

**Department of the Interior
Bureau of Indian Affairs
Guidelines for State Courts; Indian
Child Custody Proceedings**

(Published at 44 Fed.Reg. 67,584 (1979))

This notice is published in exercise of authority delegated by the Secretary of the Interior to the Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs by 209 DM 8.

There was published in the Federal Register, Vol. 44, No. 79/Monday, April 23, 1979 a notice entitled Recommended Guidelines for State Courts—Indian Child Custody Proceedings. This notice pertained directly to implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, Pub.L. 95—608, 92 Stat. 3069, 25 U.S.C. 1901 *et seq.* A subsequent Federal Register notice which invited public comment concerning the above was published on June 5, 1979. As a result of comments received, the recommended guidelines were revised and are provided below in final form.

Introduction

Although the rulemaking procedures of the Administrative Procedures Act have been followed in developing these guidelines, they are not published as regulations because they are not intended to have binding legislative effect. Many of these guidelines represent the interpretation of the Interior Department of certain provisions of the Act. Other guidelines provide procedures which, if followed, will help assure that rights guaranteed by the Act are protected when state courts decide Indian child custody matters. To the extent that the Department's interpretations of the Act are correct, contrary interpretations by the courts would be violations of the Act. If procedures different from those recommended in these guidelines are adopted by a state, their adequacy to protect rights guaranteed by the Act will have to be judged on their merits.

Where Congress expressly delegates to the Secretary the primary responsibility for interpreting a statutory term, regulations interpreting that term have legislative effect. Courts are not free to set aside those regulations simply because they would have interpreted that statute in a different manner. Where, however, primary responsibility for interpreting a statutory term rests with the courts, administrative interpretations of statutory terms are given important but not controlling significance.

Batterton v. Francis. 432 U.S. 416, 424—425 (1977).

In other words, when the Department writes rules needed to carry out responsibilities Congress has explicitly [sic] imposed on the Department, those rules

are binding. A violation of those rules is a violation of the law. When, however, the Department writes rules or guidelines advising some other agency how it should carry out responsibilities explicitly assigned to it by Congress, those rules or guidelines are not, by themselves, binding. Courts will take what this Department has to say into account in such instances, but they are free to act contrary to what the Department has said if they are convinced that the Department's guidelines are not required by the statute itself.

Portions of the Indian Child Welfare Act do expressly delegate to the Secretary of the Interior responsibility for interpreting statutory language. For example, under 25 U.S.C. 1918, the Secretary is directed to determine whether a plan for reassumption of jurisdiction is "feasible" as that term is used in the statute. This and other areas where primary responsibility for implementing portions of the Act rest with this Department, are covered in regulations promulgated on July 31, 1979, at 44 FR 45092.

Primary responsibility for interpreting other language used in the Act, however, rests with the courts that decide Indian child custody cases. For example, the legislative history of the Act states explicitly that the use of the term "good cause" was designed to provide state courts with flexibility in determining the disposition of a placement proceeding involving an Indian child. S.Rep. No. 95—597, 95th Cong., 1st Sess. 17 (1977). The Department's interpretation of statutory language of this type is published in these guidelines.

Some commenters asserted that Congressional delegation to this Department of authority to promulgate regulations with binding legislative effect with respect to all provisions of the Act is found at 25 U.S.C. 1952, which states, "Within one hundred and eighty days after November 8, 1978, the Secretary shall promulgate such rules and regulations as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this chapter." Promulgation of regulations with legislative effect with respect to most of the responsibilities of state or tribal courts under the Act, however, is not necessary to carry out the Act. State and tribal courts are fully capable of carrying out the responsibilities imposed on them by Congress without being under the direct supervision of this Department.

Nothing in the legislative history indicates that Congress intended this Department to exercise

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supervisory control over state or tribal courts or to legislate for them with respect to Indian child custody matters. For Congress to assign to an administrative

Nothing in the language or legislative history of 25 U.S.C 1952 compels the conclusion that Congress intended to vest this Department with such extraordinary power. Both the language and the legislative history indicate that the purpose of that section was simply to assure that the Department moved promptly to promulgate regulations to carry out the responsibilities Congress had assigned it under the Act. Assignment of supervisory authority over the courts to an administrative agency is a measure so at odds with concepts of both federalism and separation of powers that it should not be imputed to Congress in the absence of an express declaration of Congressional intent to that effect.

