Moderator Carol Spigner introduced the first speaker, John Poupart.

Presentation by Mr. Poupart of the American Indian Policy Center:

Thank you very much. It’s interesting and rewarding to see this kind of a discussion, particularly around these topics that we have before us this morning. I’ve been working on this issue all of my life. And I’m here to share some of those learnings from my life, from my experience in my community, which I will hope to register with you that it is outside of the box totally.

There are three things that I think are important that I’m going to address this morning. One of those is research, another is training and education about American Indians, and a third has to do with policy and where the tire meets the road in Indian communities.

I come from a culture of the western hemisphere. Notwithstanding the Bering Strait theory, we have been here since time immemorial. We have possessed a culture of our own that is different than anything else in the world. There are some similarities, yes, but we have our own language, we have our ceremonials, we have our songs, and we have our stories. All of these are couched in an oral tradition, an oral history, so we find it difficult sometimes to deal with mainstream interpretation of cultural competence. And I’ll tell you why that is. We also have trouble with best practices because we are still a challenge to America’s social institutions. We have been an enigma, if you will. We haven’t been figured out yet.

And we have disparities in every area you can think of – juvenile justice, out-of-home placements, poverty, educational outcomes – the list is quite long including health disparities, deaths by suicide. Folks can’t quite figure that out that Indian people are sometimes 10 times the national average of suicides in their communities. In a recent review in Rosebud of 17 deaths in a 3-month period, they don’t know what’s causing those things.

So we have a great challenge before us and I just say that the reason I bring up research, training and policy is that we haven’t really been fully participating in the design or the models that many will reference. There’s very little literature on American Indians in this regard. It’s because the research that has been done in our communities has been done with an orientation to a European-based thinking and reasoning and logic and combined with the manifest-destiny approach to controlling everything. We as Indian people rather lived with everything and respected everything. So that kind of confusion enters definitions.

I know there were some kind words said about social workers, and social workers all of us know as Indian people because we’re raised with social workers, and we’re still trying to show them how to work with us. And maybe someday we’ll arrive there, but at this point we haven’t done so.

And the research that’s been done on us hasn’t been adequate enough to inform folks. We haven’t made it into the mainstream literature in terms of definitions that are meaningful to our community, to our culture. So that’s what causes me to say that the terms that we use are not endemic to our community. When we get there, when you know how an Indian thinks about things, it’s completely different than the linear mainstream thinking that we have grown accustomed to. Those are the things that define research. Those are the things
that define education. And when you go into the education, you learn that way and when you come out you start getting into the policy arena; it's a political will that determines where things go. We're not powerful enough to influence adequately those three areas.

So my comments this morning, they may not comport with what everyone else is saying, but I just hope you would go away from here feeling that you've missed out on something, and it's not too late to go back and be a good person. I don't know that kindness or sympathy is really being asked for at this point. I think what's being asked for is to be a professional, to learn your trade, to learn how to work with people, that's a professional attitude. I'm not talking about racism, I'm not talking about stupidity, all I'm saying is there are some standards that ought to be established. And when you come to research in our communities, do it with us not on us. We have an old saying that I've developed and I rely on: Indian people have been researched to death, let us help you research us to life. Thank you.

*Moderator Carol W. Spigner introduced the next speaker, Carolyn Sweets.*

**Presentation by Mrs. Sweets of the Family and Youth Driven Institute for Change:**

I'm going to give you a little recap of the earlier presentations because it was very delightful for me to be here today and to listen to the early presentations because they spell out a lot of questions that I had that needed to be answered.

I'm not only a lay person, I'm a foster parent and I'm a biological parent, but also I have a masters in education and in administration as well and (I'm) a high school counselor. I became a foster parent after raising my three daughters and I found it's very rewarding. But I didn't know what evidence-based practice was, and I think I had it somewhere years ago when I was in college. But I was so confused because I heard so many different schools of thought about evidence-based practice and evidence-based practices. I was discussing with Dr. Briggs and I would say, “You know, it should be evidence-based PP – evidence-based practice process.” Because the way I'm understanding now, evidence-based practice is a process of steps to be developed so that you can create a model program that will be conclusive for all cultures and competencies as well as the values and wishes and expectations of people.

I formulated a parent group in St. Louis. It's called Family and Youth-Driven Institute for Change of St. Louis. And we are in the process, among other things, to be trained in evidence-based process because the parents, as foster parents and biological parents, are concerned. They're concerned about how they're going to get the valuable treatment for their children, not only in the school system, but in the mental health institutions as well as in juvenile justice. And there is a disparity among African American youth that are in the juvenile justice system as well as in the child welfare system. But there's no conclusive answers, and we're kind of fed up with that, and we want to see some changes.

