

APPENDIX E

Toward a Better Understanding of the Needs of Aboriginal Children in Care: An Analysis of Discussions with Directors and Managers Working in Child Welfare Agencies Located On and Off reserve

Appendix E forms part of the report titled,

“LET’S GET IT RIGHT: CREATING A CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE TRAINING MODULE AND IDENTIFYING LOCAL URBAN ABORIGINAL RESOURCES FOR NON-ABORIGINAL CAREGIVERS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN NEW BRUNSWICK”

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“One of the things that come out of Truth and Reconciliation is the idea that we need to recognize that our way isn’t always better. There are different ways that children can be brought up in families I really think we need to be more open about other ways of helping families than the way we’ve been led to believe is the best way. And I think that’s where we’ve missed out a lot. In some cases they can do better work than we can.”

Interview Participant

1. INTRODUCTION

The Minister of Social Development is legally responsible to service children (and their families) in need of protection under The Family Services Act. This legislative mandate authorizes social workers both on and off First Nations (FN) Communities, to carry out the Minister's responsibilities including placement of children in foster homes. Aboriginal families living in a FN community are serviced by social workers working in that community while Aboriginal people living off reserve fall under the jurisdiction of the province and are usually serviced by provincial social workers.

In a case that came before the New Brunswick courts involving an Aboriginal family living off reserve and under the jurisdiction of the province, Justice Baird from the Court of Queen's Bench, Family Division was highly critical as to how the province services Aboriginal children and families.

As part of a larger research project initiated in response to Justice Baird's critique, Managers from around the province and Directors from First Nations (FN) communities were interviewed and asked about the challenges they face when Aboriginal children are brought into care of the Minister. The information which follows is a synthesis of their discussions, comments and recommendations.

2. DISCUSSION

Two themes dominated the Directors' and Managers' responses: first - that Aboriginal children are losing their culture and that communities are losing their children. FN Directors articulated more clearly the pain that results when children are removed from their parents and placed off community in non-Aboriginal foster families. The Managers, meanwhile, who are responsible for servicing Aboriginal families who were not living in a FN community, also spoke to children's loss of culture. Their concern led to the second theme - the negligible infrastructure in place to respond to this growing and presently over-represented population in the child welfare system.

2.1 The Scarcity of Foster Parents Overwhelmingly, participants identified a lack of foster homes as the primary barrier to servicing children who come into care. Social workers are under tremendous pressure to 'find a foster home' irrespective as to whether the foster parents self-identify as Aboriginal persons. Directors and Managers noted the significant challenges finding Aboriginal foster homes on and off reserve. This reality was voiced as problematic for FN Directors because children were leaving not only their biological parents but the community itself. Managers also referred to the challenges of servicing Aboriginal children who live with non-Aboriginal foster parents -- the bonding that sometimes occurs and the reluctance on the part of the social workers to break that bond should the children become free for adoption. Lastly, FN Directors were not always able to respond to requests from managers for placements of children in a community if they had been living off reserve.

...."negative influences sometimes occur when birth parents bash/speak negatively about foster parents. Sometimes visits have had to be cancelled because parents will say to children 'they don't know anything about us'".

2.2 The Lack of Training for foster parents was identified by both Managers and FN Directors as problematic. Although the Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education or PRIDE training¹ is viewed positively in terms of information about fostering, participants noted that there was only a passing reference to the importance of culture. PRIDE does not include any information specific to Aboriginal children and their families.

Managers said that they do not believe that the current PRIDE modules meet the needs of foster parents caring for Aboriginal children. It was further noted by FN Directors that provincial training and standards reflect a settler world-view not necessarily shared by Aboriginal people. This in and of itself, FN Directors noted could serve as a barrier to recruitment. And, as reflected by one of the Managers:

“One of the things that came out of Truth and Reconciliation is that our way isn’t always better. There are different ways that children can be brought up in families.”

2.3 Cultural Disconnect Many foster parents in the province are not Aboriginal and this is a barrier to meeting the cultural needs of Aboriginal children in their care. Managers referred to the issue that arises when the children are visibly Aboriginal and their foster parents are visibly non-Aboriginal. For the child, this creates an overt disconnect from their family of origin. Not belonging, not feeling part of a family, and losing identity are potential challenges for all children being fostered but this is magnified for Indigenous children who are unable to stay connected to their culture.