Some commenters also recommended that the guidelines be published as regulations and that the decision of whether the law permits such regulations to be binding be left to the court. That approach has not been adopted because the Department has an obligation not to assert authority that it concludes it does not have.

Each section of the revised guidelines is accompanied by commentary explaining why the Department believes states should adopt that section and to provide some guidance where the guidelines themselves may need to be interpreted in the light of specific circumstances.

The original guidelines used the word "should" instead of "shall" in most provisions. The term "should" was used to communicate the fact that the guidelines were the Department's interpretations of the Act and were not intended to have binding legislative effect. Many commenters, however, interpreted the use of "should" as an attempt by this Department to make statutory requirements themselves optional. That was not the intent. If a state adopts those guidelines, they should be stated in mandatory terms. For that reason the word "shall" has replaced "should" in the revised guidelines. The status of these guidelines as interpretative rather than legislative in nature is adequately set out in the introduction.

In some instances a state may wish to establish rules that provide even greater protection for rights guaranteed by the Act than those suggested by these guidelines. These guidelines are not intended to discourage such action. Care should be taken, however, that the provision of additional protections to some parties to a child custody proceeding does not deprive other parties of rights guaranteed to them by the Act.

In some instances the guidelines do little more than restate the statutory language. This is done in order to make the guidelines more complete so that they can be followed without the need to refer to the

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agency such supervisory control over courts would be an extraordinary step.

statute in every instance. Omission of any statutory language, of course, does not in any way affect the applicability of the statute.

A number of commenters recommended that special definitions of residence and domicile be included in the guidelines. Such definitions were not included because these terms are well defined under existing state law. There is no indication that these state law definitions tend to undermine in any way the purposes of the Act. Recommending special definitions for the purpose of this Act alone would simply provide unnecessary complications in the law.

A number of commenters recommended that the guidelines include recommendations for tribal-state agreements under 25 U.S.C. 1919. A number of other commenters, however, criticized the one provision in the original guidelines addressing that subject as tending to impose on such agreements restrictions that Congress did not intend should be imposed. Because of the wide variation in the situations and attitudes of states and tribes, it is difficult to deal with that issue in the context of guidelines. The Department is currently developing materials to aid states and tribes with such agreements. The Department hopes to have those materials available later this year. For these reasons, the provision in the original guidelines concerning tribal-state agreements has been deleted from the guidelines.

The Department has also received many requests for assistance from tribal courts in carrying out the new responsibilities resulting from the passage of this Act. The Department intends to provide additional guidance and assistance in that area also in the future. Providing guidance to state courts was given a higher priority because the Act imposes many more procedures on state courts than it does on tribal courts.

Many commenters have urged the Department to discuss the effect of the Act on the financial responsibilities of states and tribes to provide services to Indian children. Many such services are funded in large part by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The policies and regulations of that Department will have a significant impact on the issue of financial responsibility. Officials of Interior and HEW will be discussing this issue with each other. It is anticipated that more detailed guidance on questions of financial responsibility will be provided as a result of those consultations.

One commenter recommended that the Department establish a monitoring procedure to exercise its right under 25 U.S.C. 1915(e) to review state court placement records. HEW currently reviews state placement records on a systematic basis as part of its responsibilities with respect to statutes it

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administers. Interior Department officials are discussing with HEW officials the establishment of a procedure for collecting data to review compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Inquiries concerning these recommended guidelines may be directed to the nearest of the following regional and field offices of the Solicitor for the Interior Department:

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, 510 L Street, Suite 408, Anchorage, Alaska

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, 686 Federal Building, Fort Snelling, Twin Cities, Minnesota 55111 (612) 725-3540.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, P.O. Box 25007, Denver Federal Center, Denver, Colorado 80225, (303) 234-3175.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, P.O. Box 549, Aberdeen, South Dakota 57401, (605) 225-7254.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, P.O. Box 1538, Billings, Montana 59103. (406) 245-6711.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Room E-2753, 2800 Cottage Way, Sacramento, California 95825, (916) 484-4331.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Valley Bank Center, Suite 280, 201 North Central Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona 85072, (602) 261-4758.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, 3610 Central Avenue, Suite 104, Riverside, California 92506, (714) 737-1560.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Window Rock, Arizona 86515, (602) 871-5151.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Room 3068, Page Belcher Federal Building, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74103, (918) 581-7501.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Room 7102, Federal Building & Courthouse, 500 Gold Avenue S.W., Albuquerque, New Mexico 87101, (505) 766-2547.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, P.O. Box 397, W.C.D. Office Building, Route 1, Anadarko, Oklahoma 72005, (405) 247-6673.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, P.O. Box 1508, Room 319, Federal Building, 5th and Broadway, Muskogee, Oklahoma 74401. (918) 683-3111.

