



BRIGHT SPOT

SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

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How has Osage Nation done “whatever it takes” to keep children safe within their families and community?

“Take care of your children, and you’re halfway to the sovereignty of your nation.”

— Principal Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear, Osage Nation

Osage Nation¹ is a federally recognized Native American Tribe with ancestral lands spanning present-day Missouri. It has nearly 26,000 members, with one in five living on reservation lands in rural Oklahoma. Around one in three Osage Nation members are children, with about 20% living on tribal lands.

With the help of American Rescue Plan Act pandemic recovery funds, Osage Nation in 2025 opened a multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art early learning center that stands as a testament to the value the Nation places on the well-being of its children and their families. The center features entirely around the needs of children and the staff who care for them: from the extensive indoor gymnasium where children can play, as well as rooms where parents can take continuing education classes, to modern, in-room kitchens where staff have everything they need close at hand. Bright colors, traditional art, and messages in Osage language adorn the spaces.

For three-term Principal Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear, children have been the key to protecting and preserving Tribal sovereignty, or the inherent right of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to govern themselves as distinct political entities. “You must understand that the 5-year-old child in front of you is not only present now,” he says, “but in the 50 years ahead. When you’re talking to a child, you’re talking to the future.”

A core tenet of Chief Standing Bear’s leadership vision and messaging — “We must do better for our children” — is infused at all levels of Osage Nation’s government structure. The Nation’s executive branch

and Congress have braided resources from multiple funding streams to ensure its social service-rendering departments have what they need to serve children and families well — and at times have declined funding streams that include restrictions counter to their members’ interests. Cabinet secretaries and department leaders encourage social services staff to work together, think creatively, and engage in active, respectful, and relentless casework on behalf of children and families.

For the team responsible for Indian Child Welfare, this has resulted in a shift away from foster care as the primary intervention for families in need to prevention-focused strategies that maintain family integrity, with fewer children needing to enter the tribal foster care system. In February 2023, the number of children in tribal foster care was 27. As the prevention strategies took root, this figure dropped to zero in July 2024 and has remained in single digits ever since. Importantly, child safety was not compromised — the number of repeat maltreatment instances during this timeframe were rare.

“It’s important to prioritize early intervention and prevention-focused strategies. The earlier we can identify families in need and provide them with resources, the more likely we are to prevent a crisis from escalating and resulting in foster care.”

— Sylvia Kelderman-Lewis, Indian Child Welfare specialist, Osage Nation

Embracing a “whatever it takes” culture

Osage Nation headquarters are based in the small Oklahoma town of Pawhuska (population: 3,000), one hour north of Tulsa. Other towns on the reservation have even fewer resources than Pawhuska. An Osage Nation family, for example, may need to travel 30 minutes or more to reach the nearest grocery store.

Like other Native American Tribes, Osage Nation has endured a traumatic history of forced displacements and repeated attacks on its wealth and sovereignty. Its strong cultural traditions persevere, however, demonstrated through the arts, traditional clothing, hand and dice games, and well-attended gatherings for ceremonial dance and music.

Osage Nation culture also highly values the concept of learning. Their careful attention toward staffing and emphasis on teamwork come together to create an environment where the Tribe commits to — in its words — “whatever it takes” to ensure Osage Nation children and their families are protected and supported.

Hiring the right people and then supporting them

Chief Standing Bear says, “hiring good people matters” because “success is contagious.” He has recruited trusted members of the Tribe who worked elsewhere to “come back home” to fill key departmental leadership roles, promising them competitive salaries and benefits.

With the right people on board, the Chief then asked them, “What do you need?” and did his best to find room in the budget to fulfill their requests. In 2022-23, the Indian Child Welfare program added four staff: a caseworker and three case aides whose role is to fill in the gaps in supporting families’ needs (for example, transporting people to family time visits when family members are separated). The additional positions have resulted in smaller caseloads, giving caseworkers more time to focus on each family.

Chief Standing Bear expresses confidence in his staff by declining to intervene when constituents call him with complaints. Concerns about the way a child welfare case has been handled instead are directed back to the department for resolution. “The leadership trusts that their staff are taking care of things,” says LaDonna Shadlow, director of Osage Nation social services, which oversees Indian Child Welfare.

