

Faculty and Planning Committee

Understanding and Applying ICWA: Purpose, Strategies, Practice, and Resources

Hon. Jamie Cork, District Court Judge, Dakota County



Judge Cork was appointed to the First Judicial District Bench in August 2016, where Judge Cork presides over a variety of cases including criminal, civil, juvenile, ICWA Cases, probate, and family cases.

Judge Cork is a former Assistant Hennepin County Attorney and worked for over 18 years in the Child Protection Division. Judge Cork specialized in Sexually Exploited Youth and Indian Child Welfare Act cases, including traditional child protection, long term foster care, educational neglect, runaway, sexually exploited youth, Rule 20 incompetent delinquent, and truancy cases. Judge Cork worked with Indian tribes and communities in an attempt to assure that families and children were able to obtain culturally appropriate education and services.

Judge Cork is currently the co-chair of the Dakota County Domestic Violence Coordinated Community Response Team and the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative-Elimination of Racial Disparity, faculty on the Children's Justice Initiative Indian Child Welfare Act training workgroup, faculty for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges-National Judicial Institute on Domestic Child Sex Trafficking, a member of the Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Trafficking Workgroup, the First District Equal Justice Committee, the Children's Justice Initiative Indian Child Welfare Act subcommittee, the Children's Justice Initiative Parent's Representation subcommittee, the Minnesota Statewide Human Trafficking Taskforce, the Violence Against Women Act Electronic Crime Unit Grant Oversight Committee, and International Human Trafficking Presenter for United States Department of State. Judge Cork was a member of the Indian Child Welfare Act Education Day Committee, the Native American Attendance Initiative, and the Gerald Vick Law Enforcement Trafficking Taskforce. Judge Cork was an original member of the Safe Harbor committee that established Minnesota's "No Wrong Door" Policy and co-chaired the Statewide Model Protocol workgroup on Child Protection/Child Welfare. Judge Cork

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has been a member of and consulted on several committees and collaborations regarding sexually exploited youth, including specialized groups focusing on Native American women and children who are missing and/or exploited.

Judge Cork is an adjunct professor for University of Minnesota School of Law teaching Policy and Laws of Human Trafficking Seminar and St. Thomas School of Law teaching Child Abuse and the Law. Judge Cork continues educating through local, state, national and international presentations to judges, law enforcement, human services, advocates, public health workers, medical personnel, and attorneys regarding the human trafficking. Judge Cork received a juris doctor in 1998 from Hamline University School of Law with concentration in criminal law and has a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice. Prior to law school she worked as a law enforcement officer, a correctional officer, a group home counselor and a 911 dispatcher.

Hon. Anne McKeig, Associate Justice, Minnesota Supreme Court



Justice McKeig worked for over 16 years handling child protection cases and adoption matters with a specialty in cases involving the Indian Child Welfare Act, as a former Assistant Hennepin County Attorney.

Justice McKeig was appointed to the district court bench in 2008 and served as Presiding Judge in Family Court in the Fourth Judicial District in Hennepin County located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Justice McKeig spearheaded the Family Court Enhancement Project, a demonstration project to improve outcomes for families facing issues of domestic violence. In September 2016, Justice McKeig was appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court, becoming the first Native American woman in the United States to be appointed to a state's highest court.

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Justice McKeig currently teaches at Mitchell Hamline School of Law and St. Thomas School of Law as an Adjunct Professor and is co-author of a law school curriculum entitled “Child Abuse and the Law”.

Justice McKeig is currently a member of the Speakers Bureau for Gundersen Health National Child Protection Training Center, board member of Proof Alliance, Division of Indian Work, the Infinity Project, trustee for St. Catherine University, and a member of the Tribal Court State Court Forum.

Justice McKeig, White Earth Band of Ojibwe, grew up on the Leech Lake reservation and is a native of Northern Minnesota. Justice McKeig is a proud mother of five children and a Johnny Cash super fan.

Jessica Ryan, Tribal Attorney, and former Tribal Court Judge



Jessica Ryan was appointed to serve as the Chief Judge for the Lower Sioux Indian Community in 2016 and was appointed to serve on the Court of Appeals for the White Earth Nation in 2017.

Jessica now represents parents, guardians, and legal custodians through Hennepin County’s Adult Representation Unit. Jessica’s private practice represents Bands and Indian families, primarily in the areas of child welfare. A large portion of Jessica’s practice has focused on child welfare: seeking to support families in finding a sense of balance and harmony, so families remain together in a good way. Jessica has extensive litigation experience in several tribal and state courts. Jessica is active in policy analysis affecting Indian families; and collaborates with tribes, counties, and states to develop policy and practice that better serve American Indian families. Jessica has been invited to speak locally, regionally, and nationally regarding implementation of the ICWA and related laws in a way that honors the letter, spirit, and intent of the law.

Since graduating from Hamline Law School in 1997, Jessica clerked in state district court and two tribal courts, helped establish the Hennepin County ICWA Guardian ad litem Panel, and served as volunteer guardian ad litem for ICWA cases. Jessica has drafted legislation for tribes and states, was a key player in

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renegotiating the Minnesota Tribal/State Agreement and has sought to improve application of the law through rule revisions and creation of written materials to assist stakeholders in implementation in a good way over the years.

Most recently, Jessica was re-appointed to the Juvenile Protection Rules Committee, and co-chairs the ICWA Subcommittee. Jessica has served on the Board of Directors for several American Indian non-profit organizations and is on the Site Council for the local school.

