URBAN ABORIGINAL FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN CARE

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF PARENTS LIVING IN FREDERICTON AND HALIFAX

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PREAMBLE

This report presents the results of an urban Aboriginal community driven project that has gathered stories of fourteen people who have experienced child welfare services either as parents, as children or both. The intent underlying this research is to share the lessons learned through the participants' narratives in order to contribute to systemic changes within child welfare services.

The reader will notice that the participants' narratives reflect the many challenges they faced and, therefore, their frustrations, calling for systemic changes. However, they also shared stories about positive experiences that serve as examples of best practices. We know that people who choose to become social workers are well intended, caring and compassionate, we believe that child protection social workers have the best interest of the children and the families at heart, and that they embrace the core values of the profession, namely the respect for human dignity and social justice. We also know that their work is set in a system imbedded in policies, procedures, and often insufficient resources, leaving social workers with the impression of having little if any leverage to intervene in the way – and with the resources – needed to support families and children.

Hence, we understand that it is a system confronted with many challenges; a broken system in need of mending, at the least, or of transformation at the best. Although we recognize that systems are made of individuals, it is not individual changes that are required, but systemic changes. We hope that this report will contribute to the reflection process that is already in course, following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, the first five of which relate to child welfare services.

INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH QUESTION, CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE

Aboriginal children, youth and families across Canada face multiple and persistent disadvantages, central among which is the disproportionate number of children in out-of-home care. This overrepresentation has increased in the last four decades to the point that the number of Aboriginal children in child welfare services today is approximately three times higher than the number placed in residential schools at the height of their operations in the 1940s (Bennett & Auger, 2013). Moreover, the tendency of overrepresentation is ubiquitous: from the first call to child protection authorities up to the decision to place children in out-of-home care (Blackstock, Trocmé & Bennett, 2004: 14). However, "Aboriginal children reported to child welfare authorities do not appear to have more health, cognitive, behavioral, or emotional problems than non-Aboriginal children, even though they are being admitted into out-of-home care at a higher rate" (Blackstock, Trocmé & Bennett, 2004:14).

The underlying forces driving this growth are well known: out-of-home placements of Aboriginal children result primarily from cases involving child neglect, which is ultimately linked to factors such as poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, substance abuse and other structural inequalities stemming from colonialism and assimilationist government policies (Blackstock, Trocmé & Bennett, 2004; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Sinha et al., 2011; Trocmé, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004).

Although scientific and political attention has mainly focused on Western and Central Canada, the situation is not inherently different in the Atlantic Provinces. In New Brunswick, for example, First Nation children – who represent the vast majority of Aboriginal children in the province – are up to six times more at risk than non-First Nation children of being removed from their home and placed in foster care; between four and five times more at risk of being charged as young offenders; and more likely to suffer from chronic health problems, live in homes that require major repairs, and be subjected to domestic violence, sexual assault or incest (Richard, 2010; for historical contextualization, see Paul, 2006). Children in care also face higher risks after leaving care, including drifting from care to the justice system (Bowes & Hayes, 1999) and homelessness.

Among Aboriginal families with children in care, those living in urban, off-reserve contexts encounter unique difficulties. All things considered, when child welfare services apprehend a child as a last resort to protect him or her from neglect or other types of maltreatment, it has lasting and often devastating effects on everyone – children, parents, and communities at large.

Added to this is the fact that urban Aboriginal children and families often lack community or kin support and are left on their own to navigate the non-Aboriginal mainstream child welfare system, a system that remains, as a whole, ill-equipped for implementing approaches that are preventative, community based and culturally respectful (Davies et al., 2007; on the need to develop culturally appropriate health services for urban Aboriginal people, see Sookraj et al., 2010). While on-reserve agencies across the country seek to overcome these obstacles – albeit with often limited means – urban Aboriginal people appear to be the forgotten among the forgotten: as indicated by Sinha and Kozlowski (2013: 5), of all 84 Aboriginal child and family agencies surveyed across Canada in 2011, only three were located in urban, off-reserve settings – Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Toronto – despite the fact that urban Aboriginal people constitute the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada: aadnc-aandc.gc.ca[1]).

URBAN ABORIGINAL POPULATION

Understanding the realities of urban Aboriginal families accessing child welfare services in Fredericton and Halifax requires an appreciation of the importance of this population[2].

NEW BRUNSWICK

In 2016, there were 29,380 Aboriginal people in New Brunswick, making up 4.0% of the population. Of the Aboriginal population in New Brunswick, 59.8% (17,575) were First Nations people, 34.7% (10,200) were Métis, and 1.3% (385) were Inuit. Most of the Aboriginal population is living off reserve (74.6%; 21,915 people).

In the last decade, there was a 66.4% (11,725 people) increase of Aboriginal people living in New Brunswick. Most of the increase (96%; 11,265 people) is explained by Aboriginal people

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[1] This ministry has seen transformation since the beginning of our research project. It now consists of two ministries: Indigenous Services Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.

[2] All the following numbers and statistics are from Statistics Canada. 2017. *Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census*.

living off reserve. As the numbers suggest, the urban Aboriginal population (off reserve population) will only continue to grow, it is therefore important that we better understand the needs and experiences of this population gaining in importance.

FREDERICTON

In 2016, there were 4,415 Aboriginal people in Fredericton, making up 4.4% of the population. Of the Aboriginal population in Fredericton, 76.2% (3,365) were First Nations people, 19.1% (845) were Métis, and 1.4% (60) were Inuit.

NOVA SCOTIA

In 2016, there were 51,495 Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia, making up 5.7% of the population. Of the Aboriginal population in Nova Scotia, 50.2% (25,830) were First Nations people, 45.3% (23,310) were Métis, and 1.5% (795) were Inuit. 18.2% (9,350) of the Aboriginal population live on reserve and 81.8% (42,140) live off-reserve.

In the last decade, there was a 113% (27,230 people) increase of Aboriginal people living in Nova Scotia. Most of the increase (95%; 25,945 people) is explained by Aboriginal people living off reserve. Again, as the numbers suggest, the urban Aboriginal population will only continue to grow and it is important that we better understand their needs and experiences.

HALIFAX

In 2016, there were 15,815 Aboriginal people in Halifax, making up 4.0% of the population. Of the Aboriginal population in Halifax, 50.3% (7,955) were First Nations people, 43.7% (6,910) were Métis, and 2.6% (405) were Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Child welfare services in urban and rural setting - outside reserves - are offered to all families, without regards to specific populations. Understanding the Aboriginal families' experiences with these mainstream services is crucial so that these services can be improved. As aforementioned, the number of Aboriginal children in child welfare services today is approximately three times higher than the number placed in residential schools at the height of their operations in the 1940s (Bennett & Auger, 2013). This overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care had Blackstock ask this crucial question: "Residential schools: Did they really close or just morph into child welfare?" (Blackstock, 2007).

This question alone demonstrates the importance of a better understanding of child welfare services from the point of view of parents that access those services.