The culture of trust translates into frontline staff feeling empowered to get creative about meeting families’ needs. “Our leadership encourages us to think outside the box and come up with solutions that fit the

needs of our families and their culture,” social worker Brandy Aldridge said. Staff also are supported with ongoing clinical consultation and encouraged to take time to prioritize their own well-being.

“They really foster self-care for us. They don’t burn us out. In turn, we can do better for our people.”

— Sylvia Kelderman-Lewis, Indian Child Welfare specialist, Osage Nation

Prioritizing learning

The Chief frequently visits with leaders of other Tribes to talk about how they address shared challenges, such as preserving and revitalizing the native language. He encourages his staff to do the same and provides a travel budget to support it. For example, staff of Osage Nation’s social services department have taken two trips to the [Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community](#) in Arizona to learn about its integrated, collaborative approach to child abuse prevention and family well-being.

Osage Nation has high educational and learning expectations for its social services team and other child-serving staff. Childcare staff are expected to attain an associate’s degree at minimum, with many staff working toward their bachelor’s or higher. Each staff member in school receives up to six hours of paid education leave per week. In the new early-learning center, the staff room contains several computer stations for employees who do not have the dedicated space, time, or equipment at home. The early learning center also supports caregivers who wish to learn the Osage language, offering discounted tuition to parents who attend onsite language classes.

Social services staff also frequently attend trainings on new child protection-related interventions and methods, including instruction in [motivational interviewing](#).

Building an expectation of collaboration

Inspired by their trip to Salt River, the social services department of Osage Nation has focused on breaking down interdepartmental silos. One approach has been to convene monthly meetings of all Osage Nation programs that provide direct services to children and families. Members of this group, known as the Osage Collaborative, share information and resources, and support one another’s events.

The Nation has also established the Osage County Multidisciplinary Team, which it operates with non-tribal agencies, such as the Osage Nation Attorney General, Osage County District Attorney, Osage County law enforcement agencies, and State child protection workers. This group reviews [forensic interviews](#) together and discusses complex child welfare cases. The team has been particularly helpful in fostering a positive relationship between social services and law enforcement. Osage Nation Indian Child Welfare social workers now spend one day per week onsite at the county police department. “When you’re face to face with somebody for eight hours, you’re going to create a relationship,” Shadlow said. “Then, when you need something from that department, you’ve got someone you can call, and they know who they’re talking to.”

A new age of collaboration

Osage Nation’s social services team (which oversees Indian Child Welfare) used to struggle in isolation to serve families that other departments were not able to help. “Other departments would load up a family, drive them over to us, and kind of unpack them on our front lawn,” Social Services Director LaDonna Shadlow recalled.

Things are very different today, however. In a recent case in which the state ordered a child removal, the children were already staying safely with a trusted family member, but their home was deemed structurally unsound. Multiple Osage Nation departments quickly pooled resources to move the family into a different house and furnish it. While this did not prevent the change of legal custody, the children were able to remain safely with family they knew.

“So many different departments came together to make that happen,” Shadlow said. “We didn’t even have to work late to get it done.”

The same spirit of collaboration exists within the social services team itself. Once a month, social workers present cases at a strategic roundtable, and the team discusses as a group what is best for the children. Staff have reported that they feel supported by this approach, which gives them the benefit of different perspectives while ensuring tough decisions are made together. “Removal is such a huge decision to make — no one should do this on their own,” social worker Aldridge said.

“As a team, no one ever says ‘no’ to each other. There are always multiple people willing to jump in to help out. That allows us to stretch our resources and increases our ability to help families.”

— Amy Patton, Indian Child Welfare specialist, Osage Nation

Putting the “whatever it takes” culture into practice

As a result of leadership’s “whatever it takes” commitment, Osage Nation’s social services team feels empowered to build respectful relationships with parents and caregivers, engage in active efforts to reduce and eliminate barriers to safety and self-sufficiency for families, proactively engage with the broader community, and serve Osage Nation children no matter where they live.

