



## **Tribal Child Support on the Wind River Indian Reservation** **By Lee Spoonhunter**

Nationally there are more than 50 federally approved Tribal Child Support Programs, each uniquely tailored to their tribal needs, traditions, and customs. I hope to provide a quick insight into the Northern Arapaho Child Support Program by explaining the history, jurisdiction, in-kind support (non-cash), and partnership with the State of Wyoming Child Support Program.

Originally the Northern Arapaho lived in Colorado in what is now the area of Boulder and Denver. In 1877, the Arapaho were forced to locate to the Wind River Reservation with the Eastern Shoshone.

The Wind River Indian Reservation is home to the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone Tribes. The Reservation covers 3,500 square miles and 2.3 million acres in central Wyoming, and is the third largest Indian reservation in the United States. The Wind River Reservation is home to approximately 9,550 Northern Arapaho and 4,130 Eastern Shoshone Tribal members.

In 2006, the Northern Arapaho Tribal Child Support Program was approved for start-up funding, and in October, 2008, the program received authorization to become a comprehensive child support program. The program officially opened its doors to the public on October 7, 2008. Currently, the program has 1,946 cases and each case worker averages 326 cases. Similar to other tribal programs, we do not have an automated system for case management; therefore, work on these cases is processed manually.

The Northern Arapaho Tribe and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe share the Wind River Reservation; however, there are two separate tribal governments. Both tribes share the same jurisdiction, the interior boundaries of the reservation, and jointly utilize the only tribal court on the reservation. This is a unique aspect for the tribes as usually when there are two or more tribes sharing a reservation there will be one form of government for the tribes. It is rare to find two child support programs sharing the same jurisdiction, and each program operating under a jurisdiction that is relevant to its location and tribal needs.

The Law and Order Code of the Shoshone & Arapaho Tribe was enacted in 1987. Prior to 2008, the law provided the establishment of paternity and child support orders. However, the law did not authorize the enforcement of child support orders. In 2008, the Arapaho Tribe ratified the Northern Arapaho Family Support Ordinance that

provided provisions for enforcement and updated child support law from 1987. Before child support enforcement was established, there was no enforcement implemented for tribal members residing on the reservation. Often tribal members who pay child support struggle with the concept of enforcing child support. The key to successful child support enforcement is to educate, inform, and provide public awareness to the community about the child support program.

The cultural value of the Northern Arapaho Tribe is that support for children is more than just a monetary value. Despite the limited financial resources and opportunities, the majority of the tribal families are successful in many ways. The Northern Arapaho tribe supports and strengthens families by emphasizing two parent involvement as well as non cash and emotional contributions.

In-kind support is offered when all parties agree to the terms, and is only used for current support. Before a court order for in-kind support is issued, the court shall ensure that it benefits the child. The court shall specify the terms, standards, requirements delivery, and dollar amount for in-kind support. However, the in-kind services are not to be used to meet any previously assigned arrears.

The Northern Arapaho Child Support Program has determined that in-kind resources include, but are not limited to, fish, game, arts and crafts, and firewood. For example, services may include auto repairs, home improvements or maintenance, and/or any other skill the non-custodial parent is able to apply for basic child support costs.

The Northern Arapaho Child Support Program has an effective and thriving partnership with the State of Wyoming. The focus of both programs has been to provide the best services possible while continuing to improve lives of children and families. The Tribal and State authorities have successfully collaborated on locate services, state passport denial, and on granting the tribe access to the Wyoming State computer system. Also, the two authorities have developed a joint policy interpretation direction regarding a jurisdictional matrix when deciding the appropriate program to better meet the needs of the family. A tribal liaison assists communication efforts between the tribe and the State of Wyoming programs.

The Northern Arapaho Child Support program continues to improve as it matures and grows, always striving to provide the best services possible for the Northern Arapaho tribal members. I think this is best summed up by the 2012 National Tribal Child Support Conference theme "Taking care of our children is a cultural responsibility as ancient as our tribes."

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