So we want to be trained to become investigators, as well as to be able to balance the condition within the black community so that we can finally come up with some solutions ourselves. I enjoyed the presentation from Ms. Ault in regards to community involvement, the focus groups. I think it's very important to include parents, to find out what they want, what their needs are, that's the first basis.
I also understand Dr. Briggs because we have been arguing and fussing and talking and educating me, okay?, in regards to evidence-based practices as opposed to evidence-based process. One of the things I really liked about his presentation and our past discussions is dealing with not only cultural competency in an ethnic group, but also values and wishes of individuals. But I don’t think we understand that, I don’t think we understand values, wishes and expectations in individuals because it’s too cost effective to do that in evidence-based practices.

You have this grand model. We had this model in the transition program in St. Louis which the federal government sponsored by giving $6 million dollars for our transition program and to build a family board. Well, my foster children were in the Wrap Around Program in the transition, and they received wrap around service which was a dismal failure. Okay, Wrap Around did not work and I said, “Why?” All this money’s been spent on Wrap Around, case workers are being trained, and there was no conclusive progress in the Wrap Around services that my children received. And I was upset because my expectations were high. I thought this was the magic pill. I didn't think I had to come home and redirect, but I found out I did. So my expectations were lowered around that particular model.

I found out that particular model needed to be tweaked because it did not deal with the wishes even though I had two children in foster care that were dealing with Wrap Around, but each of them had different dynamics and different personalities and from different homes. So their frame of references were different because they came from different dynamics and different homes. It was just a global model that put everybody in that particular model, and it did not work. It could have been that the worker did not know how to implement the program effectively, but I’m in the frame of reference to think that programs need to be tweaked for families, not only for families, but programs need to be tweaked for children because everybody’s different. You can’t put all of us in a bowl and mix and stir that bowl and say it works.

I have one child that has bi-polar and she was on medication before I received her and they took her off her medication. When I got her, she was not on any medication. I didn’t know she was bi-polar. I saw mood swings. I said something is wrong with this child, I need some help. So I started talking to the worker because sometimes they don’t give you everything. They want to have that placement. They don’t want you to say, “No, I don’t want this bi-polar child in my home.” They need that placement so they don’t tell you everything. So she had an outburst and it was real bad. So we talked about that and she came back and she packed up all her clothes and she said, “I’m getting the hell up out of this house.” I said, “What’s wrong? Why?” And she was in a manic depression, and she was just saying everything that was not true. Her perception was just gone. So after we talked, we sat down. I had her do some things. I gave her a tape recorder. I asked her what was her favorite poem, or scripture, wherever she could tape it in the tape recorder and she did that. And I said, every time you feel . . . and she knew when she was getting a mood swing. (Okay, but I have another child who is bi-polar that does not know when she is getting a mood swing.) This child let me know what transpired in her physical condition when she had the mood swing. She’d get hot; it starts from the top of her head and moves down. I said, “Oh, that sounds like me when I’m having my personal summers.” I said, “Well, maybe I’m bi-polar.” But, you know, you have to tune in to find out what’s really going on with these children. So she was telling me about her bipolar. She gets hot from the top of her head and it moves all the way down, and then she just gets so out of it. I said, “Well look, here’s your tape recorder, dismiss yourself when you feel hot from the top of your head and it’s moving down, go to your room, you have your favorite poem, record it and play it over and over, lay on the bed and relax.” I just really believe in relaxation therapy. And
that’s what she was doing to keep herself from going into these terrible mood swings until we were able to get her on medication. Anyway, I asked her, “Why are you not taking medication?” She said, “It made me fat. I mean I was over 200 and something pounds.” This is a small child, she was in a size 7 or 8 when I got her, but she said she was over 200 pounds. She said, “I don’t want to take it.” She said, “Carolyn, I want to stay here, but I don’t want to be on medication.” I said, “Well, honey, I think that you need to take some medication until we can really focus and do some biofeedback with you.” I said, “I’ve got to learn a little bit more about you. You have not been in my home long enough.” She said, “Well, if I’ve got to take medication I’m going to get big.” I said, “No, we’re going to put you in a program. We’re going to put you in the Y so you can do your exercises and so forth.” But the program did not tell me this, the intervention did not come into play with this. This is something I had to muster up and use common sense. If you don’t want to get fat like me, go to exercise, get into a program. This is what we were getting ready to do, is to put her in the Y so she would feel comfortable in taking the medication. So this is wishes and expectations. And I think you really need to deal with the wishes - a client’s wishes, values and expectations because you’re going to have the natural buy-in. So this child had a natural buy-in to take the medication.  