A mother’s story²

When Osage Nation Indian Child Welfare removed Constance’s three young children, she felt hopeless. Having lost custody of her twins years earlier, she said: “It felt like it was already over. I didn’t see any light.”

But her second encounter with Osage Nation’s child welfare system would be different. This time, Constance’s caseworker focused on her strengths as a parent, not just her challenges. When Constance started rehabilitation services for a substance use disorder several towns away, the caseworker didn’t let the distance prevent her children from seeing their mom, bringing them to meet her for visits. “She fought for the things I needed,” Constance said.

The two stayed in close communication, and when placement changes were necessary, they worked together to identify caregivers who could keep the siblings from being separated. When Constance struggled to complete her reunification service plan tasks, her caseworker responded with empathy, not judgment. Together, they explored how difficulties with anxiety and time management stemmed from the effects of trauma. The caseworker took time to make sure Constance understood everything that was happening and gave her a notebook planner to help her stay organized. “All I really needed was a system,” Constance said. “She helped me believe in myself.”

Today, Constance believes her second encounter with the child welfare system was one of the best things that’s ever happened to her. With the support and advocacy of an empathetic and proactive caseworker, Constance was able to reunite safely with her three younger children — as well as regain joint custody of the twins she had lost years before.

“That filled a hole in my heart,” Constance said. “It was exactly what I prayed for.”

Respectful relationships

Osage Nation government also prioritizes respect: “Our people always say, whatever you do, put respect first,” affirms Chief Standing Bear.

Osage Nation social services staff acknowledge the impact of both historical trauma and more recent traumatic events on the families they serve. Staff also recognize the fear that any family would experience when a child protection worker shows up at the doorstep of a home. As a result, they focus on easing that fear by changing the family’s perception of Indian Child Welfare from an entity that is threatening to a service that is supporting. “We try to build rapport with them, give them hope, and help them make the changes they need within their family,” said Jenny Rush Buffalohead, Osage Nation foster care specialist.

Working in such a small community requires social services staff to be especially mindful of their own preconceptions. They may know the families they work with from other contexts, or they may have worked with other members of the same family — perhaps even across generations. Staff say they neutralize personal bias — especially as it relates to parents returning to the system — by never giving up on a family and recognizing that each family has a different timeline for change.

In recent years, respect for families manifested into recruiting staff who have lived experience in the child welfare system. Any personal history with the system used to render an applicant ineligible for employment within the Indian Child Welfare team. Now, however, that experience is viewed as an asset. “When someone has done the hard work required to resolve a child welfare case, and you can see them thriving on the other side, that’s an empowering statement to a parent who’s still in the middle of it,” Shadlow said.

“We think about the families we work with as *our* families. We are diligent and intentional about building relationships, building rapport, treating people as people, showing up as humans, and being on their side.”

— Karie Mashunkashey, Indian Child Welfare specialist, Osage Nation

Reducing stressors and preventing future crises

In the same way the Chief asks his cabinet members, “What do you need?”, social workers ask the families they serve how they can best support them and build a plan around their needs. The expectation is that every family will receive individualized, active efforts such as expedited services, transportation assistance, or help with job applications. It also means addressing any barriers to service access or affordability that may arise.

“We know too much about historical trauma and historical poverty to not be doing the best we can to break those cycles,” social worker Aldridge said. “When we know there’s need, we immediately step in. A lot of times, agencies have great plans, but they aren’t addressing what a family needs to be able to make necessary changes. We add that extra layer to knock down barriers.”

Having multiple funding streams that have no strings attached — including federal child welfare money, tribal self-governance funds, and discretionary dollars approved by the Tribe’s Congress — is critical to Osage Nation’s successfully managing its Indian Child Welfare program.

Some form of concrete support often is offered to families, such as help with utility bills or rental assistance to avoid eviction. Supervisors have the final say on such requests and most often approve them, recognizing that concrete supports help relieve anxiety and pressure on a family. Osage Nation’s social services team also is mindful about keeping the

Elder Connections

In 2022, Osage participated in a pilot project to explore how American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders may be helpful in preventing children from entering foster care. After the initial focus groups, which tapped into tribal elders’ wisdom about traditional practices that keep young people healthy and safe, Osage Nation’s social services team continued the program as a prevention effort.

