CECANF DRAFT REPORT:
SALT RIVER STORIES

Notes:
Here are two stories from Salt River. They can be separated or together. There is a "before" and an "after" story of a system that responded in very concrete ways to a fatality. The stories echo a number of the key themes that came up during the Commission's travels and work so far.

Story 1: "Before"

Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community: When Crisis Leads to Change

"Seeing a dead child changes your life," said Alene Breland, who in 2008 was the newly hired assistant chief prosecutor at the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community near Phoenix, Arizona. Breland had only been working in the community for nine months when, on a hot evening in August, she was called to the scene where two children, ages 3 and 4, had suffocated to death in the trunk of a car. It is a memory she will never forget.

The death of the two siblings, Alexis and Isaiah, was a wake-up call for this community, which consists of two tribes, the Pima and the Maricopa. It is a small community, with only 10,000 people, half of them children. Everyone knows everyone, a tribal strength. Many are related. "So how can a child die in a community such as this? How can that happen?" asked Sheri Freemont, chief prosecutor at the time and subsequently director of the community's Family Advocacy Center, put in place to support families like Alexis and Isaiah's before problems lead to tragedy.

In fact, this family's path to crisis happens every day in communities across the country. When children as young and vulnerable as Alexis and Isaiah die, their families often have had contact with a range of professionals, each of whom could potentially get help to the family in time to save a life. That they don't is one reason Congress created the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF) and charged it with learning how and when these tragedies occur and making recommendations to stop them.

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In this case, the deaths of Alexis and Isaiah brought the Pima-Maricopa community together in grief that turned to action. “I hope people will hear us and make changes before they have dead children of their own,” said Breland.

Missed Opportunities

There were many eyes on this Salt River family before the two siblings died. After the incident, the need to share information rose quickly to the top of a list of priorities. But at the time of the deaths, as Freemont said, “the database was in our heads. It didn’t translate down to the front lines.”

For example, some tribal child welfare staff had known that years earlier, when the mother was living outside the community, she had passed out and rolled onto her baby, killing the child. Problems continued after the family’s move to Salt River. Child protective services (CPS) opened a neglect case. The children were removed, but returned after the mother got treatment for alcohol abuse. She continued to drink. Police knew that, but the child welfare staff did not.

Two weeks before the children died, a probation officer went to the home looking for a relative who had registered at that address. There was no response to the probation officer’s knocks on the door, but she saw a child peeking through the window. Thinking the children were home alone, she called the police. When she and the police officer went in, they found broken glass, open alcohol containers in the kitchen, and no appropriate food for children. The mother was drunk and unresponsive. They roused her. She begged them not to take her children.

The two officers that night did not know the mother’s history. They did not know that she still had an open CPS case or that the children had only recently returned from placement. The officers made a referral, but they did not call CPS that night and did not remove the children. They changed the baby’s soiled diaper, took a photo of all four children on the couch, and left.

CPS visited the home over the next two weeks, but no one saw the children. The referral they had received was vague and did not raise any new alarms. The police report included detailed information that would have increased the urgency, had anyone from CPS seen it. But it was a paper form, not attached to the referral, and it had been placed in a basket for eventual delivery to CPS. No one at CPS saw that report before Alexis and Isaiah died.

On the day the children died, the temperature outside was 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Their mother was drinking and was reported to have left the home at least three times that day to purchase alcohol. No one drove the car the kids played in; the family could not afford the license and it just sat outside the home. But the children knew how to pop the trunk and often played hide and seek in the car.

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A Catalyst for Change: The Family Advocacy Center

The immediate response to the deaths was anger and grief, but it was followed quickly by a desire to change the system to prevent this from happening ever again. As a gaming community, the tribe had some resources, but they also knew that it takes more than money to transform a system.

Tribal leaders committed to a long-term process of planning and education, helping the community move toward a new way of investigating abuse and neglect that included earlier and more comprehensive support for children and families and a 360-degree view of parents' history.

The issues were, and remain, complex. "We need the policy makers to understand what best practices about child neglect look like," said Freemont. "It's not as easy as filling up a prison when people misbehave." She added that they struggled to see mom in this case with compassion, noting that "she was not just an alcoholic." She had traumatic incidents in her life that led her to this point, and she was very upset about the death of her two children.

