

# Building Bridges in Navajo Nation to Improve Mental Health Services for Children and Families

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NICWA Conference 2026

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National Center for  
Adoption Competent  
Mental Health Services

Building Bridges to Improve Mental Health

## Introductions



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## Workshop objectives



Participants will:

- Learn what technical assistance from the National Center entails and how it is implemented in a Tribal Nation
- Hear from Navajo Nation about their experience working to strengthen cross-system collaboration to strengthen mental health services for children and families
- Understand how the National Center can assist in enhancing or developing the adoption/permanency-competency of mental health services that serve families who have experienced the child welfare system and increasing access to adoption-competency trained workforces

# What is Adoption Competence/Permanency Competence?



- Not a single practice but a comprehensive set of knowledge, values, and skills competencies
- Attachment-focused
- Trauma-informed
- Healing occurs best in the context of family
- Addresses core issues such as loss, rejection, guilt, grief
- Therapeutic parenting: reframe behaviors based on a deep understanding of the child's experiences

**All children, youth, and families that have encountered the child welfare system can benefit from Adoption Competent Mental Health Services.**

# More Than Just Adoption



- Comprehensive set of knowledge, values, and skills competencies
- Separation, grief, and loss can cause challenges that can influence identity, family relationships, and psychological adjustment
- Services are family-based and strengths-based
- Avoid treating as abnormal or bad behaviors developed in response to past maltreatment or adverse circumstances
- Therapeutic parenting: reframe behaviors based on a deep understanding of the child's experiences
- Attachment-focused, trauma-informed parenting strategies

# Building Bridges to Improve Mental Health

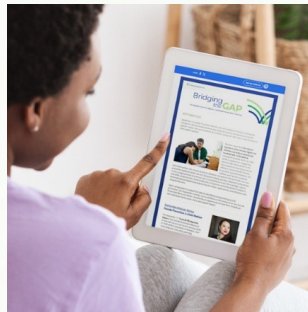
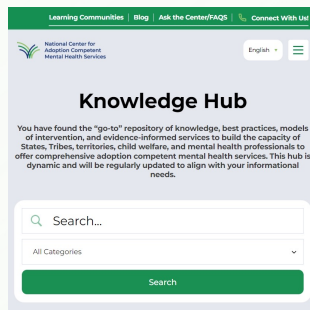
National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services



The **National Center** supports States, Tribes and Territories (STTs) as they build their capacity to improve mental health outcomes for youth and families who have experienced the child welfare systems. Universal Services offered:

You can expect from your engagement with the National Center a team of dedicated subject matter experts who work alongside you to realize three primary goals:

- 1. Improved cross-system collaboration**
- 2. Better equipped workforce to meet the unique and often complex needs of this population**
- 3. Enhanced accessibility to mental health services for ALL families.**