So the presentations were very thought-provoking, very challenging. At our organization in St. Louis, we’re going to be trained and in turn we are going to train other parents so they can learn how to investigate and foster parent and to assess programs and have some documentation ready to go to battle. Because you cannot go to battle without armor – you’ve got to have your sword and your shield. And this is what evidence-based process is – empowering parents to have their sword and their shield. Thank you.

Moderator Carol W. Spigner introduced the final speaker, Neal Thao.

Presentation by Mr. Thao, member of the St. Paul School Board, a social worker and case manager, & assistant professor at Metropolitan State University:

Good morning! Bonjour tout le monde! [Good morning in Hmong]

I would like to start with an introductory story. My first one is my experience as a paraprofessional in Appleton, Wisconsin for the resettlement program. I thought I was a good bilingual worker, but I wasn’t that good until I realized I had a lot of things to learn. One of my bosses asked me to find a good apartment for a Hmong refugee. So we did a good job. I took a lot of time and got a wonderful apartment with five bedrooms. Then my supervisor said, “Neal, let’s go see the family.” We did go see the family. We toured the rooms. Mr. Hang, Mrs. Hang and seven small kids – they all had slept in one room. My boss said, “Neal, what’s going on? I thought you were doing such a good job in Appleton, Wisconsin. Let’s ask Mr. Hang.” I said, “What happened? Why don’t you people sleep in the other rooms?” Mr. Hang smiled at us and said, “Tell your boss my kids are small and scared of a ghost.” My boss said, “Why, why is that Neal?” I want to give them a good example. And in 3 more months, we go back to visit, and all of them were spread all over the rooms. My boss said, “Ask them how come they change now?” He said, “My kids are Americanizing.” It is true in southeast Asia we’re taught about ghosts, we’re scared of ghosts and we try to be together, large families. So we talk about application of practice standards.
My second story is when I was first hired to be the Hmong-Southeast Asian Cultural Center’s child protection worker for Ramsey County. I was amazed. Any time I was about to place a Hmong kid in a foster home, a Hmong family flew from California, Milwaukee, Texas. They said, “Neal, can you not place them? Can I take them? I’m the uncle.” I have a hard time to battle sometimes with the system because of confidentiality. They say you are not to share the records of the family unless you have the okay from the family. But, in that culture, the definition of the family is the same, whether you are the immediate family or the extended family; they are considered one big family. Nowadays we have a Hmong family going to court that lives a quarter mile from Ramsey County Juvenile Court, and the parents, they don’t even bother to show up. So that gives me a lot of problems. I say, “Wow, we were involved so much in the beginning - family, community! Now we say you take care of our kids.” That is very dangerous because social work can never replace family. So I have to go back and say, “How come this thing has happened?”

So that leads me to a couple of things I would like to share – maybe several points. I’d like to share more about the tension, which I call entropy for my social methodology. What are the entropies, the conflicts between our system and the new system. Traditionally, for years and years we emphasized a lot of family, extended family. They are the primary institution for domestic issues. In America, even though its one of the best systems, but we emphasize too much on professional institutions. So I question, where is the balance? Are we going to depend too much on institutions and on professionals at the expense of losing family, community? And that’s a very good example for the Hmong and the Southeastern Asian experience. We question, we debate a lot in the community, which way would help us? Are we going to go to the preemptive model taking over? Uncle Sam being the solution, being Moses? Or we should say no, we’re going to be a partner. Uncle Sam’s role is to be only the facilitator. Our main job is not to work for you, but to work with you. A hand up, not a handout. Work together. Strengthen the family, strengthen the community. That’s a good question that people have asked me a lot, “What’s my real role?”

The second point that I want to add is the issue of buy-in, denial, dependency, confusion, paranoia. Okay, from denial to dependency now. Does this social indebtedness empower families? Are we going to do cultural genocide in a very indirect way? The part we don’t realize comes back to accountability. We have to think hard, think hard - are we going to take our strengths model or the deficit model? A very good example is the war we’re having now in Iraq.

I’m at that point perhaps I’m working because of what I’ve been through. I was the very first Hmong to do culturally-centered social work in child protection. I had two good bosses, just like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. I had two good white bosses training me to do it there. The reason I say good boss is because they allowed me to be creative in a way that, I think, fits the need of the community. Maintain the principle, but be flexible in my practice. And that’s very rich.

