

# Heart of the Matter: Rovianna Leigh

As an undergraduate, **Rovianna Leigh** discovered a passion for Indian law. “I became interested in Indian law as a vehicle for social change,” Leigh said. Since graduating in 2005 from the University of California Berkeley School of Law, Leigh has served tribal clients in a variety of areas, such as environmental and cultural resources protection, health, employment, Indian child welfare, and TANF. She has drafted tribal children’s law and order codes, and successfully negotiated one of the first memoranda of understanding (MOU) between a tribe and a county child welfare services department in California.

Leigh believes that it is critical to educate county governments on the need to collaborate with the impacted tribe before a child is removed from a home. ICWA requires that steps be taken to prevent removal of a child, yet often county agencies feel that collaboration cannot occur until the child has been removed. A mechanism that can be used to educate the county is to draft an MOU. An MOU helps county courts and social service agencies understand that they can share information with tribes, and doing so will not violate confidentiality. The law says they can share information pre-removal, pre-petition, and pre-ICWA findings.

Courts and social service agencies can work together to identify culturally appropriate placements and services. Many times counties don’t understand that tribes can help with the process. When counties and tribes collaborate early in the process, it minimizes the number of moves a child may have to make.



In Leigh’s experience, another important practice—especially for smaller tribes—is to create intertribal consortiums. Many smaller tribes don’t have the resources to operate their own tribal court systems. Tribes that can’t provide a stand-alone court benefit from partnering with other tribes. In addition to expense sharing, this provides an opportunity to get policies and codes drafted. Elders and tribal councils can meet, discuss, and agree on these policies, allowing all members to have a voice.

Leigh sees progress being made as more of her cases are transferring to tribal courts. This is helping cases move through the process much more quickly and easily. For example, parents are being admitted to inpatient programs if substance abuse or domestic violence issues are present. While the parents are treated, children are placed with a relative or tribal member. Families are successfully reunifying much more quickly than they do via state courts.

“I am thankful for NICWA,” Leigh said. “Anytime I need to think about a resource or research important factual data, NICWA is a great partner.” She sees the annual conference as a good opportunity to come together, share, build community, and reenergize. “The work is hard and can be so draining, especially for our social services workers. The annual conference is a wonderful resource for all who do this work,” she said.

*Rovianna Leigh has been a NICWA member since 2009.*