Directors noted that if children are living ‘in town’ [off the reserve] with a non-Aboriginal family, access to school and other educational services available to them in their home community can be lost. FN Directors also made the point that if non-Aboriginal foster parents lack cultural sensitivity, then the children in their care may not be encouraged to connect with their community let alone their biological family.

2.4. Lack of Resources Managers and FN Directors identified the need for supports and resources for non-Aboriginal foster parents caring for Aboriginal children. Reference was made to the province of PEI which has a separate handbook offering information and guidelines specific to the needs of parents fostering Aboriginal children. One FN Director noted that ensuring that cultural connections are made and nurtured is not even identified as a specific requirement for non-Aboriginal

....“if the foster parents are non Aboriginal, they may struggle with knowing how to best link the youth with their community and culture. That is why it is imperative that PRIDE, and other foster parent training and resources, give these parents the information they need in order to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal children in their care.”

....“depending on whether or not the child is Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Cree or Inuit...different resources may be required for foster parents...it is not only important to be able to identify whether or not the child is Aboriginal, it is also important to identify the child’s specific Aboriginal background.”

¹ PRIDE training offers 27 hours of pre-service training and involves 9 different modules related to permanence for children, meeting their developmental needs, separation and loss, and the importance of strengthening Family relationships.

foster parents. The Managers noted that while there is in fact, an expectation for all foster parents, generally, to maintain a cultural connection, there aren't any supports or knowledge as to how to make this happen for Aboriginal children. Managers noted that without proper training, the child's and family's beliefs and behaviours could be misinterpreted or neglected.

The FN Directors advised that when non-Aboriginal foster parents are caring for children, there needs to be an awareness of the traditions, beliefs and culture specific to the child's birth family. Managers from the province noted that the foster parents need to begin with the basics: the knowledge that the child in their care is Aboriginal; who the child's community is and what is that community's culture; why the child ended up in care; what the links are back to their home community; and how to utilize those links to best care for the child. It was stated in the FN Directors' report (Appendix C) that most foster parents want the information but parents would require a great deal of support and encouragement from Social Workers to acquire this baseline knowledge.

2.5. Aboriginal children are invisible Invisibility due to proximity is less of an issue in a FN community, but is a notable reality within the provincial system. Parents and children are not always asked by DSD workers if they are Aboriginal. Nor does DSD make it mandatory for their workers to collect this information. Unless the child or the parent is visibly Aboriginal or self identifies, a client's heritage can go unrecorded -- and this can further compound the cultural disconnect for these Indigenous families.

In addition to a lack of systematic data collection, there are no standards, protocols, resource materials or information about cultures, specific to the three Indigenous groups in New Brunswick or the province's substantive off-reserve Indigenous population.

This invisibility is further exacerbated when children are in the legal custody of the Minister, but without any formal recording of their Aboriginal background. Managers pointed out that while individual situations could lead social workers to pursue Aboriginal continuity or even status for the children they were working with, there are still many bureaucratic and systemic barriers in place. Furthermore, there are no guidelines or policies in place to guide the social worker on how to provide cultural continuity or apply for status.

...."additionally, there aren't any protocols in place to guide social workers in HOW to ask whether or not a client is Aboriginal. One respondent noted, "is it appropriate to ask ethnicity and race coming in through the front door of our service? and if so, what do those questions need to look like? How do we identify that in a culturally safe way? Until we do that, we are going to miss those youth?"

...."that would be the place to start and to acknowledge the fact that we don't even keep them [statistics]. I mean the system has a component where you can fill in whether they're Aboriginal don't they don't always say and I'm not sure if it's a mandatory field that has to be filled. Getting the statistics, the facts, they speak for themselves."

2.6 Lack of training for social workers All participants identified social workers' lack of knowledge about Aboriginal history, colonization and the inter-generational impact of same on the on and off reserve Indigenous populations they serve. The Managers stressed the need for social workers to be taught about systemic racism since that is what their Aboriginal clients have lived with historically and what they continue to experience on a daily basis.

“Aboriginal Awareness Training for social workers is good, it gives a history, details how things look now and gives the policies and standards.”

The FN Directors noted that Aboriginal Training [provided by Hann Martin and Assoc. available to all government employees] is believed to be helpful but the Managers from the province asserted that more work needs to be done to educate social worker's during their degree programs. Social workers will be the ones communicating with partners on behalf of the Aboriginal children.

“Mandatory Professional level courses are needed for non Aboriginal social workers in New Brunswick.”