So, I do worry a lot about young Hmong social workers, young Laotians, young Cambodians, young Vietnamese. Even though we might say that they are culturally competent; they’ve received good MS degrees. I got good MS degree from good professors, Esther Wattenberg, one of my guru professors, . . . Nancy Johnston . . . they all helped me. But I worry about they
young social workers] are going to be very naïve, very lonely. Without the opportunity to be creative, the longevity might not be there unless we really help them navigate. Because they might work for an institution and, not knowing their strengths, they get a lot of pressure. So to me they are the most vulnerable messengers to go in between unless we do things different to empower them, to help cultivate the community, and to take advantage of the strengths that exist in the community.

I wouldn’t characterize them as culturally competent, probably I would say they probably they do more “translate” social work. In other words, I speak English. I’ve got my social training. I try to learn the mission of the agency, how they do Anglo social work. I do that, in a way, to the Hmong community because in their perception I do that. If I am going to do multicultural sort of work, but I have to be trained by the culture, by the elders.

To me one of the reasons I fought so hard to be an activist, to be a leader, is that I had to be a real leader to be an activist, be an elected official. So I not only got the MS at the U, passed my promotion at the county, but I have been accepted by my community to be a real leader. I’ve become effective, which means the most busy time for me is not 9 to 5 Monday to Friday, it’s during the weekend. I have to go to funerals, go to ceremonies, earn the trust. “Neal’s over there in bad times, in good times, in hard times.” That’s really my credential.

Who’s my boss? Who’s my tutor in addition to my professors here or my boss? My father, my uncle, they teach me how to navigate. And those are important because I don’t want to be a “translate” social worker. I want to have permission to answer. At the same time, I want to make sure since Ramsey County pays me, that I fulfill the mission, too. And those are hard work. In a couple thousand year angle I’m paid to bridge the gap. It’s not easy.

My next point is a side effect - I want to make sure that it won’t damage the existence of the Hmong culture. Nowadays we’re moving too fast. We’re losing a lot of good values, good factors. And the court, the county, the foster care is all not equipped to deal with that. Those are very dangerous. So I have to think through how can I be more effective? What are the factors to help, to enforce the old way, the family-help-family? We don’t have to be driven by money, but we’re driven by passion, by cultural values. And we’re losing that because the old guard are silent, they feel they’re losing power. So I have to work hard to reverse that, and that’s not easy. Our complexity, we have talked about diversity, democracy, lot of choice and these could be very naïve, and a false message, too. We haven’t known very much about middle-class American values yet.

My very last point: accountability, accountability, accountability. What is really accountability? Are we truly culturally inclusive? Do we allow people to make such determinations which may allow them to tell us how to work with them? Where is the real culture-sensitive model? Do we take advantage of existing or not, from the Southeast Asian group? With our knowledge, there is a lot of strength; it is up to us. If we wait until the next generation, it will be much more complicated. My mom and my dad have no education, but at the end of the year they say, “Neal, how much money have you saved?” They only work $2.30, $4.50, but they save a lot of money. I make more, I spent all. That’s where I worry about the gap, the gap . . . being thrifty, wanting to help one another, those are all social values.
My last point: I’m very optimistic today. When I first worked for Ramsey County, very few people of color were supervisors. But nowadays, I see people who look like me who have some decision, and I give them a lot of credit. Maybe I’m not that much of a skeptic, I’m very positive. The question to be truly honest with ourselves is that we have to hold ourselves accountable. Accountability, accountability. Make sure that the work we do is worth the money spent.

I will listen and be ready to answer questions. Thank you.

Attendee Alfred Babbington-Johnson: I really appreciated the remarks of the response panel and some of the literature that we got before we came here, particularly this article on The Color of Care. It’s like this research project, I guess, sponsored by Casey, in which the statement is made that action begins when state or local leaders identify racial inequities as a serious problem and resolve to address it. And then it goes on to say that the Casey study discovered ... what we learned is that the impetus for action can come from inside or outside the child welfare agency, but that it seems most powerful when it comes from both. I guess I found a thread from John Poupart’s comments to Mr. Thao’s and even some of the comments made by Dr. Briggs that has to do with reaching out to the client base for a sense of most effective response. And, I guess, even broader for me, a sense of reaching out into the community for the community’s response that couples itself with the agency’s response to bring forward an action or a set of actions that affect an issue that is critically important. So, in that context, I guess I just want to raise ... one, I think that’s a model that we need to be driving more and more for, that is the collaborative model between the community and the agencies that are involved. I think we are trying to do something like that in Hennepin County now. And recognizing in the midst of that there has to be a sense that really there is a partnership. It’s important that there’s a respect for both partners. Because even though there might be an effort to come together, agency and community, by and large, the dollars, at least initially, are largely in the agency, the state or whatever, and in the best intentioned models ... someone said, “He that pays the piper calls the tunes.” It’s important that there be a respect that divorces itself from the fact that maybe the initial dollars are coming from the agency or the philanthropy or whatever it might be, to recognize that the real power for change is in the community. As the community is given latitude and is emboldened to take the steps to own the issue, because that’s where the solution is, and the collaboration goes forward. I think that’s where we have the most effective outcome. I guess that was a comment, wasn’t it? Not a question.