EXISTING SERVICES FOR URBAN ABORIGINAL FAMILIES IN FREDERICTON AND HALIFAX

As previously stated, child welfare services offered to urban Aboriginal families are the same as those offered to non-Aboriginal families. They do not always consider the specific resources that, in some cases, exist in the communities and provide a safe environment and support for urban Aboriginal families when accessing child welfare services. Friendship Centers and Head Start programs are key resources. However, we have seen cases where some of these services have reached out to child welfare services and have been successful in building relations with key stakeholders in the system to address some issues faced by urban Aboriginal families. We will come back to those winning practices in the last section of our report. Below is a list of existing services for urban Aboriginal families in Fredericton and Halifax.

FREDERICTON

According to Jodoin (2017: 8), "the predominant organizations that service urban Aboriginal people in Fredericton, New Brunswick are Under One Sky Head Start Program, New Brunswick Aboriginal People's Council (NBAPC) and Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation". We also included Gignoo Transition House in our list, since this organization was mentioned several times throughout the Fredericton's sharing circles.

Under One Sky Head Start is "a culturally relevant Head Start program that services off-reserve families. Parents participate in monthly parent sessions which help to foster a sense of community amongst the parents as well as a deeper engagement in their children's education" (Jodoin, 2017: 8).

The *New Brunswick Aboriginal People's Council* (NBAPC) is an Off-Reserve Aboriginal voice for approximately 28,260 Status and Non-Status Aboriginal people who reside in the Province of New Brunswick. The NBAPC provides services, programs, and a political voice for their members.

Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation is "an organization that provides affordable housing to off-reserve Aboriginal people residing in Fredericton and across New Brunswick. It offers

numerous housing programs including rental and home ownership programs to help people of varying income levels" (Jodoin, 2017: 8).

Gignoo Transition House is a not for profit shelter for First Nation women and children who are experiencing domestic violence: physical, sexual, emotional, mental, spiritual, and financial. They offer culturally appropriate programs and services that meet the need of Aboriginal women and children in crisis (Gignoo Transition House: www.gignoohouse.ca/).

There are also other organizations doing important work for off-reserve Aboriginal people. These include Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy; the Joint Economic Development Initiative; New Brunswick Aboriginal Workplace Essential Skills; and the Aboriginal Workforce Development Initiative. Additionally, the University of New Brunswick's Mi'kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre and St. Thomas University's Aboriginal Education Initiative offer invaluable services to Aboriginal people pursuing a postsecondary degree in Fredericton.

HALIFAX

The predominant organization that service urban Aboriginal people in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is the *Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre*, with its nine core programs. The mission of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre is to improve the lives of Aboriginal people living in an urban environment through social and cultural programing. They provide services and programs in a context that acknowledges the rich artistic and spiritual traditions of Aboriginal people, to facilitate cultural knowledge transfer in an urban Aboriginal environment. Their programs pertain to employment, education, health, justice, child development, and research (Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre: http://www.mymnfc.com/).

The *Mi'kmaw Child Development Centre* is an extension program of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre and a non-profit Native Family Resource Centre that consists of an Aboriginal Head Start Program, a Community Action Program for Children, a Provincial Child development Initiative as well as a provincially funded Daycare Centre. The mandate of the Centre is to provide quality culturally appropriate programs and resources for First Nation individuals and their families who are residing off-reserve.

It's important to reiterate that the urban Aboriginal population continues to grow. It is therefore important that we better understand the needs and experiences of this group of people in order to ensure services that are relevant and that promote their wellbeing.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In this community-driven project, three research objectives were identified by the team members and have guided this project: 1) Hearing the voice of Aboriginal parents with children in care living in Fredericton and Halifax, in order to learn from their experience and better understand their challenges and needs; 2) Seeking useful and relevant ways to reduce the number of Aboriginal children place in out-of-home care and help parents care for their own children; 3) Promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal families living in Atlantic Canadian cities, namely Fredericton and Halifax.

For this purpose, two key qualitative lines of questioning have been explored. First and foremost, emphasis was put on what can be called "parenting narratives", which are life stories revealing the subjective experiences of parents and the complexities of parenthood, and the way they vary according to culture, class, and the life course of individuals (on the concept of parenting or mothering narratives and its relevance to child welfare research and practices, see Davies et al. 2007). From the standpoint of parents who deal or have recently dealt with the current child welfare system, what works, what needs improvement, and what should be done to prevent out-of-home placements? Second, to complement the information gathered through parenting narratives, what is to be learned from other key informants, such as young women and men who have experienced out-of-home care during their childhood and devoted community workers who collaborate on a daily basis with parents whose children are in care today?

The project is based on community-driven research principles, as promoted by Maori scholar Linda Smith (1999, see also Kenny et al., 2004). This is to say that its aims and scope reflect the requirements, aspirations, and views of all members of the collaborative research team and more importantly those of both community organizational partners, namely the Under One Sky Frienship Center in Fredericton, and the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre in Halifax. In this respect, the research team focused on self-identifying Aboriginal parents with children in care and other key informants who reside or work in the cities of Fredericton, New Brunswick, and Halifax, Nova Scotia, where respectively each community organizational partner operates. The two cities represent a strategic locus of interest because they attract a significant portion of Aboriginal peoples living in Atlantic Canada: of the 29,380 New Brunswickers reporting an Aboriginal identity, 4,415 (15%) live in Fredericton; and of all 51,495 from Nova Scotia, 15,815 (30%) live in Halifax (Statistics Canada, 2017).

This report is not an end in itself, but a means to contribute to the reduction of overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and help urban Aboriginal mothers and fathers care for their own children. It is the first of many steps in a research process that will ultimately consider the views of service providers – including front line state social workers and foster families – and seek to translate the gathered knowledge into a community action plan. It is expected that results produced by this research process will help design family or community-centered child welfare practices, programs, and policies that are both more effective and more respectful of the distinctiveness and resilience of Aboriginal families. These results will be especially relevant to community and government partners in answering key questions, such as to whether the mainstream child welfare system should be amended, as was the criminal justice system along the lines of the "Gladue principal" (Roach & Rudin, 2000), or whether self-governed urban Aboriginal agencies should be created instead, as the idea has been discussed in the past in both provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. This will also be of central importance to other community organizations who are seeking innovative approaches to better assist urban Aboriginal children, youth and families, as well as to child welfare services across the country who are in the process of transitioning from a one-dimensional child-centered approach to a family or community-centered differential response model (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003).

METHODS

This research is as much about results as it is about methodology. The data required for this project was gathered through non-structured and semi-structured group interviews that took the form of "sharing circles", which involve traditional knowledge and practices. During the sharing circles, an experienced Elder conducted opening and closing ceremonies and guided participants through the discussions. The use of traditional ways and wisdom in this context has many merits: it not only warrants high-quality research by creating safe spaces so participants can exchange their views and narrate their life stories without fear or judgement, but it also helps them to heal from past troubling experiences and memories as they reconnect with their Aboriginal identity (Mckenzie & Morrissette, 2002).

