

Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare
Truth & Reconciliation
Commission



“Many truth commissions around the world have set out to incorporate the voice of Indigenous people who have suffered human rights abuses at the hands of government and other political groups. Most of these official truth commissions, however, have also had a nation-building objective, at least in the sense of legitimizing or re-legitimizing the government in power, and some Indigenous rights activists are uncomfortable participating in them for that reason.”

-Esther Attean and Jill Williams, [Homemade Justice](#), Cultural Survival Quarterly, Spring 2011

Truth commissions were established to create resolution between perpetrators and victims of war crimes, human rights violations, or other sources of trauma. Founded in Uganda in 1974, the process ensures that all parties have the opportunity to share their stories and tell their truths. Some truth commissions also include an aspect of reconciliation, which helps those involved start the process of healing and forgiveness.

Truth commissions have been set up in more than 30 countries. The [first official truth commission](#) in the United States was in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1999. That commission was established to acknowledge the events of the [1979 Greensboro massacre](#), in which five protesters were killed by the Ku Klux Klan.

State, Wabanaki tribes to sign mandate, look into history of harmful child welfare practices

Bangor Daily News - June 28, 2012

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Indian Child Welfare in the United States

In the late 1800s, government policy toward Native people began to focus on forced and coerced assimilation of Native people into American society. The establishment of the reservation system had unintended consequences – Native communities, which were often isolated and insular, were not adopting farming, Christianity, and American language, values, and customs. Moving away from physical destruction of Native people, the U.S. military

began to experiment with cultural destruction by removing children from Native homes and placing them in distant boarding schools. This began a century of government policy designed to eradicate Native culture by integrating Native people into non-Native society.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#) and the [Child Welfare League of America](#) created the [Indian Adoption Project](#). This was an experiment initiated in New England to prove that Indian children would do better living in white households. Some 395 children were removed from often safe and healthy Indian families and adopted by non-Native families in an attempt to continue the assimilation policies of the boarding school era. Realizing the devastating effects this policy had on Indian people, the federal government passed [the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978](#), theoretically ending the practice.

“A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” (*Official report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction*, 1892 46-59. Reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites: *Americanizing the American Indians: Writing by the “Friends of the Indian” 1880-1900* Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1973).



Maine

The Federal Administration for Children and Families conducted an audit of all states, evaluating how well they were implementing the Indian Child Welfare Act. The 1999 audit found that Maine was not in compliance with some requirements, so the state reached out to the tribes to help it improve services. It was the first time that state and tribal social workers sat down together to understand the Act and how each were working to protect children.

After a series of training sessions for social workers, both state and tribal employees desired to see something bigger happen, to effect deep changes to benefit Native children and families. The group decided that all parties needed to reconcile the past and identify a future to work toward together, and the truth and reconciliation process grew as a step toward healing.

In 2011, all five Wabanaki Chiefs and the Governor of Maine signed an intent to create the [Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth & Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC) and, in June 2012, the Commission was mandated. The goals are to document and acknowledge what happened to Native children in the state child welfare system; to recommend ways to remedy these injustices; and to challenge the dominant cultural narrative about the state's treatment of Indigenous children, replacing it with a more accurate narrative that can be incorporated into the ways the people of Maine tell its history.

In February 2013, the five commissioners who were selected by a tribal-state committee were officially seated in a day-long ceremony. The commissioners will spend two years traveling to tribal communities, examining documents and listening to testimony by Native people about their experiences with the child welfare system. At the end of two years, a report with recommendations on how to move forward will be published. [Maine-Wabanaki REACH](#) (Reconciliation, Engagement, Advocacy, Change, and Healing) serves as the advisory group to the TRC, preparing communities for the TRC process, ensuring adequate and visible support systems are available in tribal communities and guiding the process for implementation of the TRC recommendations.

Appendix A

Headlines Truth and Reconciliation

tate, Wabanaki tribes to sign mandate, look into history of harmful child welfare practices, by Nick McCrea, Bangor Daily News, June 28, 2012

Truth and Reconciliation, Maine Watch with Jennifer Rooks, MPBN, July 12, 2012

5 picked for group to examine child welfare practices that split Native American families, by Nick McCrea, Bangor Daily News, Dec. 18, 2012

Maine Truth Commission to Tell Story of Forced Assimilation of Wabanaki Children, International Center for Transitional Justice, February 12, 2013

Truth and Reconciliation, WABI-TV, by Joy Hollowell, February 12th 2013

Maine, Tribes Seek 'Truth And Reconciliation', by Susan Sharon, NPR, March 12, 2013

Wabanaki Truth and Reconciliation commissioners set first visit to tribe, by Tim Cox, Bangor Daily News, Nov. 10, 2013

The Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission, WCSH, Nov 18, 2013

Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins hearings on Indian child welfare, WCSH, Nov 20, 2013