The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Family Advocacy Center, a child-friendly, trauma-informed center for investigations, is a tribute to Alexis and Isaiah. It brings together workers from CPS, police, education, prosecution, behavioral health, probation, the fire department and other agencies as needed. Advanced technology means referrals are online for immediate access, instead of in an individual's head or on paper sitting in a basket.

Multidisciplinary team meetings are held for almost all cases from the beginning. "This community has chosen to front-load the resources on low-level referrals and grasp everything we can about the strengths and the risks in that family environment," said Freemont. CPS might not be too concerned about what seems like mild neglect, but if they learn, for example, that the police have been at the home multiple times for domestic violence, it becomes a different story.

Teaming meetings are face time for workers to share information and make informed decisions on how best to keep children safe. Staff offer their individual expertise, but are also encouraged to share their feelings and personal responses as a parent or a neighbor.

Staff members learn from every family. Strengths and cultural traditions are explored along with risks. Trained specialists do forensic interviews with children and youth so that painful conversations do not have to be repeated. Staff provide trauma-informed, culturally relevant services to children and families. The goals are long-term well-being for the child, the family, and the community.

This approach has led to more removals. The community is now working to expand services to support families and keep more children at home. But there

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have been no more child maltreatment deaths in the Salt River community since 2008. “I believe we have safer kids because we share information and it is a mandated commitment from tribal leadership for all tribal employees,” said Freemont.

“I know in my heart that these two children would be alive if the protocols we have now had been in place then,” said Breland, who is now acting director of the Family Advocacy Center. “These kids had their childhood stolen from them. We can make it better. We are their only voice. We are all they have.”

END OF FIRST PIMA-MARICOPA STORY

Story 2: “After” (Note: These 2 stories do not have to go together.)

What It Looks Like When It Works: Progress in Action in Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community

With the launch of the Family Advocacy Center, families are served differently in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. Families like Alexis and Isaiah’s with low-level allegations of neglect now have a team of professionals who know their story and are ready to step in and help.

A recent case illustrates the changes. A respected elder in the community shared his home with a number of relatives and extended family. When the elder’s grandson and his girlfriend, parents of four children, came to the attention of CPS, they were resistant to any government intervention. The CPS referrals were vague, alluding to unlivable conditions in the home, but CPS didn’t have enough specific information to get a warrant. Workers would “knock and check” and be sent on their way. When someone from adult services contacted the elder, who would also be considered vulnerable in a dangerous home, he, too, rejected any help.

The referrals, including some from family members, continued, but always without concrete charges. The Family Advocacy Center held several multidisciplinary team meetings to brainstorm how to get more information and get into the house to help this family.

One day, the elder’s grandson himself called the police when he suspected an adult relative in the home had sexually abused his young daughter. The adult relative was removed from the home and the girl, age 3, was interviewed and examined. But the family still would not let anyone into the house. Even when police needed sheets from the toddler’s bed for DNA evidence, the family passed the bedding through the window. The police had no warrant to go into the home, and they respected the elder when he said no to their request to enter.

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The tide turned when a snake got into the house and someone called the Fire Department to come take it out. Firefighters had recently been trained as CPS partners, and they knew how to identify safety concerns. When they went in to get the snake, they documented rotten food, illegal drugs, and drug paraphernalia. It was clear that heavy drug abuse was present and that the children and probably the elder were exposed to it. The firefighters knew they had to call CPS.

CPS moved quickly, getting a warrant to go into the home. They removed the grandson's four children (all of whom later tested positive for methamphetamine exposure). The grandson and his girlfriend agreed to go into treatment and get off of meth. The house was cleaned.

The children have since returned home, and the family is making progress. Key to this progress is that the multidisciplinary team meetings about the family meant that the agencies and systems needed to support the family were on the same page and ready to go into action. Keeping this family on the community's radar screen during all those vague referrals paid off.

There is no science that allows one to predict fatalities in a given family, no way to know if the problems in the elder's home would have swept family members into more serious crisis without intervention and services. But it is clear that the Family Advocacy Center's attention on this family, along with the partnership of CPS and the fire and police departments, made a big difference in the lives of these parents and their children.

END OF SECOND PIMA-MARICOPA STORY

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