To understand the lived experiences of parents with children in care, a group of participants from each city – eight in Halifax and six in Fredericton – have accepted to participate in a series of four or five sharing circles, to which took part an Elder as well as academics and Aboriginal

community workers. Sharing circles enabled participants to fully understand the aims and scope of the research project, ease their way into sensitive discussions, and ensure their wellbeing by debriefing with members of the research team, namely Elders and Aboriginal community workers. During the first three or four sharing circles, participants shared their experience about child welfare services. The experiences with child welfare services were varied: experience as parents, during their childhood, or both. One last sharing circle took place in each city, during which participants had the opportunity to validate the gathered data regarding their life stories and share their views on the analysis and interpretation of the research's results.

TIMELINE, DISSEMINATION AND OUTCOMES

The research process involved two different sets of actions over a two-year period: data collection and data analysis. The data collection started in January 2016 and ended in December 2016. Sharing circles in Halifax were conducted from January 2016 to February 2016 and sharing circles in Fredericton were held from November to December 2016. The data analysis started in January 2017, which included transcriptions and content analysis by a research assistant (January-August 2017), consultations with members of the collaborative research team (September 2017). The last phase comprised of validation by the participants (November 2017) and the final analysis of research results (December 2017-February 2018). The report was finalized in November 2018.

PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS

In this community-driven project, urban Aboriginal communities have full control on how knowledge is gathered, shared and used, ensuring the respect of traditional practices and worldviews and working to bring desired changes and benefits to their members. It is to be noted that the research results will not necessarily be shared within academic circles through conferences, researcher articles and the like; more importantly, they are destined to be used by both community and government partners in their ongoing effort to reduce out-of-home placements and help urban Aboriginal parents care for their own children.

FINDINGS

Through the different participants' life stories, it is undeniable that numerous elements of the system are broken and that it affects the parents' ability to exercise their role as parents. And yet, participants also mentioned that nothing is irreparable. The participants shared preoccupations regarding different systems (e.g. child welfare, justice, health, education, housing, etc.) as all these systems are interrelated and affect them both as individuals and as parents. However, since the project focuses on child welfare system, the following findings will only pertain to that system. The findings are presented in two sections:

1. Findings with regard to **families**;
2. Findings with regard to **families' perceptions of social workers**.

Throughout this section that gives access to the participants experiences, their voices are echoed by literature. As previously mentioned, the three objectives of this community-driven project are as follows:

1. Hearing the voice of Aboriginal parents with children in care living in Fredericton and Halifax, in order to learn from their experience and better understand their challenges and needs;
2. Seeking useful and relevant ways to reduce the number of Aboriginal children placed in out-of-home care and help parents care for their own children;
3. Promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal families living in Atlantic Canadian cities, namely Fredericton and Halifax.

NOTE: The names of the participants shared in this report are fictitious. As only a few men participated, all participants were given feminine names to make sure they were not identifiable. The excerpts respect verbatim, except for expressions that might allow the identification of participants. When certain elements were changed, they always respected the meaning expressed by the words of the participants.

FAMILIES

This first section focuses on the experiences of families with child welfare services. It reflects the wishes and needs expressed by participants when it comes to child welfare services. Three main topics emerged from the discussions: interventions, community driven initiatives and some solutions put forward.

INTERVENTIONS

These findings are based on the experience of participants – as parents or during their childhood – in relation to interventions received from child welfare services. The experiences shared by participants often relate to challenges faced while in contact with child welfare services. Nonetheless, it is important to note that parents also talked about encounters with well-intended social workers. Five elements emerged with regards to the types of interventions that they consider helpful and responding to their needs: proactive interventions, interventions supporting the whole families, interventions that listen to the children, interventions in collaboration with the community and interventions based on Aboriginal practices.

There are certain pieces with my agency and social workers that were on the positive side.
There were negative parts too. – Gina

Proactive interventions

Sometimes they intervene when they shouldn't and there are times where they should intervene and they don't. [...] When I think about what could have been a benefit for my family, it would be to have someone stepping in. Not to remove the children, but to support my family. – Amber

I'd like to see the Child care services having more proof and evidence before coming in and taken the child away. Not just basing it on assumptions or their opinions. [You shouldn't be] finding out later why they took your child. - Nicole

Some participants shared that there was a point in their life where they recognized they needed services and support to help them in a time of crisis. Some of them did not want to contact child welfare services because they feared they would lose their children in the process. Others did contact child welfare services, but they didn't get the services they hoped for.

Participants want child welfare services to provide proactive interventions to support families who are facing a crisis. Participants noted the importance of having outreach services. Early intervention could prevent escalation of the situation. It is essential for child welfare services to work with

the urban Aboriginal organization to build trust between the urban Aboriginal community and the services, so parents are more inclined to ask for help.

Interventions supporting the families

They should go in with the mind frame of supporting the family instead of apprehending the child. I get it, you want to protect the children. You got to go in. It's a family. Families want to protect their child just as much as the agency is supposed to want to protect the child. And more than anything, they need to support them all. They leave you there and say, "give me your children while you're down there". They put you down lower. – Johanne

We had actually one social worker that did not want my kids in care. She fought. […] She looked at us like a family. It wasn`t children with parents. She came up with a plan and she made it happen. This woman changed the system as she could. She even told me that she was this close from quitting her job the way the supervisors were acting towards us at first. - Olivia

Participants voiced out that time, resources, and services should be invested in the family before removing children from their homes. Furthermore, they added that the services provided should be accessible and support all members of the family so that all members of the family could feel like they are an important part of the solution. According to the participants, it is essential to embrace the family as a whole.

It is also crucial to have transparent communication with the parents and their children and to keep all members informed of what is going on. The parents need to know what they must address and they wish to participate in the development of the action plan. Parents want support in accomplishing their plan and they need their efforts to be recognized.

Although it should happen far less often then it does in the current practice, participants acknowledge that certain situations require the removal of children from their home. However, when a removal is required, the participants mentioned the importance and the necessity that social workers keep working with the whole family to favor family reunification, which is compatible with the spirit of the provincial laws pertaining to child protection (Family Services Act, SNB 1980).

Interventions that listen to the children

One of the big thing, for the social workers, is to actually listen to the child. I know they're supposed to do regular visits with children and stuff like that. As for me, [when I was a child] I didn't get that a lot. I didn't get regular visits. They were coming for like, 15 minutes, 20 minutes and "Oh. You're fine. Everything is good here." - Daisy

Every ninety days, my social worker would come and she would make me sign that we reviewed my rights and responsibilities. I hated it, until I got older and started to use my rights and responsibilities. They give you a book with your rights and responsibilities as a kid in the system, as well as a card with the name of the child and youth advocate. Especially in a group home setting, you should have this. And I know that there are hundreds of kids that didn't get that. – Gina

Individuals who have experienced out-of-home care during their childhood shared the importance of really listening to the children in care. Often, children were not informed regarding their situation and did not feel like their opinion mattered.

They want their social worker to provide a safe environment where children are encouraged to talk. Children need to be consulted when it comes to decision regarding their situation. They have to feel that their opinion is valued and has an impact on the decisions that affect them.

Farris-Manning & Zandstra (2003: 13) refer to Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child" (The United Nations, 1989: art. 12). The authors emphasize the following: "this is a very powerful and far-reaching principle which all Canadian service providers involved with children are required to implement". Hence, the preamble of the *Family Services Act* is very clear in that matter: « children have [...]a right to be heard in the course of, and to participate in, the processes that lead to decisions that affect them and that they are capable of understanding (*Family Services Act*, SNB 1980).