Office of the Field Solicitor, Department of the Interior, c/o Osage Agency, Grandview Avenue, Pawhuska, Oklahoma 74058, (918) 287-2431.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Suite 6201, Federal Building, 125 South State Street Salt Lake City, Utah 84138, (801) 524-5677.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Lloyd 500 Building, Suite 607, 500 N.E. Multnomah Street, Portland, Oregon 97232, (503) 231-2125.

Guidelines for State Courts

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99501, (907) 265-5301.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, Richard B. Russell Federal Building, 75 Spring St. SW., Suite 1328, Atlanta, Georgia 30303,

(404) 221-4447.

Office of the Regional Solicitor, Department of the Interior, c/o U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Suite 306, 1

Gateway Center, Newton Corner, Massachusetts 02158, (617) 829-9258.

A. Policy

B. Pre-trial requirements

1. Determination that child is an Indian
2. Determination of Indian child's tribe
3. Determination that placement is covered by the Act
4. Determination of jurisdiction
5. Notice requirements
6. Time limits and extensions
7. Emergency removal of an Indian child
8. Improper removal from Custody

C. Requests for transfer to tribal court

1. Petitions under 25 U.S.C. § 1911(b) for transfer of proceeding
2. Criteria and procedures § 1911(b) transfer petitions
3. Determination of good cause to the contrary
4. Tribal court declination of transfer

D. Adjudication of involuntary placements, adoptions or terminations of parental rights

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A. Policy

(1) Congress through the Indian Child Welfare Act

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such judgments are best made by tribal courts. Parties who believe that state court adjudication would be better for such reasons can present their reasons to the tribal court and urge it to decline jurisdiction. The Department is aware of one case under the Act where this approach is being used and believes it is more in keeping with the confidence Congress has expressed in tribal courts.

Since Congress has established a policy of preferring tribal control over custody decisions affecting tribal members, the burden of proving that an exception to that policy ought to be made in a particular case rests on the party urging that an exception be made. This rule is reflected in subsection (d).

C.4. Tribal Court Declination of Transfer.

(a) A tribal court to which transfer is requested may decline to accept such transfer.

(b) Upon receipt of a transfer petition the state court shall notify the tribal court in writing of the proposed transfer. The notice shall state how long the tribal court has to make its decision. The tribal court shall have at least twenty days from the receipt of notice of a proposed transfer to decide whether to decline the transfer. The tribal court may inform the state court of its decision to decline either orally or in writing.

(c) Parties shall file with the tribal court any arguments they wish to make either for or against tribal declination of transfer. Such arguments shall be made orally in open court or in written pleadings that are served on all other parties.

(d) If the case is transferred the state court shall provide the tribal court with all available information on the case.

C.4. Commentary

The previous version of this section provided that the state court should presume the tribal court has declined to accept jurisdiction unless it hears otherwise. The comments on this issue were divided. This section has been revised to require the tribal court to decline the transfer affirmatively if it does not wish to take the case. This approach is in keeping with the apparent intent of Congress. The language in the Act providing that transfers are "subject to declination by the tribal court" indicates that affirmative action by the tribal court is required to decline a transfer.

The recommended time limit for a decision has been extended from ten to twenty days. The additional time is needed for the court to become apprised of factors it may want to consider in determining whether or not to decline the transfer.

A new paragraph has been added recommending that the parties assist the tribal court in making its decision on declination by giving the tribal court their views on the matter.

Transfers ought to be arranged as simply as possible consistent with due process. Transfer procedures are a good subject for tribal-state agreements under 25 U.S.C. § 1919.

D. Adjudication of Involuntary Placements, Adoptions, or Terminations of Parental Right

D.1. Access to Reports

Each party to a foster care placement or termination of parental rights proceeding under State law involving an Indian child has the right to examine all reports or other documents filed with the court upon which any decision with respect to such action may be based. No decision of the court shall be based on any report or other document not filed with the court.