Jessica is enrolled with the Brothertown Indian Nation and remains active with Tribal activities.

Shannon Smith, Executive Director, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Law Center



Shannon Smith has served as Executive Director of the ICWA Law Center since July 1, 2004. Shannon has been with the ICWA Law Center since 2000 and has over 20 years of experience working in the field of Indian child welfare. Shannon has provided direct legal representation to hundreds of families impacted by the child protection system in state and tribal courts. Shannon has provided ICWA training to local and national audiences.

Shannon is a graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School class of 1999; Shannon graduated with honors and earned the MJF Volunteer of the Year Award in 1999. Prior to joining the ICWA Law Center, Shannon clerked for the Honorable Robert A. Blaeser of the Hennepin County Juvenile Court.

Shannon is highly regarded as a leader in the field of Indian child welfare and has served on several committees impacting the interests of Indian children, their families, and their tribes, including the Supreme Court Juvenile Protection Rules Committee, the Legal Service Advisory Council Emerging Leaders and the Minnesota Tribal/State Agreement drafting committee.

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Maya Tester, Assistant Hennepin County



Maya Tester is an Assistant Hennepin County Attorney in the Child Protection Division, where Maya has been a trial attorney since 1993. Since 2010, Maya has handled exclusively cases that fall under the Indian Child Welfare Act, providing legal representation to the Human Services and Public Health Department, and working closely with representatives of Minnesota and out of state tribes. Maya has been a member of the Hennepin County Children’s Justice Initiative and, over the years, has provided numerous trainings on the impact of domestic violence on children, trial practice and procedure, and emerging issues in child protection.

Maya has always had a passion for working with children in legal proceedings. Maya graduated with honors from Harvard Law School in 1991, where she focused her trial advocacy training and research on juvenile justice and poverty law issues. Prior to law school Maya obtained a Master’s degree in Developmental Psychology from the University of Virginia in 1988. Maya’s thesis and publications addressed resilience factors in victims of child neglect and abuse, and adolescent decision making in a legal context.

Maya is past President of Proof Alliance and is engaged with many community programs working to educate women about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy.



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Rebecca Vanden Hanen, Staff Attorney, Minnesota State Court Administrator's Office



Rebecca (“Becca”) Vanden Hanen has worked with the Minnesota Judicial Branch for the past 14 years. Becca serves as a Staff Attorney for the Children’s Justice Initiative (CJI), a collaborative effort between the Minnesota Judicial Branch and the Minnesota Department of Human Services designed to address systems change in the juvenile court process. Becca staffs the Tribal Court State Court Forum and has contributed to the Child Focused Parenting Time Guide Workgroup.

Prior to Becca’s work with the State Court Administrator’s Office, Becca was a staff attorney with the Minnesota Judicial Branch’s Self-Represented Litigant Program. Becca provided direct service to self-represented litigants in family court and juvenile court matters and worked closely with the bench and court administration in Hennepin County and throughout the State of Minnesota to improve access to justice for children and families.

Becca holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Political Science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and received her Juris Doctor degree from the University of St. Thomas School of Law in 2008.

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Hon. Korey Wahwassuck, District Court Judge, Itasca County



Judge Wahwassuck (Cree) served as a tribal court judge for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Tribal Court from 2006 until 2013, Judge Wahwassuck was appointed by Governor Mark Dayton to serve as a Minnesota District Court Judge for the Ninth Judicial District. Previously, Judge Wahwassuck served as a Kansas Supreme Court Certified Mediator, and practiced law for 15 years, specializing in Indian law, child welfare, and juvenile delinquency.

Judge Wahwassuck was a founding member of the first Joint Tribal-State Jurisdiction Wellness Courts in the nation and authored “The New Face of Justice: Joint Tribal-State Jurisdiction” for the Washburn Law Journal and “Building a Legacy of Hope: Perspectives on Joint Tribal-State Jurisdiction” for the William Mitchell Law Review. Judge Wahwassuck is also a member of Project T.E.A.M. (“Together Everyone Achieves More,”) helping other jurisdictions create tribal-state collaborative courts of their own.

Judge Wahwassuck served as a member of the Minnesota Supreme Court’s Drug Court Initiative Advisory Committee, the Minnesota Supreme Court’s Racial Fairness Committee, and the Safe Harbor Statewide Model Protocol Judges Workgroup, and the Committee for Equality and Justice. Judge Wahwassuck currently serves on the Children’s Justice Initiative Lead Judges Workgroup, the Minnesota Tribal Court State Court Forum, and the Opioid Epidemic Response Advisory Committee. Judge Wahwassuck also served as a member of the Board of Directors for the National Association of Drug Court Professionals and was a member of the Tribal Advisory Committee to the Indian Law and Order Commission. Judge Wahwassuck served on the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges’ (NCJFCJ) Tribal Leadership Forum and the NCJFCJ’s Tribal Court Committee and as an Advisory Member of the NCJFCJ Diversity Committee.

Judge Wahwassuck earned a Bachelor’s degree and Juris Doctor degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Judge Wahwassuck has taught courses on Native American Spirituality and Sovereignty,



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Treaty Rights and Tribal Sovereignty, Tribal Court-State Issues, and Juvenile Delinquency Guidelines at Penn Valley Community College in Kansas City, Missouri, Leech Lake Tribal College, the National Judicial College, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Judge Wahwassuck also serves as a trainer for the State of Minnesota on subjects ranging from the Indian Child Welfare Act to creating trauma-responsive justice systems.