and, and giving your statement –

A: Yep.

ME: – um, because it's a really valuable contribution –

A: Well, thank you very much.

ME: – to the work of this organization.

A: Thank you. I feel like I didn't contribute a lot, but thank you. *(laughs)*

ME: Again, every, every statement is a small piece of a much bigger picture –

A: Right.

ME: – and, and it helps us to understand, um, you know, our own roles in, you know, the bigger picture of what's happening –

A: Right.

ME: – so —

A: Right.

ME: – So. Thank you!

A: You're welcome!

[END OF RECORDING]