Children also need to know their rights, their responsibilities, and the resources they can access. A participant suggested that these rights, responsibilities, and resources be discussed with the children in care every 90 days by their social worker. Participants emphasized that a child is never too young to understand his/her situation. Social workers can explain the situation in words adapted to the level of understanding of the child. They can also review the child's

rights, responsibilities, and resources in a language that is accessible for the child.

Interventions in collaboration with the community

We go out and talk to all the child protection agencies and we let them know every six months. We're letting them know who we are. What I would love to see in a perfect world is that they would start coming to us and saying how can you help this family, what supports can you put in place because we don't want to take their children. Can you help us build this family up? That would make us really happy and we would be really glad to step in and take some of those pieces because I don't think we've ever seen a parent that walked through the door that doesn't have some wonderful skills. Every one of us has skills. Every one of us. Every one of us has things that they need as parents. – Community worker

We had a lot of help from [community organization]. They were there a lot. From step one they were there with us. - Paige

Participants emphasized that urban Aboriginal organizations have something to offer, namely as support services and culturally safe environments. When resources are available in urban Aboriginal communities, they can help support the whole family to avoid having to remove children from their families. When it does come to out-of-home care, community organizations can provide an environment for the children to learn about their culture. For example, they can offer a space where families can have supervised visits, as well as opportunities where children can participate in activities that are culturally significant. When those resources are not available, child welfare services can work with urban Aboriginal organizations to create them.

This echoes to the Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015: 1) for the federal and provincial governments to commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care by "providing adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside".

Interventions based on Aboriginal practices

[The system]'s flawed. It doesn't work for us. What we're trying to do is find something that does work for us. And I think that's possible, but it has to come from us. Not to us. – Amber

Participants want new practices to be developed and implemented in collaboration with urban Aboriginal communities and their organizations. For example, Family Group Conference is a process based on Aboriginal practices. In this process, "families are at the center of the decision-making, recognizing that they know best what they need to provide for the care and safety of their children" (Government of New Brunswick, 2018: para 5).

Participants gave other examples of practices that could be put in place. For instance, adopting an Aboriginal continuum of care for all Aboriginal families that come into the child welfare system. One of the participant mentioned that the wellness wheel could be incorporated during meetings and when elaborating action plans with families.

Participants further mentioned they would like to see Elders as part of the list of professionals – like psychologist or psychiatrist – to provide support for families (parents and children). Moreover, sharing circles could be used when making decisions, but also as a way to provide healing for family members.

COMMUNITY DRIVEN INITIATIVES

A key element raised by participants throughout the research is the need for community involvement, particularly with respect to consulting communities and transforming the system.

Consulting communities

And if more funding does come across, some should come across to the Aboriginal people so that we can put these things in place. If anyone is going to understand the children, it's going to be us. – Community Worker

Participants insisted that urban Aboriginal communities, and their organizations, be consulted regarding changes that affect them. Participants brought to light different changes needed on an individual level (social workers) and on a structural level (child welfare system) that are necessary to better support urban Aboriginal families in the context of child welfare services.

Urban Aboriginal organizations are the knowledge holders with regards to their community. Therefore, changes implemented in tandem with the community are more likely to have positive impact and ensure a foundation for success. Participants were clear: real consultation means that communities have a role in decision-making.

Sookraj et al. (2010: 154) argue that strategies to build the capacity of mainstream health and social services organizations to provide culturally appropriate services should be developed and implemented. They point out that "these changes may be pursued in conjunction with the pursuit of stronger collaborative relationships between Aboriginal communities and service providers and mainstream providers who serve urban Aboriginal peoples" (Sookraj et al., 2010: 154).

Transforming the system

It's the system that's broken. Not the people. We have to stop trying to fix the people and start fixing the system. – Amber

It doesn't really matter if you're an Aboriginal person or a non-Aboriginal person. They're still delivering the same system. And that's why it's flawed. It doesn't work for us. – Amber

I lost my child because of my addiction. I'm taking responsibility for that and I respect them to keep my son safe and everybody else safe. But what I went through to get our son back was a nightmare, it was a complete nightmare. No support. It was a complete nightmare to find out that the system is broken. It's corrupted. - Leslie

Stories from participants, as well as statistics provided in the introduction, demonstrate that child welfare services must be transformed to better serve the Aboriginal people living off reserve. Those changes should not only happen at an individual level (social workers), but should occur throughout the system (policy changes).

On the topic of the disproportionate representation of neglect as the primary form of child maltreatment for Aboriginal families, Blackstock, Trocmé and Bennett (2004: 14) suggest "that targeted investment in culturally based community development and prevention programs, which focus on the eradication of child neglect, may substantially reduce future incidents of maltreatment".

Blackstock and Trocmé (2005: 30) further indicate that "provincial and territorial child welfare authorities have made some nominal attempts to reverse this pattern of discrimination, but the continual increase in placements points to the pressing need for bolder action at community and structural levels". Participants expressed that it is essential to rethink those services in collaboration with urban Aboriginal organizations. These organizations know their communities and their people. They know what is needed and they must be in the driver's seat.

Blackstock and Trocmé (2005: 30-31) argue that stronger communities equipped with resources to respond to child poverty, inadequate housing, and addictions are necessary to address the issue of Aboriginal children entering the child welfare system.

A FEW SOLUTIONS PUT FORWARD

Throughout the sharing circles, participants identified solutions to specific issues – not necessarily priority issues – regarding: foster homes, gradual transition out of the system, group homes, ombudsperson, and timeline.

Foster homes

I'm not saying it's wrong to put Native child in with white people. But they need to have a common ground. And so many times they take Native children and put them with white people or put them in the Catholic schools or they put them within the church system. It's wrong. - Bernice

My social worker took me to this older lady. She wasn't First Nations, but she had a lot of respect for First Nations. And she's had a lot of First Nations' kids in her care. I stayed with her, went to school and smartened up. I got off drugs and I finished high school. - Gina

When out-of-home care is the only option, child welfare services have to work with foster families to avoid putting children in difficult situation (e.g., loyalty conflicts where children must choose between parents and foster family). Participants would like to see social workers and foster homes working in collaboration with urban Aboriginal organizations to enable children to stay connected with their culture. With appropriate funding, those organizations could also provide cultural awareness opportunities for foster homes.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015: 1) called on governments to enact legislation that establishes standards for Aboriginal child apprehension and custody cases that determines "as an important priority, a requirement that placements of Aboriginal children into temporary and permanent care be culturally appropriate".

Rycus and Hughes (1998) share that the cultural differences between children and their foster families can cause tremendous stress for the child and frustration for the foster parents. The child may not understand the "rules" in his new home, while parents may misinterpret the child's actions and punish him for behaviors that may have been valued and encouraged in his own culture. Hence, foster parents should be trained on all relevant cultural issues so that they become culturally competent when they welcome children in their homes. An intervener who knows and understands the rules and

norms of a child's culture is better able to prepare the family for what he or she can expect from that child.

