Listening Sessions to hear from tribal leaders and representatives on the re-examination and update of the BIA's Indian Child Welfare Act Guidelines for State Courts

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Kevin K. Washburn today announced that his office will hold the next set of Listening Sessions on the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Guidelines for State Courts on Tuesday, April 15, 2014, at the National Indian Child Welfare Association annual conference in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and on Thursday, April 24, via teleconference.

The sessions are a coordinated effort with tribal leaders and their designees to determine if the guidelines are still effective for guiding state courts in Indian child custody proceedings or if they need to be updated.

"The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 is seminal legislation vital to protecting the best interests of Indian children and promoting the stability and security of the federally recognized tribes and Indian families," Assistant Secretary Washburn said. "However, the law and BIA's guidelines for state courts on implementing the statute need re-examination. In addition to conducting these Listening Sessions, I've directed my staff to take another look at the Guidelines for State Courts and invited input from tribal leaders, tribal court judges, counsel, ICWA staff, social workers and tribal members on any revisions to it and to BIA ICWA regulations they think are needed."

The first Listening Session was held at the National Congress of American Indians 2014 Executive Council Winter Meeting in Washington, D.C. The major themes were:

- State ICWA accountability including data collection and reporting to the tribes;
- Tribes and states need to build relationships and work together to increase ICWA compliance;
- Guidelines should recommend best practices including providing birth and adoption records to adoptees born prior to 1978;
- Apply ICWA to all juvenile justice cases;
- Improve clarity on ICWA abuse and neglect, qualified expert witnesses, adoption, termination of parental rights, and guardianships;
- ICWA training for state courts and strengthening families/parenting education for tribal families is needed; and
- Resources are needed to empower tribal child welfare systems to care for their children.

The April 15 session will take place at the Hyatt Regency Pier Sixty-Six at 2301 S.E. 17th Street, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. (EDT).

The April 24 teleconference will be held from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. (EDT). To participate, dial

1-800-619-2487 and use passcode 4969328. Dialing in a few minutes prior to the start of the call is advisable.

For more information, including the Dear Tribal Leader letter announcing the Listening Sessions and how to submit written comments, click on this link to the Indian Affairs ICWA webpage: http://www.indianaffairs.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OIS/HumanServices/IndianChildWelfareAct/index.htm.

The Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs oversees the BIA, which is headed by a director who is responsible for managing day-to-day operations through four offices – Indian Services, Justice Services, Trust Services and Field Operations. These offices directly administer or fund tribally based infrastructure, law enforcement, social services, tribal governance, natural and energy resources, and trust management programs for the nation's federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages through 12 regional offices and 85 agencies.