A vibrant online Knowledge Hub

Monthly webinars focusing on key issues and the latest thought leadership

Monthly newsletters with high utility resources

Peer learning opportunities that bring professionals across the nation together

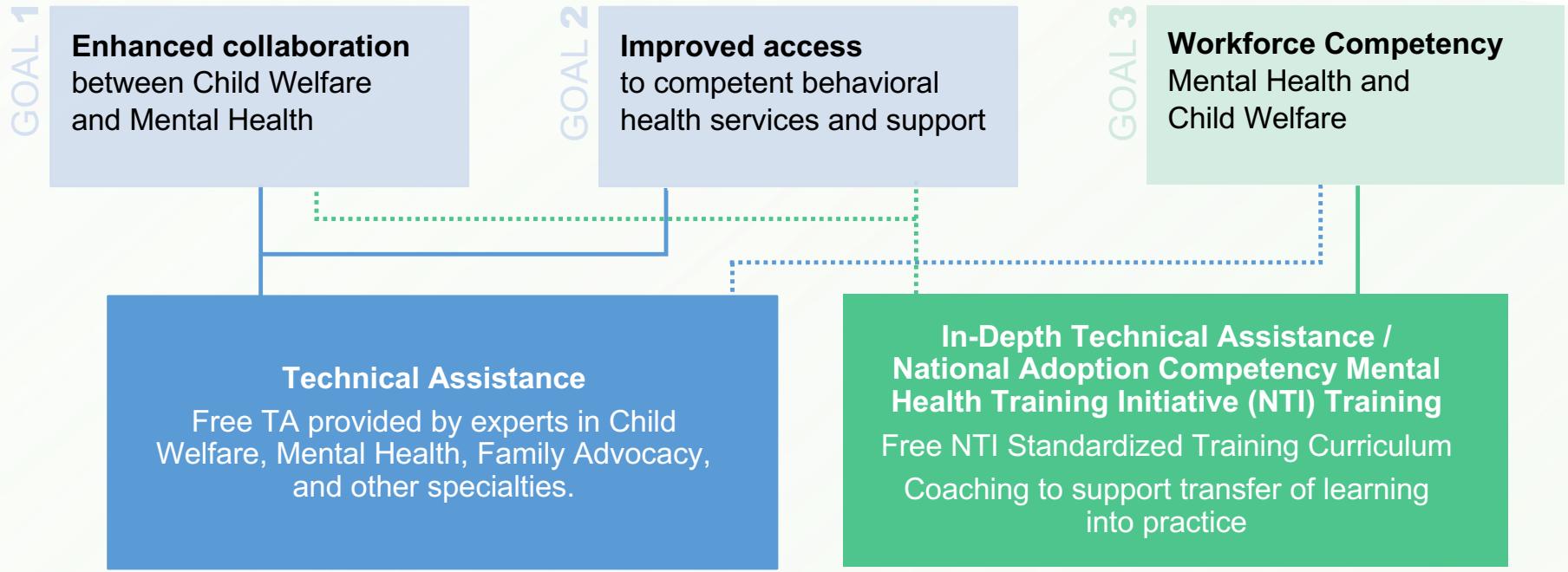
# Transforming Policy & Practice



Launched in 2024, the **National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services** supports states, tribes, and territories to build bridges between child welfare and mental health systems. We provide technical assistance and evidence-informed training to strengthen coordination and collaboration to drive systemic change that will improve children’s mental health outcomes.

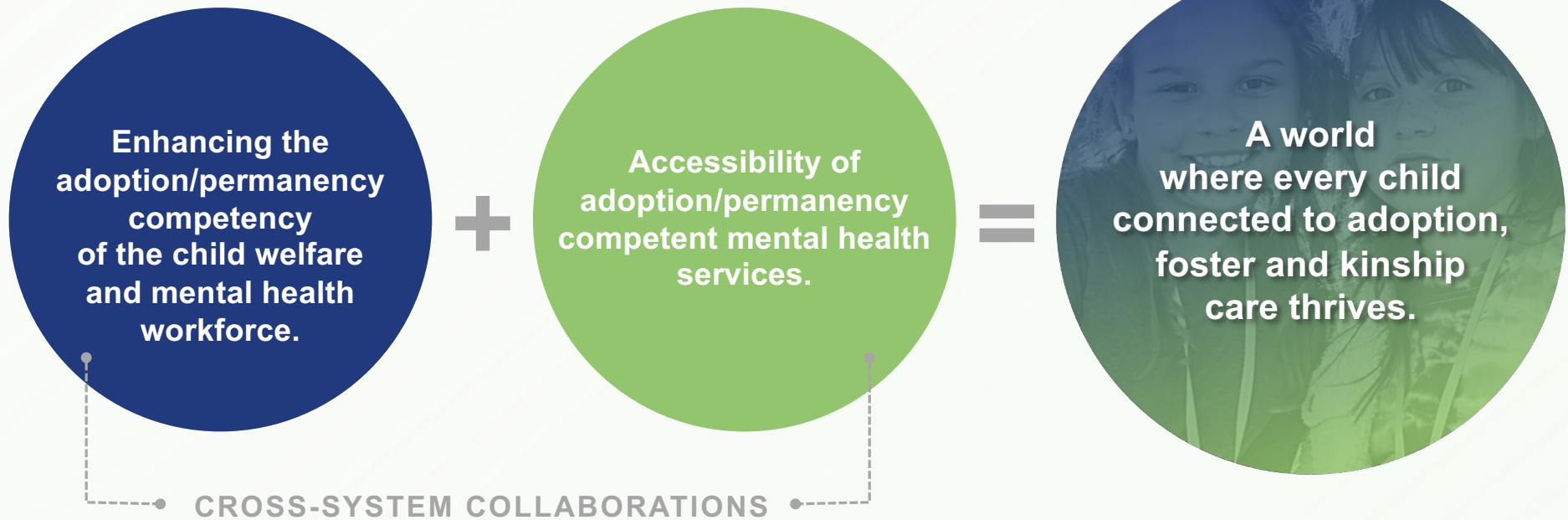
# Technical Assistance

Supporting Three Program Goals



————— solid line = direct relationship      ..... dotted line = indirect relationship