D.1. Commentary

The first sentence merely restates the statutory language verbatim. The second sentence makes explicit the implicit assumption of Congress—that the court will limit its considerations to those documents and reports that have been filed with the court.

D.2. Efforts to Alleviate Need To Remove Child From Parents or Indian Custodians

Any party petitioning a state court for foster care placement or termination of parental rights to an Indian child must demonstrate to the court that prior to the commencement of the proceeding active efforts have been made to alleviate the need to remove the Indian child from his or her parents or Indian custodians. These efforts shall take into account the prevailing social and cultural conditions and way of life of the Indian child's tribe. They shall also involve and use the available resources of the extended family, the tribe, Indian social service agencies and individual Indian care givers.

D.2. Commentary

This section elaborates on the meaning of "breakup of the Indian family" as used in the Act. "Family breakup" is sometimes used as a synonym for divorce. In the context of this statute, however, it is clear that Congress meant a situation in which the family is unable or unwilling to raise the child in a

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manner that is not likely to endanger the child's emotional or physical health.

This section also recommends that the petitioner take into account the culture of the Indian child's tribe members who may have developed special skills that can be used to help the child's family succeed.

One commenter recommended that detailed procedures and criteria be established in order to determine whether family support efforts had been adequate. Establishing such procedures and requirements would involve the court in second-guessing the professional judgment of social service agencies. The Act does not contemplate [sic] such a role for the courts and they generally lack the expertise to make such judgments.

D.3. Standards of Evidence

(a) The court may not issue an order effecting a foster care placement of an Indian child unless clear and convincing evidence is presented, including the testimony of one of [sic] more qualified expert witnesses, demonstrating that the child's continued custody with the child's parents or Indian custodian is likely to result in serious emotional or physical damage to the child.

(b) The court may not order a termination of parental rights unless the court's order is supported by evidence beyond a reasonable doubt, including the testimony of one or more qualified expert witnesses, that continued custody of the child by the parent or Indian custodian is likely to result in serious emotional or physical damage to the child.

(c) Evidence that only shows the existence of community or family poverty, crowded or inadequate housing, alcohol abuse, or non-conforming social behavior does not constitute clear and convincing evidence that continued custody is likely to result in serious emotional or physical damage to the child. To be clear and convincing, the evidence must show the existence of particular conditions in the home that are likely to result in serious emotional or physical damage to the particular child who is the subject of the proceeding. The evidence must show the causal relationship between the conditions that exist and the damage that is likely to result

D.3. Commentary

The first two paragraphs are essentially restatement of the statutory language. By imposing these standards, Congress has changed the rules of law of many states with respect to the placement of Indian children. A child may not be removed simply because there is someone else willing to raise the child who is likely to do a better job or that it would be "in the best interests of the child" for him or her to live with someone else. Neither can a placement or

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and use the resources of the child's extended family and tribe in attempting to help the family function successfully as a home for the child. The term "individual Indian care givers" refers to medicine men and other individual tribal termination of parental rights be ordered simply based on a determination that the parents or custodians are "unfit parents." It must be shown that it is shown that it is [sic] dangerous for the child to remain with his or her present custodians. Evidence of that must be "clear and convincing" for placements and "beyond a reasonable doubt" for terminations.

The legislative history of the Act makes it pervasively clear that Congress attributes many unwarranted removals of Indian children to cultural bias on the part of the courts and social workers making the decisions. In many cases children were removed merely because the family did not conform to the decision-maker's stereotype of what a proper family should be—without any testing of the implicit assumption that only a family that conformed to that stereotype could successfully raise children. Subsection (c) makes it clear that mere nonconformance with such stereotypes or the existence of other behavior or conditions that are considered bad does not justify a placement or termination under the standards imposed by Congress. The focus must be on whether the particular conditions are likely to cause serious damage.

D.4. Qualified Expert Witnesses

(a) Removal of an Indian child from his or her family must be based on competent testimony from one or more experts qualified to speak specifically to the issue of whether continued custody by the parents or Indian custodians is likely to result in serious physical or emotional damage to the child.

(b) Persons with the following characteristics are most likely to meet the requirements for a qualified expert witness for purposes of Indian child custody proceedings:

(i) A member of the Indian child's tribe who is recognized by the tribal community as knowledgeable in tribal customs as they pertain to family organization and childrearing practices.

