

Meret Bainbridge, Saco, ME
On behalf of the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network
P.O. Box 8, Augusta, ME 04330, www.muusan.org, info@muusan.org

Maine 131st Legislature – Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
Testimony in Favor of LD 1970, Public Hearing May 31, 2023



Senator Carney, Representative Moonen,
and esteemed Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Meret Bainbridge. I am a resident of Saco and a constituent of Senator Donna Bailey who is the sponsor of LD 1970, **An Act to Enact the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act.**

I am testifying in favor of LD 1970 on behalf of my organization, the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network (MUUSAN), which links Maine's 26 UU congregations in faith-based advocacy. Unitarian Universalists recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

Many UU congregations in Maine have engaged with educational programs by Wabanaki R.E.A.C.H. to learn about the devastating effects of child removal policies prior to the passage of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, policies that resulted in the forced removal of Indigenous children not only from their families, but also their tribe, culture, and language, resulting in damaging effects to the individual children, cultural genocide and generational trauma.

In 1978, according to the National Indian Child Welfare Association, nationwide 25% to 35% of all Indigenous children were removed from their homes by state child welfare and private adoption agencies. As many as 85% of those children were placed outside of their families and communities — even when fit and willing relatives were available. According to a 2015 report of the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth & Reconciliation Commission, Wabanaki children were placed into foster care at similarly higher rates than non-Native children. Even after ICWA's enactment, a disproportionately higher rate of Wabanaki children in Maine are taken into foster care than non-Native children.

ICWA has been labeled the "gold standard" in child welfare policy and practice by a coalition of 18 national child advocacy organizations. Maine's U.S. Sens. Susan Collins and Angus King and Rep. Chellie Pingree are among the 87 members of Congress who signed the "friends of the court" brief supporting ICWA in the pending U.S. Supreme Court review of ICWA's constitutionality in the Brackeen vs. Haaland case that is expected to be decided in June. Maine is one of 26 states that filed a "friends of the court" brief in the case. If the US Supreme Court were to strike down ICWA, it would have devastating consequences to Indigenous children, families, and communities.

By enacting LD 1970, Maine would join 12 other states that have acted to codify ICWA protections on the state level. This would protect Wabanaki children, families, culture and sovereignty if the U.S. Supreme Court decides in June to weaken or destroy protections that have been known as the "gold standard" of child welfare policies for 40 years.

Maine's Unitarian Universalist congregations urge you to vote OTP on LD 1970, An Act to Enact the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act. It is a moral and ethical obligation to protect Wabanaki children in Maine from a return to the devastating policies of the past, and ensure they grow up within their communities in support of their tribal identities and cultures.

Thank you for allowing me to testify.