Anderson (2014: 22) lists a few practical ways to encourage preservation of children's culture and ethnic heritage if placement cannot occur in the same cultural, ethnic, or racial group: "the carers should engage positively with the child's family, if available in the community; the carers should undertake to positively promote the child's heritage; […] the carers should openly discuss the child's background, and acknowledge and address racism». Although Anderson (2014) refers to cultural and ethnic identity from a black/non-white's perspective, these observations can be transferred to an Aboriginal/ non-white's perspective:

> It is essential in order for people to have a full and cohesive sense of self, that they are able to develop their cultural and ethnic identity while they develop their individual identity and as they grow and develop from children into adults. If a person is denied access to their culture and is not able to develop that cultural identity through the process of socialization which occurs within families and communities, the person will experience greater difficulties as an adult in forming a positive self identity and esteem. There should be access to positive black/non-white attachment figures which the child can internalize. (…) The child should be raised in an environment where the black child is normal rather than exceptional. The child should be exposed to a range of black role models coping with everyday life. There should be people or organizations that are a resource for ways of coping with and challenging racism experienced by the child. There is a requirement that any carer […] must be able to demonstrate an active understanding of the developing needs of the black child. The carers must have an understanding of racism. The carers must have a commitment to challenging racism and discrimination (Anderson, 2014: 22).

Furthermore, Piquemal, LeBow, Galetcaia & Peters (2017) identify two aspects that are important for adoptive parents (we add foster parents) to ensure while caring for a child from another culture, namely the need to favor cultural integration by engaging in cultural activities associated with the child's cultural heritage (language, celebrations, stories, etc.) and to favor cultural socialization by initiating contacts with members of their native community.

Gradual transition out of the system - Aging out

If these systems are in place to help people, then they really should help people. Kids that grew up in that system got chewed up and spit out. They have nowhere to go. I just don't think it's safe to take the child away and remove the family. And then, when they reach a certain age, there's nothing in place and there's no-one checking up on you afterwards. - Gina

Participants highlighted the need to provide services to children that "age out" of the system. Those services should ensure them financial security, emotional support, community support, cultural bearings, and life skills training. Participants noted that this assistance from child welfare services should be individualized to correspond to the specific needs of the young adults and facilitate their gradual transition out of the system. Children aging out of the system require a support system in place that includes Aboriginal organizations. This support system needs to be in place and involved during and after the child is in care in order to facilitate the transition. In New Brunswick as in Nova Scotia, the cut-off age is 19, "with services available to those between 16-19 years of age on a voluntary basis[3]" (Doucet, 2015: 2).

The National Youth in Care Network (NYICN) has identified "that for youth to successfully complete their transition to adulthood, they need improved access to and availability of resources and financial support" (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003: 9). A study of street youth in Toronto found that 51% of youth surveyed were former children in care and that all youth surveyed expressed the need for more financial support and life skills after care (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003: 9).

Doucet (2015: 2) illustrates another issue that prevails in New Brunswick regarding children in care and protection,

> Youth older than 15 years of age will often refuse protection services since the caveat often entails living in foster care, group homes or residential drug treatment centers in order to access services; previous negative experiences within the system and frequent placement

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[1]   The department can also continue to provide child protection services to youth up to the age of 21 if the youth is still enrolled in public high school (Doucet, 2015).

disruption in foster care often discourage youth from accepting further placements. There are currently no specific policies or regulations outlining alternatives for youth who do not wish to remain or enter the child welfare system under protection status in order to access protection services.

She offers four recommendations: 1) Provide transition support services to all post-guardianship youth up to the age of 24 and eliminating the current cut-off ages; 2) Develop an educational program for youth who are preparing to transition out of care, including components on career development, life skills, financial literacy and independent living; 3) Make post-secondary funding available to all post-guardianship youth up until the age of 24, with no restrictions on the number of degrees attained, change of program, or timeframe of enrollment into post-secondary institutions; 4) Offer and encourage exit interviews to all youth exiting care (Doucet, 2015).

Group homes

If you're taking children away and you run out of foster homes, then you're just trying to find a bed for them. A lot of times, they end up in group homes. How are you supposed to be nurtured, to grow and to be loved there, when it's shift workers? How are you supposed to come up to somebody when you know that they're only here for one more hour? It just blows my mind that they still exist. You're not making the situation any better. You're making it worst and those kids end up worst off. It's really important to think about the past history with First Nation people. That vicious circle needs to stop.
- Gina

There is an imminent need of finding an alternative solution to group homes for children in out-of-home care. Participants shared the necessity of creating a space (or spaces) where children feel safe and cared for. The alternative that will be put in place must consider the specific needs of Aboriginal children and the history of their communities, particularly the impact of residential schools.

It is difficult to find statistics relating to the number of Aboriginal children in group homes. However, Irwin Elman, the Ontario' Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, indicated the following: "There are no accurate numbers as to how many of the 3,000 children living in Ontario group homes

and another 15,000 living in foster homes, are indigenous or where they are" (Talaga, 2017: para. 18). What is known is the tendency of overrepresentation is omnipresent, from the first call to child protection authorities up to the decision to place children in out-of-home care (Blackstock, Trocmé & Bennett, 2004: 14), we can therefore estimate that the number of Aboriginal children are also overrepresented in group homes.

As far as the types of placements for youth in care, research demonstrates that family-based care is the preferred placement option when compared to group residential options (Kluger et al., 2000: 141). The National Youth in Care Network found that "youth who are in less restrictive placements such as foster homes fare best academically, while those in more restrictive placements such as group homes are less likely to succeed" (NYICN, 2001: 3). Furthermore, youth in foster homes experienced a significantly greater decline in criminal activity (50%) than youth in residential group care (Kluger et al., 2001: 159).

Ombudsperson

If somebody is going to provide you service and you can't really do anything when you have complaints because they're the ones who are controlling everything, maybe it's good to bring an advocate in. In regard to overseeing the processes of complaints. Just like the ombudsman or something like that. - Heather

The need for an Aboriginal Rights' Advocate has been raised as a way to promote these rights and to act as a gatekeeper for these rights. Naming an independent official, in consultation with the urban Aboriginal organizations, charged with representing the interests of the families would allow investigating and addressing complaints of maladministration or a violation of rights. To be able to do their job, that person would have the authority to investigate the services that were provided to the family. In order to do so, the office of the ombudsperson would need to be well-resourced. All members of the family would need to be made aware of the role of the

ombudsperson and have the information to contact this person, if need be.

Timeline

They're letting us know that there are timelines. If you go over certain timelines, your child can go into permanent care. At the same time, they're admitting that they made all these mistakes. They were making it take longer. - Johanne

Participants spoke about timelines in two ways. Firstly, the deadlines imposed on parents. Secondly, the social workers challenges to meet deadlines. Parents feel the pressure of acting quickly to avoid losing the custody of their children. In regard to this issue, participants urge child welfare services to rethink the maximum amount of time a child stays in care before a guardianship order is issued. They also question if those timelines are serving the system rather than the child. Decisions about the care of children should be made from a children's rights perspective in order to take into account what is in the best interest of each child. Those decisions, therefore, must not be made solely based on time constraints in order to respect deadlines.

