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Policy Brief

Keeping the Circle Strong: Social Promotion through Community Networking to Strengthen Off-Reserve Aboriginal Child Welfare

– August 2009

by

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Acknowledgements

This publication is part of the Aboriginal Policy Research Series, which focuses on public policy issues affecting Métis, non-status Indians, and other Aboriginal peoples residing off-reserve. The series is produced in a partnership between the Institute On Governance (IOG) and the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians (OFI).

The contents of this paper are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect a position of the IOG, its Board of Directors, or the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians.

The authors would like to acknowledge:

- The University of British Columbia for provision of a grant that enabled the development of this research partnership.
- The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their support of this research through the provision of a Strategic Research Grant.
- Northwest Alberta Child and Family Services Authority for their generous support of the work of the Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC).
- Miriam Abel, MSW Student (University of Calgary Edmonton Division) and Graduate Research Assistant for her ongoing assistance with this research.
- All those who provided comments and feedback on the initial draft of this paper.
- The individuals and organizations that constitute the membership of the AIC for your vision, values, and past, present and future commitment:

Tanya Bell, Peace River Community Services
Brenda Brochu, Peace River Regional Women's
Shelter Society
Syd Courtepatte, Peace River School District
Iris Callioux, Town of Peace River
Sister Mary Jeanne Davidson, Our Lady of
Peace (School Sisters of Notre Dame)
Diane Ireland, Northwest Alberta Child and
Family Services Authority
Leslie Ayre-Jaske, Town of Peace River
Ruth Kidder, AAWS
Billy Joe Laboucan, Northland School Division
Vanessa Malegana, Holy Catholic Family
Regional School Division
Brandy Mitchell, Region V1 MNA
Lillian Parenteau, Native Counselling

Helen Piper, Elder
Aleatha Rolling, Native Counselling
Bill Sewepagahm, Cadotte Lake School
Laurie Stavne, Peace River Community Services
Larry Stewart, Alberta Culture and Community
Spirit
Georgina Supernault, Manning Resource Centre
Trish Syncox, Peace Country Health
Beatrice Turangeau, Kee Tas Kee Now Child
and Family Services
Gill Yearous, RCMP – Peace Regional Victim
Services
Elizabeth Yeates, Peace River CFSA Site
Manager
Tracy Zweifel, Sagitawa Friendship Society

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Introduction

Despite a lack of consistent measurement between and within various jurisdictions, it is widely known that Aboriginal children and families are strongly overrepresented within statutory child protection systems, that this trend is international in scope, and that these numbers appear to be increasing.¹ This overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and families within child protection systems is symptomatic of a larger crisis that can be traced back to the legacy of colonization, marginalization and oppression that generations of Aboriginal people have endured.

The purpose of this policy brief is to present the initial findings and emerging lessons from a community based participatory research project focusing on the members and work of an Aboriginal Interagency Committee in north-western Alberta. While not denying the importance of current debates centering on issues of Aboriginal self-governance in the delivery of off-reserve services, our intent is to sidestep them, concentrating on a policy framework for the promotion of social change and collective well-being as opposed to the delivery of social services.

Background: The Crisis of Aboriginal Child Welfare

Aboriginal child welfare was sustained for thousands of years through rich and vibrant

socio-cultural lifeworlds² that placed a high degree of value on children and ensured traditions, identities, roles and relations that nurtured children's physical, spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual growth.³ European colonization of North America attacked these lifeworlds through the implementation of formal systems that enabled genocide, confinement of Aboriginal people on reserves, outlawing of cultural traditions and enforced removal of children to residential schools. The disturbance of a people's socio-cultural lifeworld has profound impacts on individual and collective well-being. Interpersonal violence, depression, addictions, alienation, and suicide become common.⁴ All of these impacts have been identified for Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities. They are further magnified by the barriers to housing, employment, and education experienced by Aboriginal people.

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and families in statutory child protection systems is unlikely to improve as long as both the problems and the solutions continue to be defined within the narrow scope of these systems. An approach is needed that addresses the larger community and structural issues impacting Aboriginal child welfare. "Resilient Aboriginal communities provide the best chance for resilient, safe and well Aboriginal children, young people and families."⁵ Yet there is a

¹ Ed Connors and Frank Maidman. "A Circle of Healing: Family Wellness in Aboriginal Communities," Issac Prilleltensky, Geoffrey Nelson and Leslea Peirson (eds.), *Promoting Family Wellness and Preventing Child Maltreatment: Fundamentals for Thinking and Action* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) 366-7; Carol A. Hand, "An Ojibwe Perspective on the Welfare of Children: Lessons of the Past and Visions for the Future." *Children and Youth Services Review* 28 (2006), 20-46; Nico Trocmé, Della Knoke, and Cindy Blackstock, "Pathways to the Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canada's Child Welfare System." *Social Service Review* 78, no. 4 (2004), 577-600.