# Cross-System Collaborations



# Navajo Nation Partnership with the National Center

Focus: children, families, and culturally appropriate mental health services

## National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services

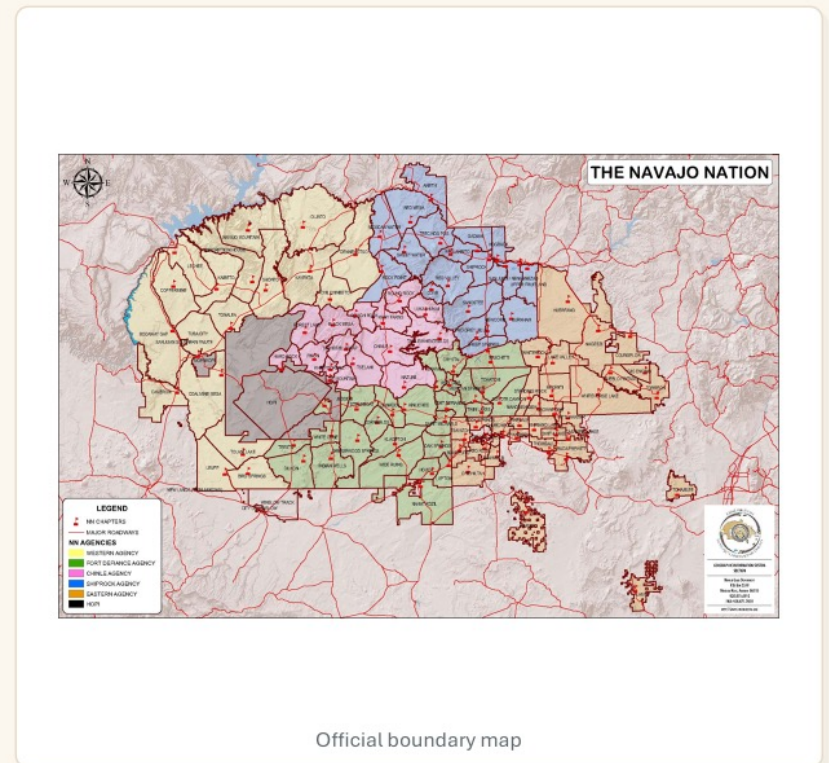
Overview of the Navajo Nation, demographic context, and partnership benefits



## Navajo Nation at a glance

A sovereign tribal nation with a large land base, local chapter governance, and service delivery needs that span rural communities across three states.

- Largest geographic land base of any American Indian tribal nation in the U.S.
- 27,425 square miles across Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah
- 110 chapters organized into 5 agencies
- 423,412 people in the U.S. reported Navajo ancestry in the 2020 Census



# Demographic and service context

**423,412**

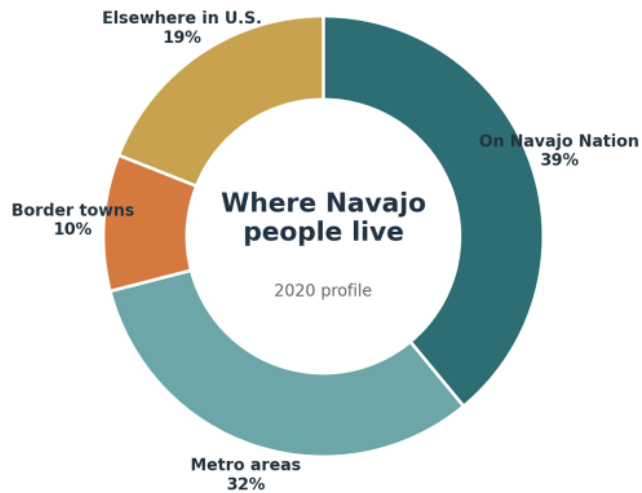
People in the U.S. who reported Navajo ancestry

**159,631**

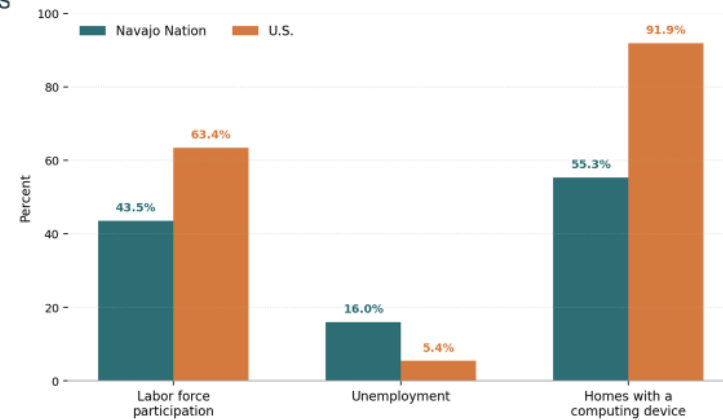
Navajo alone or in combination living on the Nation (2021 ACS)