(ii) A lay expert witness having substantial experience in the delivery of child and family services to Indians, and extensive knowledge of prevailing social and cultural standards and childrearing practices within the Indian child's tribe.

(iii) A professional person having substantial education and experience in the area of his or her specialty.

(c) The court or any party may request the

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assistance of the Indian child's tribe or the Bureau of Indian Affairs agency serving the Indian child's tribe in locating persons qualified to serve as expert witnesses.

D.4. Commentary

The first subsection is intended to point out that the issue on which qualified expert testimony is

The party presenting an expert witness must demonstrate that the witness is qualified by reason of educational background and prior experience to make judgments on those questions that are substantially more reliable than judgments that would be made by nonexperts.

The second subsection makes clear that knowledge of tribal culture and childrearing practices will frequently be very valuable to the court. Determining the likelihood of future harm frequently involves predicting future behavior—which is influenced to a large degree by culture. Specific behavior patterns will often need to be placed in the context of the total culture to determine whether they are likely to cause serious emotional harm.

Indian tribes and Bureau of Indian Affairs personnel frequently know persons who are knowledgeable concerning the customs and cultures of the tribes they serve. Their assistance is available in helping to locate such witnesses.

E Voluntary Proceedings

E.1. Execution of Consent

To be valid, consent to a voluntary termination of parental rights or adoption must be executed in writing and recorded before a judge or magistrate of a court of competent jurisdiction. A certificate of the court must accompany any consent and must certify that the terms and consequences of the consent were explained in detail and in the language of the parent or Indian custodian, if English is not the primary language, and were fully understood by the parent or Indian custodian. Execution of consent need not be in open court where confidentiality is requested or indicated.

E.1. Commentary

This section provides that consent may be executed before either a judge or magistrate. The addition of magistrates was made in response to a suggestion from Alaska where magistrates are found in most small communities but "judges" are more widely scattered. The term "judge" as used in the statute is not a term of art and can certainly be construed to include judicial officers who are called magistrates in some states. The statement that consent need not be in open court where confidentiality is desired or indicated was taken

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required is the question of whether or not serious damage to the child is likely to occur if the child is not removed. Basically two questions are involved. First, is it likely that the conduct of the parents will result in serious physical or emotional harm to the child? Second, if such conduct will likely cause such harm, can the parents be persuaded to modify their conduct?

directly from the House Report on the Act. A recommendation that the guideline list the consequences of consent that must be described to the parent or custodian has not been adopted because the consequences can vary widely depending on the nature of the proceeding, state law and the particular facts of individual cases.

E.2. Content of Consent Document

(a) The consent document shall contain the name and birthdate of the Indian child, the name of the Indian child's tribe, any identifying number or other indication of the child's membership in the tribe, if any, and the name and address of the consenting parent or Indian custodian.

(b) A consent to foster care placement shall contain, in addition to the information specified in (a), the name and address of the person or entity by or through whom the placement was arranged, if any, or the name and address of the prospective foster parents, if known at the time.

(c) A consent to termination of parental rights or adoption shall contain, in addition to the information specified in (a), the name and address of the person or entity by or through whom any preadoptive or adoptive placement has been or is to be arranged.

E.2. Commentary

This section specifies the basic information about the placement or termination to which the parent or Indian custodian is consenting to assure that consent is knowing and also to document what took place.

E.3. Withdrawal of Consent to Placement

Where a parent or Indian custodian has consented to a foster care placement under state law, such consent may be withdrawn at any time by filing, in the court where consent was executed and filed, an instrument executed by the parent or Indian custodian. When a parent or Indian custodian withdraws consent to foster care placement, the child shall as soon as is practicable be returned to that parent or Indian custodian.

E.3. Commentary

This section specifies that withdrawal of

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consent shall be filed in the same court where the consent document itself was executed.

E E.4. Withdrawal of Consent to Adoption

A consent to termination of parental rights or adoption may be withdrawn by the parent at any time prior to entry of a final decree of voluntary termination or adoption by filing in the court where the consent is filed an instrument executed under oath by the parent stipulating his or her intention to withdraw such consent. The clerk of the court where the withdrawal of consent is filed shall promptly notify the party by or through whom any preadoptive or adoptive placement has been arranged of such filing

(a) In any adoptive placement of an Indian child under state law preference must be given (in the order listed below) absent good cause to the contrary, to placement of the child with:

- (i) A member of the child's extended family;
- (ii) Other members of the Indian child's tribe; or
- (iii) Other Indian families, including families of

single parents.