Participants are critical of the lack of flexibility and double standards when it comes to having to respect the timeline. A shortage of workers or resources should not be the reason why a deadline is not respected (e.g., not filling paperwork on time).

FAMILIES' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

This second section focuses on the experiences of families with social workers, more specifically, their wishes and needs. Most participants recalled positive experiences with social workers, as they expressed that the system has a lot to do with the challenges they faced. Three main topics emerged from the discussions: relationship with the families, social work rooted in Aboriginal culture, and social workers having access to the resources to make a difference.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FAMILIES

The following findings illustrate participants' expectations of social workers with regards to relationships with families. It is about believing families, believing in families, and having a stable relationship.

Believing (in) families – parents and children

My experience is, to them, everybody lies. And that's not the case. Not everybody lies. I'm a very honest family. Social workers are out to save the government money, I don't know why. These people are calling and they're asking for help, so why refuse them? If a woman or a man gets to a point where they realize they need help. They need help with their children, they need help with food, they need help with guidance, they need help with counseling. Why are they being turned away? I don't understand. – Eve

Being a child who was in foster care before, they targeted me when they found out I was pregnant and didn't really give me the chance to prove that I could be better than my mother was before me. As soon as I had my child, they were there. […] They just assumed because I had trouble in my past and my mother had trouble then obviously, I couldn't break the chain. - Myriam

Parents and children need social workers to believe in them. They need their social worker to believe they are good parents and good children. They want their social worker to believe that they will succeed. As participants strongly emphasized, working towards a relationship based on trust with parents and children is necessary. Families need social workers that believe what they are saying. They also need their social worker to be transparent with them.

A transparent relationship will contribute to healing as opposed to hurting. To do so, listening to the parents, the children and the whole family is fundamental. Participants recognized that to be able to have such a relationship with families, social workers require a reasonable workload and not to be overwhelmed. That would allow them to take the time to create relationships and support families in their struggles and challenges, in an engaged and non-judgmental way. A trust-based relationship should be individualized to meet the specific needs of the families they are working with.

Continuity of care with families

The other thing that I found is your cases would be bounced around from case worker to case worker. You wouldn't stay with a case worker for long, so you can't build a relationship with that person or social worker or somebody because... You disclose everything and then, next thing you know, like six months later, another social worker comes along. - Eve

But you also can't give up. You can't give up. It's your job. – Eve

It makes all the difference who the worker is. I had a positive experience with a worker who got to know me. We got to sit down and spend time together. [...] I had an experience with a neighbour calling the cops. The cops came in and called my worker. They thought I was drunk or on drugs because of how calm I was. But my worker came over and she said, that's Isabelle, that's just the way she is. – Isabelle

Participants talked about the important turnover of social workers as affecting their ability to develop a strong and healthy working relationship with them. For the benefit of the parents and children, participants shared that it was both beneficial for the parents and their children to have a stable relationship with the social worker working with their families. Before our report's conclusion, we share an example taken a decision of the Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick. In the decision regarding the *Minister of Social Development v. M.A. & R.A.*, the mother "had 17 parent aide and family first workers, counselors, and social workers on her file, some of who were with her for weeks only, and were replaced by new workers […]. Throughout, aside from three of the workers, [the mother] seemingly cooperated with all of the workers. No explanation was offered for these continual changes" (2014: 82). Participants in the sharing circles also discussed similar situations.

Social workers need to have sufficient time to build a relationship of trust. Families do not want to have to deal with multiple social workers during the process. However, when families feel like trust is lacking, they should be able to ask for a different social worker, with whom they can build a positive relationship.

Participants want child welfare services that meet their needs and that they can identify with. To achieve this, they noted the importance of having more urban Aboriginal social workers and decision-makers, in addition to providing cultural awareness for every employee working in the child welfare system.

Urban Aboriginal social workers and decision-makers

I think that they should have the right people in the system, even if they're white, Aboriginal, Chinese or any sort of culture. It should be people who care about the kids. – Daisy

But I also believe there's more Aboriginal social workers needed. – Bernice

Participants highlighted the importance of having urban Aboriginal social workers. While they acknowledge that non-Aboriginal social workers can work with urban Aboriginal families and develop a positive relationship, they indicated that more Aboriginal social workers are necessary because child welfare services should be representative of the population it is serving. Furthermore, urban Aboriginal social workers grasp the reality of Aboriginal families living in urban context and better understand the cultural and spiritual needs of the community.

More urban Aboriginal individuals are needed as social workers at the intervention level, but also in decision-making positions. An increased number of Aboriginal professionals is expected to contribute to the delivery of culturally appropriate services in mainstream service (Sookraj et al., 2010: 154).

Moreover, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal social workers should have access to advices from Elders. This access should be encouraged and facilitated by the child welfare system in an effort to decolonize practices and services. Many institutions such as universities are now in the process of adopting decolonizing practices.

Cultural awareness

Participants mentioned that families require social workers (individuals) who are culturally aware and who are conscious of Aboriginal history. Having an open mind, a positive attitude regarding Aboriginal people, and avoiding stereotyping can go a long way. Social workers need to be knowledgeable of and open to Aboriginal culture and ways of life, but also to the Aboriginal organizations that make up the community.

This historical and cultural knowledge should be transmitted by universities and the child welfare system from a decolonizing perspective. Both institutions (i.e., education and child welfare) should promote respect for Aboriginal knowledge and reconciliation.

Families also require child welfare services (system) to embrace an anti-oppressive approach to work towards restoration. Child welfare services, as a system, needs to set the tone and impose certain standards. Continuous training for social workers and opportunities to get to know the urban Aboriginal community they are serving should be provided. During this study, some initiatives were taken by child welfare services, namely in New Brunswick, to improve Aboriginal cultural awareness, which is clearly a step in the right direction.

Grasping the impact of Aboriginal history

It was the biggest thing for me to do… (tearing up) because I don't like social workers at all. I hate it. But I had to put that aside because my son needs all the helps that he can get. – Daisy

Regardless of what the social worker's intentions are, the damage is the same. If I stick my foot out unintentionally and one of you trips and breaks her leg. It doesn't matter that it wasn't intentional. She still has a broken leg. - Amber

Participants want social workers to be aware of the Aboriginal history, especially child protection and the role social worker played with regards to residential schools and the sixties scoop. Knowing where families are coming from, will help build relationships based on trust. Often, the mistrust or the dislike of social workers expressed by the participants was related to past experiences either as a child or as a child whose life has been affected by the intergenerational transmission of the trauma experienced by their own parents that have attended residential schools or were children of the sixties scoop. Interventions that are infused with the knowledge and understanding of these historical wrongs that lead to traumatic experiences will allow social workers to better support these families and create more positive working relationships with them.

This finding echoes the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015: 1): "Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools, […] about the potential for Aboriginal communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing [and] requiring that all child-welfare decision makers consider the impact of the residential school experience on children and their caregivers".

