



THE NAVAJO NATION

RUSSELL BEGAYE PRESIDENT
JONATHAN NEZ VICE PRESIDENT

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PRESIDENT BEGAYE SAYS SEPARATING NAVAJO CHILDREN FROM THEIR PARENTS AND FAMILIES IS DEVASTATING



“We need to make sure that every Navajo child in state custody or foster care doesn’t have to go through life wondering who they are or who their parents are,” President Russell Begaye said during his speech that opened the NDSS and Casey Family Program’s Navajo Child Work Session.

ALBUQUERQUE, NM-During the opening banquet for Navajo Division of Social Service and Casey Family Program’s Navajo Child Work Session in Albuquerque on Monday, President Russell Begaye called for the absolute protection of Navajo children in his support of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

“There is nothing more devastating than seeing a Navajo child being taken from their parents. The connection that exists between a child and their parent is strong. It’s a sacred bond. In our support of the ICWA, we are protecting the connection between children, their parents and siblings,” President Begaye said.

Last week, President Begaye delivered a letter to Secretary of Health and Human Services Sylvia Burwell asking for her to support ICWA in enforcing that state courts investigate and verify the enrollment of Native American children in cases regarding custody and foster care.

President Begaye talked about the boarding school era in the history of Native Americans to emphasize the historical trauma caused by the separation of Indian children from their families, culture and lan-



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guage. Both President Begaye and his brothers attended boarding school as young men.

“Imagine your identity being erased. Imagine not being able to see your mother and father. Imagine knowing you have family but not being able to see them. The separation is too much,” he said. “Now imagine children who are separated from their families and cultures for the entirety of their lives.”

On July 7th of this year, ICWA came under fire when the Goldwater Institute filed a proposed class-action lawsuit in federal district court in Arizona challenging the constitutionality of ICWA and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) guidelines that strengthen this legislation.

The Goldwater lawsuit has sparked a national discussion questioning the purpose of ICWA. It is the position of the Navajo Nation that tribes, states and partners do everything they can to advocate for this legislation which protects tribe’s connection to Native American children.

President Begaye said the lawsuit portrays the lifeways of Native Americans as being insignificant while also portraying tribal communities as substandard. For non-Natives, the lawsuit could be interpreted as compelling.

“It makes you think about the issue in the questions it raises,” he said. “Rather than go down that road, we, as Native Americans, need to know that we are just as good as anybody else.”

The Goldwater lawsuit is a fight for the soul of tribal nations, he said. It challenges the equality of tribal nations against non-tribal paradigms of societal standards not based in traditional culture or knowledge.

“Our traditional ways nurture our children and foster environments that are conducive to the success of our children. Navajo culture inherently protects the future generations as it does the elders.”

President Begaye expressed his gratitude to all departments in attendance, as well as the Health Education and Human Services Committee and Law & Order Committee delegates, for coming together to support and address the importance of ICWA in keeping Navajo children with Navajo families. He called for the Nation’s continued support of ICWA and for tribes to stand against the Goldwater Institute’s lawsuit, which questions the constitutionality of



Members of the Health Education and Human Services Committee and Law & Order Committee joined with NDSS and Casey Family Programs to address Navajo Child Welfare at a work session held Dec. 7-8 at Sandia Hotel and Resort in Albuquerque, NM.

the Act.

“Native Americans are just as good as any other society on earth. We love our families and will stand with them,” he said. “We need to make sure that every Navajo child in state custody or foster care doesn’t have to go through life wondering who they are or who their parents are.”

During the following morning’s agenda, Vice President Jonathan Nez presented a welcoming address to the work session that supported President Begaye’s position while also supporting positive, healthy families and homes on the Nation. The vice president also extended gratitude to the partners who organized the conference.

Regarding the Goldwater Institute’s lawsuit, Vice President Nez supports the need for all tribal nations to come forth with strong messages supporting ICWA. He said there is a the need for the Nation to develop a strong strategy in combating the Goldwater Institute’s messaging and media campaign.

“What they are doing is chipping away at the sovereign rights of Native Americans which can eventually extend beyond ICWA,” Vice President Nez said. “What the Goldwater Institute is doing is wrong.”

Both President Begaye and Vice President Nez voiced support of ICWA and the protection of Indian children by keeping them with Native American families.

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