

# Indian Child Welfare Act Conference set for August 10 at Choctaw

August 5, 2016

The Sixth Annual Indian Child Welfare Act Conference will be held Aug. 10 at the Silver Star Convention Center at Choctaw.

Tribal leaders and more than 150 attorneys, judges, social workers and other professionals who deal with Native American children in a Youth Court setting are expected to attend the conference.

The 8:30 a.m. opening ceremony will include the National Anthem sung in the Choctaw language. Chief Phyllis J. Anderson of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services Director Dr. David Chandler will speak at 9 a.m. Retired Judge William A. Thorne Jr. of the Utah Court of Appeals will give the keynote address at 9:30 a.m. Judge Thorne will discuss ethics and the basics of the Indian Child Welfare Act, ICWA, at 11 a.m.

A Native American tribal perspective on raising children will be the topic of a 1 p.m. presentation by Harold “Doc” Comby, deputy director of law enforcement for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and attorney Drew Taylor, tribal prosecutor for child welfare. At 2 p.m., Tribal Director of Court Services Don Mittan and Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Kevin Payne will talk about child endangerment. A 3:15 p.m. panel discussion of how ICWA cases proceed in court will include Tanya Phillips of the Tribal Attorney General’s Office, Child Welfare Supervisor Albert Smith of the Choctaw Tribe and Iris Joiner, Region IV-W director of the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services.

ICWA is a 1978 law which sets federal requirements which apply to state child custody proceedings involving any Native American child who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe. ICWA gives the child’s tribe and family the opportunity to be involved in decisions affecting services for the child. ICWA sets out federal requirements regarding removal and placement of Native American children in foster or adoptive homes and allows the child’s tribe to intervene.

The annual conference began six years ago as an effort to educate state judges and social workers on the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act. About 3,500 of the approximately 10,000 members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians live in communities outside reservations, said Chief Justice Kevin Briscoe of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Supreme Court.

Judge Thorne, a Pomo/Coast Miwok Indian, is former president and current vice-president of the National Indian Justice Center, a nonprofit that trains tribal courts and others across the country. He retired in 2013 from the Utah Court of Appeals. He served for more than 34 years as a tribal court judge in Utah, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Wisconsin, South Dakota, Nevada, California, Nebraska and Michigan. He is a former member of the Board of Directors for National CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates. He was formerly a member of the PEW Commission on Foster Care, the Board of Directors for the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, the Board of Trustees for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the ABA Steering Committee on the Unmet Legal Needs of Children.

The conference is a collaborative effort among the Tribal Courts of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, the Attorney General’s Office of the Choctaw Tribe, the Children’s Bureau Capacity Building Center for Tribes, the Mississippi Administrative Office of Courts, the Mississippi Judicial College, the state Department of Child Protection Services, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and state Youth Court judges and referees.