GIVING SOCIAL WORKERS THE RESOURCES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Most participants were empathetic towards social workers. They understood that a clear majority wanted the best for children and their families. Participants also noted that the environment in which social workers intervene affected their ability to do as much good as they wanted. On the contrary, they witnessed the harm caused by that system. Participants shared their need for more flexibility from their social workers, greater support for their social workers, and a system that encourages social workers in the work they do with families.

Flexibility

The worker I had ended up quitting and wrote me a message on Facebook telling me how sorry she was for failing me. Straight up, that's what she told me because the agency totally failed my family. She wrote to me and apologized. – Johanne

So, when I decided that I needed to make a change, I broke the rules and so did the social worker and she didn't care. And she got in trouble and she said it was all worth it. – Gina

The problem's circular. […] Social workers can't do that much, because they are controlled by money. […] You got your social workers, who got their hands tied by budget restrictions. You have people working outside of the box, who are told not to work outside of the box or they're gonna get in trouble. […] They get a tough skin and they look at the people as: "Well, listen, […] I can't do anything for them". And they get depressed and […] helpless, because the government has got them tied. - Carolyn

Throughout the different sharing circles, participants expressed empathy for social workers. They understood some of the challenges faced by social workers and the need to comply to the existing (broken) system. They shared about positive relationship with social workers who worked their way around the system to be able to provide the help they needed.

Participants also noted that it is difficult, as an Aboriginal person, to navigate the system. Between the federal and the provincial jurisdiction, it can get really confusing. On that regard, the third Call to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015: 1) states the following "We call upon all levels of government to fully implement Jordan's Principle". Flexibility from the social workers is appreciated to accompany them and help them understand the different resources and services.

Support for social workers: better working conditions

Social workers don't become social workers because they want to go take children. What happens is they get balled down in that system. So, we need support for the social workers. We really want to make sure that the social workers are given the tools they need to do their job. – Roberta

I've seen amazing social workers. And maybe it's the people who are young. Like 90 % of them want to make a difference, and then, when they get in they become part of the system that we created, right. – Samantha

That's why there is a high turnover. They feel helpless in a lot of ways. They don't want to do the things they do and as a result, they leave the profession. We had one girl with us who was fantastic. She lasted a month, because it was just too much on her. – Kate

Participants want social workers to have a workload that allows them to build a relationship with parents and families. They should have the time and the resources needed to get to know the family and accompany them in their present situation. It all comes down to a system fostering a positive work environment.

Farris-Manning & Zandstra (2003: 6) demonstrate that the desire of child protection workers to effectively protect children in Canada is compromised by the environment in which they work. Incidentally, a national survey was undertaken by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) where over a thousand social workers involved in child protection were surveyed. The common themes of concern included low morale among practitioners, excessive workload, lack of skilled social workers, and high attrition rates. The vast majority of respondents indicated that caseload size was the biggest barrier to good child protection practice, noting that the impact of this reality is the inability to establish meaningful relationships with families (Herbert, 2002).

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE COURT OF QUEEN'S BENCH OF NEW BRUNSWICK

We will now complement the findings shared by the participants with a decision from the Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick in *Minister of Social Development. vs M.A. & R.A.*, 2014, as this decision echoes in many ways the experiences shared by the participants and the lessons to be learned from them. This decision pertains to a case where the Minister of Social Development argued the grounds for guardianship of an aboriginal child. It is important to note that, although the two parties reached an agreement to put the child back in the mother's care before the end of the proceedings, Justice Baird decided to offer a decision to ensure that this case would be documented and could serve for further hearings. She commented "I remain deeply troubled and concerned about the way this file was handled" (2014: 89). She offered thirteen recommendations "as an attempt to create dialogue within the Department of Social Development with the expectation that there will be significant changes in the way they draft affidavits, and offer services to families of diverse multicultural backgrounds" (2014: 81).

Since excerpts from this decision echo the findings shared by the participants, we decided to present them in the same subcategories: grasping the impact of Aboriginal History, Continuity of care with families, Interventions supporting the families, Foster homes and Cultural Awareness and Urban Aboriginal social workers and decision-makers.

Grasping the impact of Aboriginal History

The first recommendation emitted by Judge Baird is "that social workers and others who are working closely with parents and their children, have specific knowledge of, and understanding of the cultural, social and religious norms and values of the family before services are offered" (2014: 82). She mentions that "not one of the professionals involved on this file, had any specific training in aboriginal culture and parenting of children, cultural issues, history of the [Aboriginal peoples], nor did the applicant provide [the mother] with someone who might have been able to work with her or to gain her trust as a fellow [A]boriginal". This way of doing had tremendous consequences: "the imposition of other cultural values, superimposed on a single, [indigenous mother], at a time when 'Government' was inserting itself in her day to day life would be daunting at the best of times" (2014: 22).

Continuity of care with families

The second recommendations emanating from the Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick in *Minister of Social Development. vs M.A. & R.A.* (2014: 82) reads: "that there be continuity with parent aide workers, family first workers, social workers who offer services to the family throughout a file, unless there are reasons beyond the control of the Department of Social Development which could prevent this. In the present case, as an example, [the mother] had social workers who started working with her, and left, thus causing a transfer of her file to a new social worker, with the attendant risks associated with these transfers of misinformation and historical knowledge of the file, i.e., [the lead social worker] acted on erroneous information as noted ».

According to the Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick in *Minister of Social Development vs M.A. & R.A.* (2014: 16-17), "[The mother] had concerns about the number of changes in social workers on her file and that she had to continually retell her story. [… She] reached a tipping point over several months, after multiple changes in workers, where she lost confidence and trust in the integrity of the process, and she shut down". Continuity of care implies the consideration of the burden that employee turnover put on families. As mentioned, they end up needing to tell their story over and over again, which leads to issues of trust, as they cannot count on the commitment of their social worker, expecting he or she will not be involved for long as were the previous ones.

Interventions supporting the families

The third recommendation states that "the practice of selecting negative incidents from workers notes and ignoring the positive, creating skewed and one-sided affidavits is not an acceptable practice" (2014: 84). In the fifth recommendation, the Judge mentions that "The Department of Social Development, when it has custody of a child, has a duty, and a responsibility to consult with parents" (2014: 84). She gives the following example to illustrate this recommendation: "The Department of Social Development had repeatedly expressed concerns over [the mother's] use of cannabis, and as a result, required her to undergo a full spectrum hair analysis. The results were negative for all non-prescription drugs, yet, she was never advised, and several weeks later, a decision was made to seek permanent care of [the child]. The test results

came at a time when the Department of Social Development was moving ahead with guardianship. To not advise [the mother] of the test results was an oversight with significant ramifications, and it was inexplicable" (2014: 85). Interventions should be supportive of the family and based on a collaborative relationship between the parent and the social worker. Examples like this give the impression of working against a mother, and not in support of her and the wellbeing of her family. Parents should not be seen as the enemy, but as partners. The social worker and the parents usually have a common goal: the best interest of the child, which is a great starting point for working together.