(b) The Indian child's tribe may establish a different order of preference by resolution. That order of preference must be followed so long as placement is the least restrictive setting appropriate to the child's needs.

(c) Unless a consenting parent evidences a desire for anonymity, the court or agency shall notify the child's extended family and the Indian child's tribe that their members will be given preference in the adoption decision.

F.I. Commentary

This section makes clear that preference shall be given in the order listed in the Act. The Act clearly recognizes the role of the child's extended family in helping to raise children. The extended family should be looked to first when it becomes necessary to remove the child from the custody of his or her parents. Because of differences in cultures among tribes, placement within the same tribe is preferable.

This section also provides that single parent families shall be considered for placements. The legislative history of the Act makes it clear that Congress intended custody decisions to be made based on a consideration of the present or potential custodian's ability to provide the necessary care,

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and that party shall insure the return of the child to the parent as soon as practicable.

E.4. Commentary

This provision recommends that the clerk of the court be responsible for notifying the family with whom the child has been placed that consent has been withdrawn. The court's involvement frequently may be necessary since the biological parents are often not told who the adoptive parents are.

F. Dispositions

F.1. Adoptive Placements

supervision and support for the child rather than on preconceived notions of proper family composition.

The third subsection recommends that the court or agent make an active effort to find out if there are families entitled to preference who would be willing to adopt the child. This provision recognizes, however, that the consenting parent's request for anonymity takes precedence over efforts to find a home consistent with the Act's priorities.

F.2. Foster Care or Preadoptive Placements

In any foster care or preadoptive placement of an Indian child:

(a) The child must be placed in the least restrictive setting which

- (i) most approximates a family;
- (ii) in which his or her special needs may be met; and

(iii) which is in reasonable proximity to his or her home.

(b) Preference must be given in the following order, absent good cause to the contrary, to placement with:

- (i) A member of the Indian child's extended family;
- (ii) A foster home, licensed, approved or specified by the Indian child's tribe, whether on or off the reservation;
- (iii) An Indian foster home licensed or approved by an authorized non-Indian licensing authority; or
- (iv) An institution for children approved by an Indian tribe or operated by an Indian organization

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which has a program suitable to meet the child's needs.

(c) The Indian child's tribe may establish a different order of preference by resolution, and that order of preference shall be followed so long as the criteria enumerated in subsection (a) are met.

F.2. Commentary

This guideline simply restates the provisions of the Act.

F.3. Good Cause To Modify Preferences

(a) For purposes of foster care, pres adoptive or adoptive placement, a determination of good cause not to follow the order of preference set out above shall be based on one or more of the following considerations:

(i) The request of the biological parents or the child when the child is of sufficient age.

In a few cases a child may need highly specialized treatment services that are unavailable in the community where the families who meet the preference criteria live. Paragraph (ii) recommends that such considerations be considered as good cause to the contrary.

Paragraph (iii) recommends that a diligent attempt to find a suitable family meeting the preference criteria be made before consideration of a non-preference placement be considered. A diligent attempt to find a suitable family includes at a minimum, contact with the child's tribal social service program, a search of all county or state listings of available Indian homes and contact with nationally known Indian programs with available placement resources.

Since Congress has established a clear preference for placements within the tribal culture, it is recommended in subsection (b) that the party urging an exception be made be required to bear the burden of proving and [sic] exception is necessary.

G. *Post-Trial Rights*

G.1. Petition To Vacate Adoption

(a) Within two years after a final decree of adaption of any Indian child by a state court, or within any longer period of time permitted by the law of the state, a parent who executed a consent to termination of paternal rights or adoption of that child may petition the court in which the final adoption decree was entered to vacate the decree and revoke the consent on the grounds that such consent was obtained by fraud or duress.

(b) Upon the filing of such petition, the court shall give notice to all parties to the adoption proceedings

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(ii) The extraordinary physical or emotional needs of the child as established by testimony of a qualified expert witness.

(iii) The unavailability of suitable families for placement after a diligent search has been completed for families meeting the preference criteria.

(b) The burden of establishing the existence of good cause not to follow the order of preferences established in subsection (b) shall be on the party urging that the preferences not be followed.