**6.02 / sq mi**

Population density on the Navajo Nation



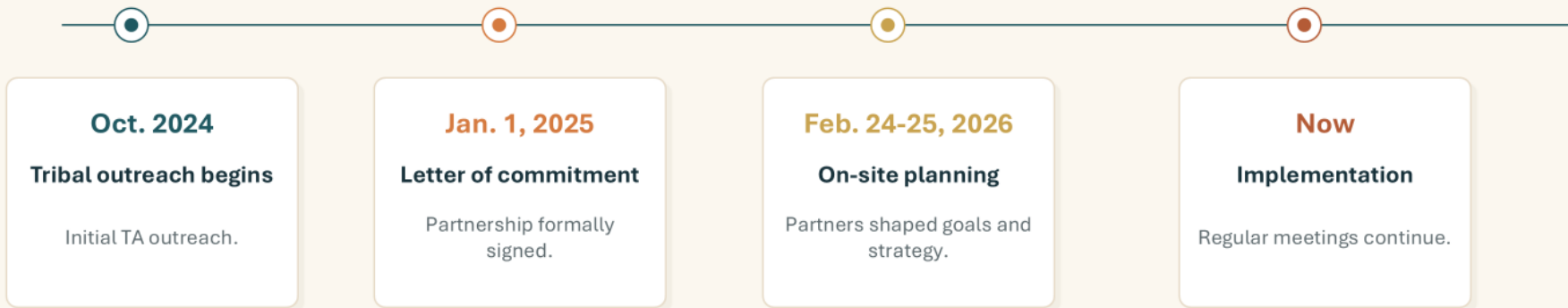
Selected indicators show the operational challenge of serving a highly rural population with persistent workforce and access gaps



Source indicators compare the Navajo Nation with the U.S. on labor force participation, unemployment, and household computing-device access.

## Partnership overview

The partnership centers on tailored technical assistance, cross-agency planning, and culturally appropriate mental health services for Navajo children and families.



### Who is involved

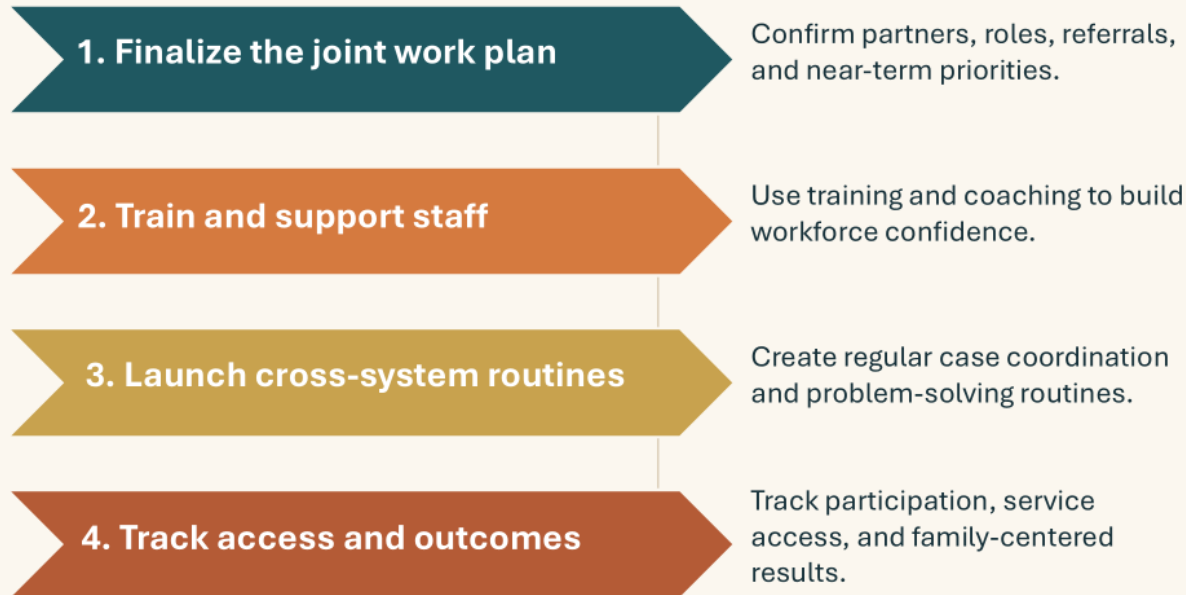
NDCFS, Behavioral and Mental Health Services, Indian Health Service, Navajo Nation leadership, and National Center staff.

