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The robust alliance between DCFS and community partner United American Indian Involvement maximizes support for Native American children and families. Dr. Carrie Johnson (left) and Supervising Children's Social Worker Lizabeth Caldera (right).

A clinical psychologist affiliated with the Wahpeton Dakota Tribe, Dr. Carrie Johnson, believes that connection to cultural heritage is key to keeping Native American families together and helping them thrive.

"I always knew I wanted to work with the Native American population," said Dr. Johnson, vice president of behavioral health at United American Indian Involvement (UAI), a service provider that works closely with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to support families with Native heritage.

"Helping vulnerable children and families is even more personal for me because I was a foster child," Dr. Johnson added. "UAI and DCFS share a common goal of keeping Native families together, helping them be healthy and ensuring

their overall well-being."

Los Angeles County is home to the largest urban Native American population in the nation. DCFS established the American Indian Unit (AIU) in 1989. AIU serves indigenous children and families by helping them access culturally relevant services.

Supervising Children's Social Worker Lizabeth Caldera, who has been with the AIU since 2015, said partners like UAI understand the importance of customs, traditions and cultural ties.

"They approach each case in a culturally respectful manner and offer families a sense of familiarity, comfort and safety that helps them succeed," she said.

Although the AIU works solely with clients who are part of one of the 574 federally recognized tribes, UAI conducts outreach across DCFS offices to reach other families with indigenous heritage.

Anyone with Native American heritage can access programming and services, including individual or family therapy, domestic violence and sexual assault programs, workforce assistance and other opportunities for fellowship and connection. Traditional Native American practices like drumming, dancing, beading and talking circles are among the most sought-after activities with UAI clients and community members.

"Our families have reported that participating in such traditional cultural experiences helps their behavioral health, strengthens their sense of identity, increases their connection to the community and helps them be more resilient," Dr. Johnson said.

Lizabeth has witnessed firsthand how UAI's approach serves to keep families intact and helps others reconcile. One DCFS family was able to safely reunify after the parents attended counseling



sessions and other activities at UAll, including participating in talking circles.

“I saw the parents volunteering at a UAll event after their DCFS case was closed,” Lizabeth recalled. “It showed that UAll had such an impact on their life that they wanted to help others in the same way.”

A strong partnership between UAll and DCFS is critical because of the Native American community’s collective historical trauma at the hands of the government. Their enduring distrust makes many indigenous families hesitant to seek help or resentful of intervention.

“At UAll, we try to be a bridge between DCFS and the community,” said Dr. Johnson. “Our organizations have a tremendous working relationship that is open, honest and trustful. We highlight our partnership wherever possible to foster trust with the Native American population.”

“We want to show the community that we are all working together in their best interest to keep Native families whole and together,” she added.

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