[THEME MUSIC]

KELLY GORDON: The Red Lake Nation is grappling with a federal investigation that alleges abuse and neglect in the tribe's child welfare program. A federal notice describes the deaths of as many as eight Red Lake Nation children since 2021. It says tribal officials refused to cooperate with federal investigators while children remained in danger.

Last month, the federal government took over Red Lake Nation's child welfare program, and since then, Red Lake Nation has seen statements from tribal leaders, a dispute over who leads the tribe, and a community coming together to grieve. MPR News reporter Melissa Olson has been following all of it, and she joins me now from Bemidji. Hey, Melissa.

MELISSA OLSON: Hi, Kelly.

KELLY GORDON: Hi. So let's recap. And I know you're the perfect person to do this with because you've been on this from the beginning. What happened at Red Lake Nation this past week?

MELISSA OLSON: Yeah. So a week ago Tuesday, the Interior Department released an 11-page notice explaining the legal justification for the Bureau of Indian Affairs takeover of Red Lake Nation's child welfare program. So on Friday, Red Lake Nation council said the chairman, Darrell Seki Sr. had agreed to step down. He said he hasn't and he won't. On Monday, the community held its first public vigil for the children whose lives were lost under the supervision of the program. And last night, it held its first community-wide meeting.

KELLY GORDON: So a lot happening. Back up just here and tell us a little bit more. What does the federal government's notice say about the tribe's child welfare program? What exactly is it alleging?

MELISSA OLSON: Yeah. The document lays out a pattern of inaction by the program's staff and decision makers. The notice says staff failed to report suspected child abuse to law enforcement. It says children were sometimes placed back in homes where they had been harmed. By my count, the document says the program failed to act in as many as five of the eight deaths it describes.

It describes children who were quote "neglected, abused, and malnourished." It says the problems got worse over time, until the refusal to cooperate on Red Lake's part was actively impeding federal investigations. The federal government says all of that put children in imminent and substantial jeopardy.

KELLY GORDON: That's why they said they needed to come in and take it over. So how has Red Lake Nation responded?

MELISSA OLSON: After the notice came out, the tribe's media contact said Red Lake Nation is cooperating fully with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Then came statements from the Red Lake Nation Council last week. The first came on Friday. By Saturday, there were multiple statements. I think three in total. In all, the council acknowledges the tragic loss of children's lives. And that says mistakes were made and that accountability must be part of the path forward. It promises a thorough internal review and says it will keep cooperating with federal agencies.

But the council does not accept everything in the federal notice, in that 11-page document. It says the notice itself contains mistakes. The council also says Red Lake Nation is appealing the Bureau of Indian Affairs takeover of its program, and that it's in mediation with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

KELLY GORDON: And I know there's been some confusion, maybe to say the least, about the status of Red Lake Chairman Darrell Seki. Has he resigned?

MELISSA OLSON: No. Seki is still chairman, and he says he will stay. Again, we go back to Friday, the Red Lake Nation Council said he had agreed to step down within two weeks by the end of the month. And it went on to talk about the mistakes that have been made and how important information was not shared with the council. Seki then posted on his own social media that he had not stepped down. He wrote that he answers to Red Lake voters. On Monday, he issued a full statement as chair of Red Lake Nation Council and says he will not retire or step down.

KELLY GORDON: I know that you were at the vigil that you said at Red Lake Nation Monday night. So what was that like?

MELISSA OLSON: Yeah. Dozens of people, about 50 people in all probably, gathered to remember the children whose lives were lost. The vigil was held at the Red Lake Boys and Girls Club North of Bemidji. There were three young men with hand drums who sang a pair of honor songs. The Red Lake Nation Youth Council led a half mile smudge walk, making sure that there was a sense of togetherness.

Thomas Barrett runs the Boys and Girls Club. He said community members asked him to organize it. Dan King is a hereditary chief and president of Red Lake Nation College. And he just talked about Red Lake as a community that has an indomitable will and that they will come through this. Their youth council members talked to me about not wanting to be defined by their community's worst moments and that there is so much more to Red Lake than what people might understand.

KELLY GORDON: And then you mentioned there was also a community meeting last night. Did you go to that, or do you know what happened there?

MELISSA OLSON: I did not go it. It was closed to media. Red Lake was adamant about that. It was held in the Oshkii Event Center in Redby on Red Lake Reservation. It was the first large community-wide meeting where Red Lake Nation members could question their elected leaders about all that's going on with the child welfare program. A few people I talked to described as this being a moment where Red Lake Nation should come together and share information and really begin to understand what's happened.

KELLY GORDON: And so as far as looking ahead at what might happen next, where does the tribe's appeal with the federal government stand? You mentioned that-- what happens next with that?

MELISSA OLSON: Yeah. Red Lake Nation says its appeal is ongoing. Under the federal rules, Red Lake Nation has the right to a hearing before an administrative law judge. The notice says-- the notice that they received last week-- says the hearing should happen within 10 days of the takeover unless the tribe agrees to a later date. The tribe says it's in mediation, so it's possible that the appeal may be on hold.

It says confidentiality rules limit what Red Lake Nation can share. So I don't of a hearing date, and the tribe hasn't said what parts of the notice it believes may contain mistakes. In the meantime, the BIA is running the program. The notice doesn't say how the agency is providing services day to day. I've asked the BIA-- I've asked the Bureau of Indian Affairs how it's serving children and families on Red Lake Nation. The agency hasn't responded to my questions yet.

KELLY GORDON: Really appreciate your time today, Melissa Olson. Thanks for joining us.

MELISSA OLSON: You're welcome, Kelly.

KELLY GORDON: Yeah. That was MPR News reporter Melissa Olson joining us from Bemidji.