### Core aim of the work plan

Improve access to culturally appropriate mental health services for Navajo children and families.

# Path to success

An effective first year would turn the partnership into repeatable practice: train people, connect systems, and measure whether families can reach the right services faster.



## Potential measures

- Staff trained across agencies
- Shared partner meetings and case routines
- Referral-to-service timelines reduced
- More families reach culturally appropriate support

These measures are illustrative and can be adapted to Navajo Nation priorities, partner capacity, and available data.

# How Navajo Nation and the National Center are Working Together



Three overarching goals for our partnership:

1. Create a cross-system collaboration network among child welfare, mental health, education (K-12), and juvenile justice (law enforcement, courts, etc.) structures to support children and families who may be referred, obtain, and complete mental health services
2. Equip Navajo agency staff with Permanency/Adoption Competent knowledge, skills, and practice by targeting audiences to be trained, enrolling relevant agency staff in NTI training courses, and developing sustainable plans for continued adoption/permanency competent professional development.
3. Improve access to adoption/permanency competent mental health care by improving service coordination across agencies.

## How the Navajo Nation can benefit

The National Center's model fits Navajo Nation priorities because it combines tailored technical assistance with workforce development and system collaboration.

### Build workforce capacity

- Staff training for child-welfare and mental health teams
- Evidence-informed tools and learning resources
- Support for culturally appropriate care design

### Coordinate services across systems

- TA that bridges child welfare and mental health systems
- Cross-agency coordination across Navajo departments
- A clearer work plan and partner structure

### Improve family outcomes

- Better access to competent services for children and families
- Stronger wraparound support aligned to Nation priorities
- Longer-term gains in well-being and family stability

The NDCFS press release explicitly ties this work to capacity building, training, and collaboration, while also aligning the effort with the Navajo Nation's 477 Plan and Diné Action Plan.

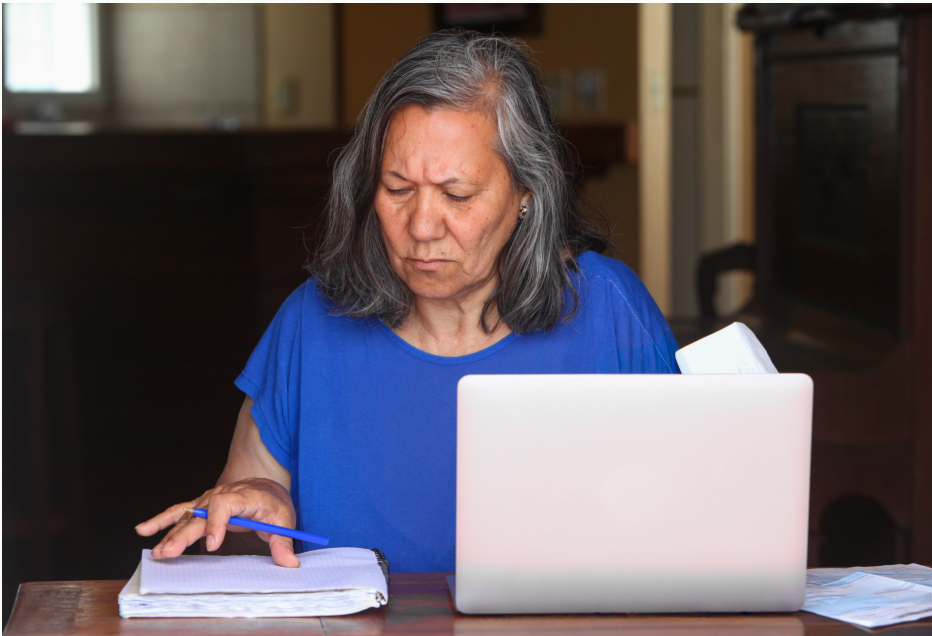
# How Navajo Nation and the National Center are Working Together



Our approaches and efforts so far:

