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Essay Title: Lost and Forgotten

A crucial issue for not only my tribal community, but also confronting other tribes in Indian Country, is the foster care system. Many children are in the system for almost half their lives; this I know from personal experience. Some children stay in foster care until they turn 18, or "age out". Approximately thirty thousand teens aged out of foster care in 2010 (Fessler). Only 13% of Native children are placed in Native homes and 32 states are failing in one way or another to stand by the law of the Indian Welfare Act (Pojoaque). Tribes need to work harder to recruit Native American Foster parents.

I am a victim of the tribal foster care system. Before I went into foster care, I was living with my mother who often left my young sister and me alone. Memories of my biological mother and why I had to be taken away are unhappy. Even though my sister was diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, she had to take care of me because I was so young. My mom would come home late at night drunk or with a new guy. Sometimes she never did come home. When I was an infant, she would often sneak out; my aunt would hear me cry and have to take care of me.

Then, I was placed in foster care. From five to 13, I was pushed around from home to home. I was always unsure of where I was to go, who I was to stay with, and what they were going to be like. Besides moving from house to house, I also moved from parent to parent. When I was young, I was given an option to call the foster parents "mom or "dad." But as I grew older, it was harder to call them mom or dad because I knew I wouldn't be with them for long. When I moved, I didn't just move to a new home, but also a new school and neighborhood. I had to make new friends, stay with new "siblings," and learn new rules. When I became adjusted to everything, I would be suddenly moving again to somewhere new. Some foster parents were nice and did everything to make me happy and comfortable. However, others treated me like I had no value, and I never felt like part of the family. People treat you differently when you are not their biological children. I felt like I was not wanted. I felt there must be something wrong with me, and that is why I was being moved from home to home.

Children need real parents, not foster parents. They need parents who are committed to the child and the child's future, not to receiving monthly payments for taking care of the child. Currently, there are 424,000 children in foster care, as stated earlier; approximately 30,000 teens will age out this year, without parents (Fessler). They need parents who will be there to help them get in to college. They need a place to come home to on college breaks. They need parents who will help and advise them as they start their careers. Being in foster care for eight years has been hard and challenging. If I had been adopted earlier, my childhood would have been better. Research shows that children who age out in foster care are less likely to graduate and find jobs. They are also more likely to be homeless, commit crimes or to be the victims of crimes (Fessler).

The failures of the Native American communities to act in these situations begin before children are even placed into the foster care system. Many tribes refuse to terminate parental rights, allowing children to be emotionally and physically abused over and over again. Why are tribes protecting parent's rights to be a parent instead of upholding the child's right to a safe and permanent home? The Indian Child Welfare Act makes it more difficult to terminate the rights of

a Native American parent than a non-Native American parent. Even if parent's rights are terminated, tribes do not make it a priority to find permanent homes for the child. This is further complicated by the Indian Child Welfare Act, which regulates the removal and placement of Native American Children. (ksl, Utah. CYFD) In spite of this, I believe that when a child's biological home situation cannot be fixed, tribes should start actively working to terminate parent's rights and work toward finding a forever family for the child.

But even when children are placed into the system, few tribes pursue permanent placements for the children they have taken away. Due to frequent personnel turnover in tribal administrations, many tribal social service directors are not aware of the children they have that are in foster care or are legally available for adoption. When my adoptive parents were searching for a child, the newest director of the Pyramid Lake Tribe was not even aware that I was legally free for adoption. My parents requested that Pyramid Lake search their records to find out who was legally free or close to being legally free. I had been legally free for adoption for about six years. If there had been a nationwide tracking system, a family could have been found for me many years earlier. The longer a child stays in the foster care system, the more likely the child will be moved, and the more likely the child is to have attachment issues and to suffer from post traumatic stress. Adolescents in foster care are at higher risk for continuing medical problems, which are worsened by multiple placements. (Child Welfare League of America)

Native American children need to be placed with Native American families. I was never placed with a Native American family. I was never given an opportunity to dance at powwows or to learn my language. What I did learn about my culture was what I learned from other Native children with whom I attended school. I would like to see Tribes form a nationwide recruiting organization to recruit Native parents for Native children. In addition, where Native children become legally free and available for adoption, they should also be entered into a nationwide system to help them find homes. That way, no child would be lost and forgotten, as I was.

As a result of my experience in foster care, I want to be an advocate for the children who are lost and forgotten in the foster system. Currently, there is a shortage of Native American foster homes. I would like to address this by making tribes aware of the pain and suffering a child goes through when we move from house to house and never feeling like we belong. If the development of such a system could help prevent just one child from enduring the suffering I have, it would be invaluable.

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