² The term "socio-cultural lifeworld," or "lifeworld" refers to social roles and relations, cultural beliefs and traditions, norms and values that are longstanding and intergenerationally transmitted. See for example, Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, *Native American Post-Colonial Psychology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

³ Connors and Maidman. "A Circle of Healing"; Hand, "An Ojibwe Perspective"; Trocmé, Knoke, and Blackstock, "Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children."

⁴ Bonnie Duran and Eduardo Duran, "Applied Postcolonial Clinical and Research Strategies." Marie Battiste (ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 86-100.

⁵ Cindy Blackstock and Nico Trocmé, "Community-Based Child Welfare for Aboriginal Children: Supporting Resilience Through Structural Change," Michael Ungar (ed.), *Handbook for Working*

dearth of research examining community oriented policy frameworks in off-reserve contexts and even less theoretical anchoring of such frameworks. Consequently, there is little to guide the development of community centered approaches to address off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare.

The Need for Community Centered Policy Approaches to Address Off-Reserve Aboriginal Child Welfare

Child protection systems are the formal systems and services – the legislative authority and duly delegated administrative systems – developed to address the protection of children and youth from negative outcomes such as abuse and neglect, addictions, sexual exploitation and other situations that pose significant risk to their immediate and long term well-being. Child welfare, on the other hand, refers to the physical, intellectual, social and spiritual well-being of each and every child. Child welfare systems should therefore be viewed as all of the people and processes that promote this well-being.⁶

While communities are often sites of conflict, oppression and marginalization, socially cohesive communities play a significant role in child welfare. They serve as spaces of belonging for their members who are tied together through a collective desire to live in a type of harmony and mutual care.⁷ Community approaches to

with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience Across Cultures and Contexts, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 106.

⁶ See Leslea Peirson, Marie-Claire Laurendeau and Claire Chamberland, “Context, Contributing Factors and Consequences, Issac Prilleltensky, Geoffrey Nelson and Leslea Peirson (eds.), *Promoting Family Wellness and Preventing Child Maltreatment: Fundamentals for Thinking and Action* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 41-123; also Sharon Stroick and Jane Jensen, *What is the Best Policy Mix for Canada’s Young Children?* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc./Renouf Publishing Co., 1999)

⁷ Calvin Morrisseau, *Into the Daylight: A Holistic Approach to Healing*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 48.

address child welfare need to focus on strengthening social bonds, social relations and interactions as well as on the norms, values and traditions that guide these. In off-reserve contexts this includes attention to social relations and interactions across diverse cultures and ethnicities. It also requires increasing the community accountability of organizations and institutions that are driven by policies and mandates developed outside of the community context.

A Community Networking Approach to the Promotion of Off-Reserve Aboriginal Child Welfare

Based on our initial information and analysis, the concept of “community networking” has emerged as a specific institutional design to facilitate the promotion of social change to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. Community networking encompasses characteristics of both communities and networks. Community characteristics include ongoing interaction between a specific group of people who have a consciousness of common bonds, shared norms and values, and who seek to develop a common vision. Network characteristics include a degree of fluidity in the membership and boundaries of that membership and differential linkages of members to other individuals and organizations that offer information, ideas, identities, and resources. The non-hierarchical nature of the community network is a characteristic of both communities and networks.⁸

While the research is only beginning to map the networks of committee membership, it is already

⁸ Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz, (eds), *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Javier Mignone, *Measuring Social Capital: A Guide For First Nations Communities* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2003). ⁸ Filippo Dal Fiore, “Communities Versus Networks; The Implications on Innovation and Social Change. *American Behavioral Scientist* 50 (2007), 857-66.

apparent that the Aboriginal Interagency Committee members are connected to children, youth and elders; men and women; individuals living in the town of Peace River as well as those living in surrounding communities; First Nations, Métis and Inuit as well as non-Aboriginal community members. They are employed in government, community based non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, education systems, and health care systems and are connected to various regional, provincial, and federal government departments as well as to a range of civil society organizations. These connections create multiple sources of information, expertise and resources.

The involvement of many members is specifically supported by the mandates of the organizations or programs that they are employed by. Member organizations also contribute financially to the work of the AIC by providing funding for specific events or through in-kind contributions. Yet the vision and values, as well as the overall direction and activities of the AIC, are developed at the grassroots level through dialogue and consensus building and are periodically reviewed by the members to ensure their continuing relevance.

The Vision and Values of the Aboriginal Interagency Committee

The vision of the AIC is to “promote unity, respect, tradition, values, and culture of the Aboriginal people for the well-being of our communities.” The activities and events of the Aboriginal Interagency Committee include: strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds; strengthening relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members; and challenging the institutional racism embedded in formal community systems.