“Interviewees felt that mandatory professional level courses are needed for non Aboriginal Social Workers in the province...including protocols for identifying Aboriginal clients and making appropriate links to help support the child, cultural information on the various Aboriginal groups in New Brunswick, information on what cultural sensitivity means and what that looks like in practice...the Social Worker needs to have specific protocols in place to meet the unique needs of that child.”

Managers noted that there are consultants in Social Development working with Aboriginal people. However, it is to be noted that currently their focus is on FN agencies not on Aboriginal families living in amongst the general population.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from these interviews range from recruitment of Aboriginal Foster Parents to more effective, culturally specific training for social workers and foster parents. Overriding these specifics however, are the systemic barriers identified including, the need to collect data about Aboriginal families and moreover, to make it a government priority to do so. Without the latter, children will continue to reside in foster homes where the parents are untrained and insensitive to the child's cultural realities leading to a disconnect from not only the child's family but also the child's larger culture. In order to prevent this from happening, the following are identified as ACTION ITEMS:

ACTION #1 Ensure government priority for the care and servicing of Aboriginal people and that that care is in alignment with Truth and Reconciliation. Responsibility Centre: Province of New Brunswick in response to TRC; Social Development in partnership with Urban Aboriginal groups in the province.

1.1 Make Aboriginal data collection in the provincial system a mandatory priority.

- 1.2 Prioritize and make this information as basic and important as name, address and Medicare number.

One participant noted" if 20 Syrian kids were in care, there'd be eyebrows going, "hey, wait a minute, why are all of these Syrian children coming into care?" -- suggesting that the number of Aboriginal children in care goes unnoticed and is not considered problematic. Just accepted and the deeper issues remain unaddressed. "

- 1.3 Collate and analyze data and respond to need accordingly.

- 1.4 Ensure that information collected is shared with senior executives, managers, consultants, social workers and foster parents.

....."all of the regions can do whatever they want to do to make this better, but until there's provincial leadership, someone who takes it and runs with it at the provincial level, there's always going to be a gap..."

- 1.5 Use these data to highlight and address the over-representation of Indigenous families in the child welfare system.
- 1.6 Working from the findings emerging from the data, partner with groups representing or working with urban Aboriginal peoples to prioritize and address concerns.

ACTION #2 Develop an immediate response to the lack of Aboriginal Foster Homes.

Responsibility Centre: Social Development in partnership with Urban Aboriginal groups; Foster Home Association; and FN Agencies.

- 2.1 Deliver a province-wide recruitment and retention campaign focused on the creation of Aboriginal foster homes, as well as foster homes open to working with Aboriginal families and their children.
- 2.2 Create a PRIDE Module specifically directed at servicing Aboriginal families and their children.
- 2.3 Identify or develop a roster of supports, resources, and links for non-Aboriginal foster home parents caring for Aboriginal children.

ACTION #3 Train Social Workers in not only cultural awareness but so they gain a deeper understanding of the impact of colonization, inter generational trauma, and cultural safety.

Responsibility Centre: Schools of Social Work and NB Association of Social Workers working in partnership with the training and Aboriginal consultants from Social Development, as well as Aboriginal people from the community.

ACTION #4 Create resources and infrastructure support for social workers. Responsibility Centre: Social Development Consultants and Regional office managers in partnership with Urban Aboriginal groups, and FN Communities. Include in-depth information on the provinces three First Nations as well as background information on off-reserve organizations and communities supporting rural and urban Aboriginal populations. Share this information and the resource materials collated per this project with Aboriginal parent aides; mentors; tutors; advocates; Head Start Programs; and Friendship Centres.

...“Participants felt that they had no guidance or leadership from government on Truth and Reconciliation. While the TRC had some very specific guidelines for child welfare, participants felt there was no movement in the province towards implementing them.”

Those interviewed believe that the quality of care that Aboriginal children receive off reserve in non-Aboriginal homes can be enhanced, and provided detailed suggestions on how to make it happen. Managers responsible for off-reserve populations said that only so much can be accomplished without leadership and that leadership on the part of government is a much-needed priority.

“I can’t even find out who’s responsible for them [Truth and Reconciliation], like one of the recommendations is specifically around fostering Aboriginal children and we haven’t got any leadership centrally on that.”

Active participation in Truth and Reconciliation provides an opportunity for government to partner with Aboriginal people and working together, to finally ‘get it right’.