Attendee Iris Bell: I have a question for Mr. Poupart. In Oregon right now there is a senate bill, Senate Bill 267, which is the basis upon which evidence-based practice is now spreading across the state. There are nine federally recognized tribes in Oregon, who were never consulted about Senate Bill 267. And as sovereign nations they have come together and begun to discuss this issue and are moving forward to say not only are we not interested in Senate Bill 267, we are not interested in any culturally adaptive processes toward 267 because those are “whitenizing” our culture. So I’m wondering about, from where you sit, what you have heard about this with respect to various tribes around the country and what the response has been or whether it’s similar to the response in Oregon?

Presenter John Poupart: Thank you, very good and appropriate question. Exacting, as a matter of fact, to what has happened ... that Indian people, since contact with Europeans, we’ve had imposed on us an alien form of government, socialization, religion, and so forth. Those things are still being attempted upon us. The near loss of our language, for example, throughout the nation; hundreds of tribes have lost their language
due to policies generated by the U.S. government to outlaw the use of our language and to establish boarding schools where English was the preferred language, the mandated language as a matter of fact.

Sovereignty of tribal nations throughout the country, that part of history and civics is not taught in our educational systems, but yet it is very real to us as tribal members. So there must be some reason why we still identify as Indian people and Indian nations in the year 2007 in spite of all these attempts to take us out one way or the other – through the academy, through mining, logging, fur trading, to say nothing about the colonization of our minds or the attempts to colonize our minds. And we’ve hung on, and I’m proud to be one of those people who have hung on, because it is my responsibility, my cultural responsibility, my traditional responsibility to retain these teachings and to make them available to others who will simply ask me for them or show that they want them. Yeah, that’s very much what’s going on in tribal governments. When I was a kid, we didn’t talk about sovereignty, but we do now. It rolls off the tongue of every tribal elected official in the country because we always had it, we just never had a chance to express it and to show it and to exercise it. But now we are doing it in the policy arena and I think that’s where it’s meaningful.

I just want to follow up on another question. The partnership and collaboration is a great, great vehicle to get information back and forth, from our Indian community anyway, to state and local units of government so that we have an honest dialogue. I participated, as well as Neal, in a partnership in Ramsey County and we’ve done this for five or six years. I forget how many years it’s been, but we’ve been growing this thing all along and it’s working great. We are putting people from inside the county out into the community, as my friend Al pointed out, we need to go. That’s the way we’re starting, that’s what we are doing. We’re also starting that with MFIP, TANF for some who understand the work opportunities act, the new welfare in other words. We’re working with MFIP at the county level and the American Indian Family Center in St. Paul where they’ve put workers, financial workers, as well as counselors, out into our community. So those are two, recent, I would say in recent years, in the recent three or four years, where this collaborative is being invoked. And it’s working well.

**Moderator Carol Spigner:** I’m going to just try to draw together very quickly some themes from the presentation and then we’ll open the floor for a broader discussion. I do want to thank our panel very much!

I think one of the ideas that is important for us to struggle with is the extent to which evidence-based practice can embrace cultural norms, individual history, and really honor the cultural tradition of folks that it serves.

Secondly, there was a theme in this discussion of de-culturalization and genocide. And I think we need to understand that the choices we make in many of our systems can lead to the destruction of culture. We really need to be responsive to that.

Another theme was noted by our first respondent earlier which is inclusion. And what I hear is inclusion at every level. I hear inclusion at the case level. I hear inclusion in research. I think I heard Mrs. Sweets call for “let us get trained to do the research in the neighborhoods so we can build our own case and bring about change.” Inclusion at the policy level.

I don’t want to miss the theme of honesty. We have a system that sometimes doesn’t tell the whole truth, and that makes it hard for the people you are attempting to serve to understand what is going on. So I don’t want to lose that as an important point.

And then, finally, I think, there was a powerful issue raised by Neal which is, “Who are we accountable to?” Are we accountable to the system? Are we accountable to the communities that we serve? And that’s really an important and fundamental question because most of us who work in these organizations have multiple accountabilities. And the people that we are accountable to, formally and informally, don’t agree. So that makes it a real challenge. So that the tensions between what we do and how our work is organized, and what communities need and want is important for us to acknowledge and try to resolve.