Strengthening Aboriginal Lifeworlds

Strengthening of Aboriginal lifeworlds includes the promotion and celebration of Aboriginal identity; efforts to repair and enhance social relations, including respect for elders, extended family and community involvement in the care and socialization of children and ending

interpersonal violence within Aboriginal families and communities. In the off-reserve context, it also encompasses building awareness and respect among all of the different Aboriginal nations and cultures residing within the community. Above all, strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds includes enhancing cultural knowledge and awareness of cultural traditions.

Enhancing Relations Among Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Community Members

Fostering greater understanding and respect among non-Aboriginal people towards Aboriginal people, their cultures, traditions and knowledge is also a vital element of this community approach. This entails education and information sharing as well as the creation of opportunities for ongoing interaction and relationship building between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. There is a particular focus on strengthening the relationship between municipal government and the Aboriginal community.

Challenging Institutional Racism

From schools, to health care clinics, to businesses and corporations, to municipal, regional and provincial government programs and services, Aboriginal people continue to be impacted by forms of racism embedded in Euro-Canadian structures and institutions. This occurs in ways that are blatant and direct as well as in ways that are more subtle and insidious. The AIC works to create dialogue between decision-makers in these institutions and the Aboriginal community. It thereby promotes greater cultural respect and safety for all Aboriginal people.

However, the committee also honors the autonomy of its individual members. Not everyone participates in all of the activities. There are times when members may choose not to participate in a particular activity whether for personal reasons or to avoid conflicts of interest with their agencies or organizations. Congruent with Aboriginal approaches, a guiding principle within the committee (and one that is honored

by committee members) is to respect each individual's – and organization's – contribution to the work of the committee as well as the right to choose the nature and extent of that contribution.

Emerging Policy Lessons for Off-Reserve Aboriginal Child Welfare

1. The importance of social promotion activities

The first and most cogent lesson of our research is the need to recognize the importance of social promotion activities to address Aboriginal child welfare. The focus of social promotion is on social change at the community level. While social promotion is only one element in a continuum of approaches to child welfare – prevention, early intervention, and protection are also necessary elements – we emphasize that social promotion has been a missing element in off-reserve child welfare policy. Specific strategies need to be developed within specific community contexts. Yet common goals should emphasize strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds, enhancing relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members and challenging forms of racism embedded in institutional programs and policies.

2. Social promotion requires a community networking approach

Community networking fosters intersectoral, non-hierarchical collaboration between diverse community members with a wide range of internal and external links. It requires commitment to a common vision, values, and beliefs. More research is needed to understand how community networks are enabled and sustained, but a minimum requirement may be agency and organizational mandates that include goals of action-focused intersectoral social promotion at the community level, as well as willingness to pool and coordinate financial resources. The best ways to achieve these goals should be left up to community members and agencies rather than being defined by organizations and agencies outside the community.

3. A community network requires a formal structure

Such a structure is required for planning and implementing social promotion activities. This structure requires meeting space and time, financial and administrative support, coordination and leadership as well as regular review of progress, identification of new or ongoing priorities, and reaffirmation of commitment. The above should be shared among all members and member organizations. In the example given above the formal structure through which the community network operates is the Aboriginal Interagency Committee. While Northwest Alberta Child and Family Services Authority provides considerable financial and administrative support, the committee truly is a multisectoral collaboration.

4. Grounding in Aboriginal cultures and traditions, led by Aboriginal people

We would also suggest that a community network to enhance Aboriginal child welfare may not be effective if it is not grounded in Aboriginal cultures and traditions and led by Aboriginal people using Aboriginal values and processes; this includes the guidance of elders in all its activities. In off-reserve contexts this will likely entail respect for and inclusion of multiple Aboriginal cultures, values, and traditions.

5. Ongoing research aimed at building capacity for practitioners and agencies

Ongoing research is needed to enable better understanding of strategies for and impacts of social promotion on the welfare of Aboriginal children that could translate into capacity building for community practitioners, agencies and organizations. This research should be grounded in an Aboriginal epistemology and should respect the resiliency embedded in Aboriginal ways of caring for children, families and communities. It should also be attuned to and respectful of the diversity of community cultures and contexts within Canada.



Conclusion

The crisis of Aboriginal child welfare is unlikely to improve as long as the problems continue to be defined with the narrow scope of formal systems of child protection. The achievement of change requires attention to strengthening social relations within off-reserve communities, both

among Aboriginal community members and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members. As well, institutions and organizations within the community need to become more accountable to the Aboriginal community. This brief highlights a policy framework that can facilitate such an approach.