F.3. Commentary

The Act indicates that the court is to give preference to confidentiality requests by parents in making placements. Paragraph (i) is intended to permit parents to ask that the order of preference not be followed because it would prejudice confidentiality or for other reasons. The wishes of an older child are important in making an effective placement.

and shall proceed to hold a hearing on the petition. Where the court finds that the parent's consent was obtained through fraud or duress, it must vacate the decree of adoption and order the consent revoked, and order the child returned to the parent.

G.1. Commentary

This section recommends that the petition to vacate an adoption be brought in the same court in which the decree was entered, since that court clearly has jurisdiction, and witnesses on the issue of fraud or duress are most likely to be within its jurisdiction.

G.2. Adult Adoptee Rights

(a) Upon application by an Indian individual who has reached age 18 who was the subject of an adoptive placement, the court which entered the final decree must inform such individual of the tribal affiliations, if any of the individual's biological parents and provide such other information necessary to protect any rights flowing from the individual's tribal relationship.

(b) The section applies regardless of whether or not the original adoption was subject to the provisions of the Act.

(c) Where state law prohibits revelation of the identity of the biological parent, assistance of the Bureau of Indian Affairs shall be sought where necessary to help an adoptee who is eligible for membership in a tribe establish that right without breaching the confidentiality of the record.

G.2. Commentary

Subsection (b) makes clear that adoptions

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completed prior to May 7, 1979, are covered by this provision. The Act states that most portions of Title I do not "affect a proceeding under State law" initiated or completed prior to May 7, 1979. Providing information to an adult adoptee, however, cannot be said to affect the proceeding by which the adoption was ordered.

The legislative history of the Act makes it clear that this Act was not intended to supersede the decision of state legislatures on whether adult adoptees may be told the names of their biological parents. The intent is simply to assure the protection of rights deriving from tribal membership. Where a state law prohibits disclosure of the identity of the biological parents, tribal rights can be protected by asking the BIA to check confidentially whether the adult adoptee meets the requirements for membership in an Indian tribe. If the adoptee does meet those requirements, the BIA can certify that fact to the appropriate tribe.

G.3. Notice of Change in Child's Status

This section provides guidelines to aid courts in applying the provisions of Section 106 of the Act. Section 106 gives legal standing to a biological parent or prior Indian custodian to petition for return of a child in cases of failed adoptions or changes in placement in situations where there has been a termination of parental rights. Section 106(b) provides the [sic] whenever an Indian child is removed from a foster care home or institution for the purpose of further foster care, preadoptive placement, or adoptive placement, such placement is to be in accordance with the provisions of the Act— which requires notice to the biological parents.

The Act is silent on the question of whether a parent or Indian custodian can waive the right to further notice. Obviously, there will be cases in which the biological parents will prefer not to receive notice once their parental rights have been relinquished or terminated. This section provides for such waivers but, because the Act establishes an absolute right to participate in any future proceedings and to petition the court for return of the child, the waiver is revocable.

G.4. Maintenance of Records

The state shall establish a single location where all records of every foster care, preadoptive placement and adoptive placement of Indian children by courts of that state will be available within seven days of a request by an Indian child's tribe or the Secretary. The records shall contain, at a minimum, the petition or complaint, all substantive orders entered in the proceeding, and the complete record of the placement determination.

G.4. Commentary

(a) Whenever a final decree of adoption of an Indian child has been vacated or set aside, or the adoptive parent has voluntarily consented to the termination of his or her parental rights to the child, or whenever an Indian child is removed from a foster care home or institution for the purpose of further foster care, preadoptive placement, or adoptive placement, notice by the court or an agency authorized by the court shall be given to the child's biological parents or prior Indian custodians. Such notice shall inform the recipient of his or her right to petition for return of custody of the child.

(b) A parent or Indian custodian may waive his or her right to such notice by executing a written waiver of notice filed with the court. Such waiver may be revoked at any time by filing with the court a written notice of revocation, but such revocation would not affect any proceeding which occurred before the filing of the notice of revocation.

G.3. Commentary

This section of the guidelines provides a procedure for implementing the provisions of 25 U.S.C. § 1915(e). This section has been modified from the previous version which required that all records be maintained in a single location within the state. As revised this section provides only that the records be retrievable by a single office that would make them available to the requester within seven days of a request. For some states (especially Alaska) centralization of the records themselves would create major administrative burdens. So long as the records can be promptly made available at a single location, the intent of this section that the records be readily available will be satisfied.

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