[Elder Connections](#) brings together elders and high school youth for conversation and connection. Elders pass on cultural knowledge about how to live a healthy life, while youth have the opportunity to share their experiences with supportive adults.

family stable when the agency is no longer involved. To that end, staff assist families with self-sufficiency skills, such as budgeting.

“Whatever we can do with our time, funds, energy, putting our heads together ... whatever we have to do to keep kids safe with their family and not remove them, we’re going to do it. That’s the bottom line.”

— LaDonna Shadlow, Social Services Director, Osage Nation

Proactive community engagement

Not allowing stressors to evolve into crises is a cornerstone of the Osage Nation approach to child welfare. Social services staff regularly host and participate in community events designed to build family resilience and deliver the message: “We’re your community helpers.” During the pandemic, families were invited to attend a drive-through public health fair to receive resources such as food boxes, formula and diapers, coats, holiday toys, and even a training on how to apply Narcan when someone is overdosing on opioids.

Participation in community events like these helps build rapport with families. “It makes us people — we’re not just knocking on your door because we’re taking your kids,” social worker Karie Mashunkashey said. “We are doing everything we can to avoid that.”

These events also allow staff to interact with new families in a situation without stigma or fear, and to better assess their needs and those of the community as a whole.

Showing up for every Osage Nation child

Although only about 20% of Osage children live on tribal lands, the Osage Nation’s Indian Child Welfare team intervenes on behalf of every Osage child involved in a child welfare case, no matter where they live. The team of specialists responds to [ICWA Notices](#) across Oklahoma and in other states, participating in hearings via video call or in person when needed, with the support of Tribal Congress Discretionary Funds.

When intervening in out-of-state cases, the Nation always seeks to keep children in their home jurisdictions: supporting safe reunification first, then diligently searching for other nearby family members. If those options are exhausted, the children are brought back to the tribal lands for placement and, ultimately, permanency.

“These are our kids, no matter where they live. When we intervene in out-of-state ICWA cases, our goal is to keep children connected with their immediate family whenever possible. But if you have no family, *we are your family*. We’ll bring you home.”

— Jerod Applegate, Indian Child Welfare Social Work Supervisor, Osage Nation

Bringing it all home

Chief Standing Bear discusses the connection between the safety and well-being of the Tribe’s children and maintaining the Tribe’s sovereignty, and notes that the two concepts are near impossible to separate. Children and their families are essential to the three pillars of Osage Nation sovereignty: reclaiming its land, protecting and celebrating its culture, and revitalizing its language. Osage Nation children are not just passive recipients of the future, they are its makers.

With so much at stake, it’s clear why Osage Nation services for children and families — and particularly those that keep families safely intact — are so highly valued and supported. The challenges facing Osage

Nation families, like all families, are complex and at times daunting. But Chief Standing Bear and his staff are remarkably unified around their “whatever it takes” approach.

“If you always focus on the children,” the Chief says, “everything else becomes just noise.”

¹ Content of this brief was informed through interviews with leadership and staff of Osage Nation and Osage Nation Indian Child Welfare: Karie Mashunkashey, Indian Child Welfare Specialist, and LaDonna Shadlow, Director of Social Services, on June 23, 2025; Brandy Aldridge, Adult Social Services Specialist, Sylvia Kelderman-Lewis, Indian Child Welfare Specialist, Amy Patton, Indian Child Welfare Specialist, and Jenny Rush Buffalohead, Foster Care Specialist, on July 17, 2025; Geoffrey Standing Bear, Principal Chief of Osage Nation, Teresa Bledsoe, Secretary of Social Services, Jerod Applegate, Social Worker Supervisor of Social Services, LaDonna Shadlow, Director, Social Services, and Tara McKinney, Director of Wahzhazhe Early Learning Academy on September 3, 2025.

² Constance, a member of Osage Nation and the mother whose personal story is highlighted, was interviewed on October 8, 2025. For privacy reasons, we are only using her first name.