- NTI cohort to get input for supplemental materials for existing training to wrap around more culturally relevant information and framing
- Having a broader liaison-steering team to have more people engaged in leading the work in Navajo Nation
- Looking for ways to connect this TA work to existing Navajo Nation plans, priorities, and practices (e.g., Dine Action Plan, 477 plan, existing collaborative meetings)
- Mapping offices, providers, etc., to get a visual picture of resources, gaps, and other factors related to children and families' access to mental health services
- In-person meetings and working sessions are highly valuable for moving our work forward and building relationships

## What We're Learning Together So Far—Insights, New Approaches, and Lessons Learned



- Connecting the work to broader priorities and goals
- Grounding this work in relationships
- Leveraging existing partnerships/collaborative structures and building on what works
- Navigating challenges in carving out time for training and TA work given the competing priorities for staff
- Highlighting the importance of leadership support for staff to devote time to this work

## What We're Learning Together So Far—Insights, New Approaches, and Lessons Learned



- Importance of addressing turf issues/role clarification across the cross-system partners
- Conversations held in the latest in-person meeting resulted in:
  - Readiness to transition from planning to implementation and
  - The TA work plan being aligned with local priorities, progress toward some strategies already underway, and current partners in the TA engagement are eager to participate in more concrete activities as part of TA implementation
- Need for dedicated staffing support to coordinate the TA work
- Questions that have come up about how the tribe's data is being used; data sovereignty

Ahehee' (Thank you)



Photo Credit: *Navajo- Hopi Observer*

Article: *NDCFS partnerships expand mental health services*  
[www.nhnews.com/news/ndcfs-partnerships-expand-mental-health-services/article\\_9dd2bda4-6db7-455a-84e9-165852fd54f6.html](http://www.nhnews.com/news/ndcfs-partnerships-expand-mental-health-services/article_9dd2bda4-6db7-455a-84e9-165852fd54f6.html)

## Ways the National Center can Support Tribal Nations



- Intensive TA — For example, our work with Navajo Nation
- Universal TA — Available to everyone

## Knowledge Hub resources



- [Children's Behavioral Health - Promising Practices in Tribal Communities](#)
  - [Culture Protects Us](#)
  - [Increasing Culturally Responsive Care and Mental Health Equity With Indigenous Community Mental Health Workers](#)
  - [Indigenous Mental Health](#)
- [Mental Health Essentials in Native Communities: A Guide for Grantees](#)
  - [Mental Health Resources for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities](#)
  - [Our Culture Makes Us Stronger \(video\)](#)
  - [Tribal Communities and Family Resilience Today](#)

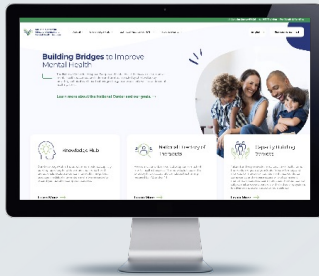


# Ways to Contact the National Center

1

Visit The Center website  
for more information

[bridges4mentalhealth.org](https://bridges4mentalhealth.org)



2

Email your TA questions to:

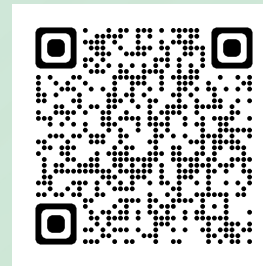
**Mary Wichansky,**  
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3

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## Contact Information



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# Questions, answers, and discussion



**The National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services** was funded in Oct. 2023 by the United States Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Children's Bureau. The National Center will provide targeted technical assistance and evidence-informed training to strengthen coordination and capacity among child welfare and mental health systems to improve the quality of mental health services provided to children, young adults, and their families while in care and in adoptive and guardianship homes.

The **Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.)** is the lead organization for the National Center. C.A.S.E. is nationally recognized for its pioneering work in adoption-competent mental health services and fostering the development of a highly skilled adoption-competent workforce through its National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI), also funded by ACF.

The **Children's Bureau** seeks to improve the safety, permanency and well-being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with states, tribes, and communities. It has the primary responsibility for administering federal programs that support state child welfare services. Additionally, it provides matching federal funds to states, tribes, and communities to help them operate every aspect of their child welfare systems, including the prevention of child abuse and neglect, the support of permanent placements through adoption and subsidized guardianship, and the information systems necessary to support these programs.

## Stay Connected

Become part of our community and follow the National Center on our social networks as we help impact systems change.



*The National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services was supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of financial assistance totaling \$4 million dollars with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the United States government.*

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