Foster Homes

The eighth recommendation in Judge Baird's decision relates to foster homes: "Foster parents caring for children need to be trained in their cultural and religious traditions, and must offer consistency in their homes. Information from the biological parent concerning schedules, routines, preferences, cultural matters and religious education must be communicated to the foster parent" (2014: 87). The following example was given: "There was evidence that [the child] had nightmares concerning owls, a bear and drums, a clear reference to her native culture. [The foster mother] made no effort to educate herself in these cultural traditions so that she could offer consistency in instruction to this young child. No one in the Department of Social Development created or initiated a plan or strategy to offer consistency in cultural teachings between the home of the foster parent and [the mother]'s home, an unfortunate gap, or oversight, which in a situation such as this, can cause confusion and further upset for her child" (2014: 49).

Cultural Awareness and Urban Aboriginal social workers and decision-makers

The eleventh recommendation points out the following: "The Department of Social Development should ensure that all workers who oversee files where [A]boriginal and other multicultural parents are named, have instruction and/ or a background in their culture". The Judge continues by stating that "the Department of Social Development cannot be culturally or religiously blind. In other words, as stated in section 1 of the *Family Services Act,* the cultural and religious criteria are part of the best interests of the child".

The Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick in *Minister of Social Development. vs M.A. & R.A.* (2004: 82) offers a way to put these recommendations into action: "It is my expectation that this decision, along with the recommendations, will be forwarded to the office of the Minister of Social Development, the office of the Youth and Child Advocate, and the New Brunswick organization in charge of First Nations communities, and the New Brunswick Multicultural Association, with the view of establishing a committee, or indeed, an inquiry, (*Inquires Act,* RSNB 2011, c 173), into some of the issues that were identified in this case."

These recommendations made by Justice Baird and the results from this research project clearly identifies that the system needs to change in order to ensure that urban aboriginal families can access child welfare services that are respectful of their culture, their needs, and their rights to be treated with dignity and respect.

CONCLUSION

The findings presented above focused on child welfare services, but throughout the sharing circles, it was clear that there is a need for a holistic approach. Policy changes must consider education and training, economic participation, health, housing, justice, and culture. It is also important to emphasize that, in order "to correct the effects of an Aboriginal history of colonization and the forced removal of children, a comprehensive set of measures must address the social problems that these communities inherit" (Trocmé, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004: 596). Sookraj et al. (2010: 152) explain that aboriginal service users experience "discrimination, communication barriers and cold, impersonal treatment in much of the mainstream service delivery system".

Participants in the sharing circles discussed of similar dichotomies presented in Sable et al.'s final paper entitled "Culture of Fearfulness? Connecting Patterns of Vulnerability and Resilience in Young Urban Aboriginal Women's Narratives in Kjipuktuk (Halifax)":

> One of the common grounds we see […] are the dichotomies they have to bridge in their everyday existence — […] raised in a community/not from a community; from Mi'kma'ki/from away; status/not status; look Aboriginal/look white. Plus, a major difference is that many are considered as the fiduciary responsibility under the Indian Act, something no other Canadian citizen has as a distinction when declaring their identity. (2016: 43)

We must remember that the urban Aboriginal population is a population that is growing in numbers and diversified as it is composed of Aboriginal peoples from many different nations. It is clear from the sharing circles that the lack of cultural awareness of some child welfare services providers has an immense impact on families. Thus, there is a necessity to offer intercultural training and continuing education to social workers. There is also a need to offer intercultural training to foster families and other intervenors that work with children and families in the context of child welfare services. Furthermore, the sharing circle brought into light that the urban Aboriginal population is in some way invisible (non-recognition of the presence of this population in the communities). Hence, communities and institutions need to recognize the urban aboriginal presence and therefore ensure appropriate resources for them.

In her final report "Navigating Government Services: The 'lived experience' of urban Aboriginal families in Fredericton, New Brunswick", Jodoin (2017: 24) points out to building "strong partnerships between urban Aboriginal community organizations and government service

providers to work together to improve access to services for off-reserve Aboriginal people. This also echoes the findings in this research.

The literature also suggests the need for community-based interventions and support at the provincial and federal levels to address a broader range of social, economic, and cultural risk factors affecting Aboriginal communities (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). Thus, there is a need for short, medium, and long-term investment in Aboriginal communities to help reduce the representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (Fluke et al., 2010: 67). Finally, the words of Eve capture the hope carried by the participants of this research project, as they want their voices to contribute to positive change in the child welfare system.

I really hope that the other people that this goes on to, it doesn't just sit on a shelf. And something, or at least one policy can be changed. Or you know, if this is going in to a group of social workers and they are hearing my voice, I really hope that they listen and they take it to heart. I really do. - Eve

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Following the various sharing circles, three recommendations were formulated with regards to families and social workers:

1. Pilot project – Liaison persons;
2. Embracing the whole family – The Headstart model;
3. Phase two of the research project – Meeting the social workers and foster parents.

We're here for a reason, we're here in hopes that our voices and our experiences are going to change the system. - Eve

PILOT PROJECT – LIAISON PERSONS

We recommend that full-time liaison persons, **paid by the child welfare system**, work within existing urban Aboriginal organizations in Halifax and Fredericton. The liaison persons would be **chosen by the urban Aboriginal organization**. They would facilitate working in collaboration with the communities regarding interventions. They would also be a first step when it comes to consulting the communities and transforming the system. These persons could also provide insight when it comes to having an environment imbued by Aboriginal culture. Ultimately, this pilot project would be a first step allowing to bring policy changes.

EMBRACE THE WHOLE FAMILY – THE HEAD START MODEL

When it comes to accompanying urban Aboriginal families, child welfare services can take example on the Head Start and Friendship center model. This model is **by and for urban Aboriginal communities** and it uses resources in the communities. When accompanying a child, the Head Start model invites every important member that is part of her/his life (e.g., parents, grands-parents, neighbours, etc.) to be part of the conversation. The model also provides a safe space for the child, as well as for the family.

Child welfare services need to **embrace a holistic approach, when it comes to the families, but also regarding all aspects of their life.** The Head Start model is invested in all spheres of the family's life: education and training, economic participation, health, housing, justice and culture.

PHASE TWO OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT – UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND FOSTER PARENTS

The participants illustrated the importance of a second phase to the research project. **Firstly, that second phase would enable the research team to meet with child welfare services' social workers**. They would create a safe place for social workers to discuss without judgement or prejudice. Social workers would be able to ask questions and to express what they need from the communities to help them do their job more effectively, with a greater awareness of Aboriginal culture. It would also be an opportunity to familiarize themselves with Aboriginal practices (e.g., sharing circle, presence of elders, prayers, etc.) and to get to know leaders from the urban Aboriginal organizations.

Secondly, the second phase of the research project would allow the research team to meet with foster families. Those meetings would serve as education opportunities (i.e. blanket exercise) and as a place where researchers can ask for their input. A safe place would be provided to foster families to exchange without judgement or prejudice.

This final recommendation echoes to one of the research objectives shared at the beginning of this report: "It is the first of many steps in a research process that will ultimately consider the views of service providers – including front line state social workers and foster families – and seek to translate the gathered knowledge into a community action plan".

I'm just honored to be a part of it. You know, it's a step forward. This is what it's all about. So, no one else has to go through. It might be easier for another child. I'm more than honored. - Florence

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