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

Judy Gillespie and Dennis Whitford

### **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 and that this trend is international.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, Aboriginal children constitute approximately 6% of the total child population.<sup>2</sup> Yet they typically comprise between 40 and 80% of the children in foster home, group home, or institutional care.<sup>3</sup> A 2003 study of child protection investigation outcomes in Canada found that 16% of Aboriginal child protection investigations resulted in formal placements as compared to 7% for non-Aboriginal child protection investigations.<sup>4</sup> An Australian study found that between 2002 and 2006 Aboriginal children were six times more likely to come into care than non-Aboriginal children.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps more disturbing however, is that—despite considerable efforts to address this overrepresentation—the numbers of Aboriginal children coming into care appear to be rising. While similar statistics are not available for off-reserve Aboriginal children, federal government statistics indicate that, between 1995 and 2001, the number of on-reserve First Nations children placed in out-of-home care grew by 71.5%.<sup>6</sup>

It is well understood that this overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and families within child protection systems is symptomatic of a larger crisis for Aboriginal people that can be traced back through generations to the legacy of colonization, marginalization, and oppression. It is also widely acknowledged that there is a need for strategies to address both on- and off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. Blackstock and Trocmé suggest that overrepresentation of Aboriginal children is unlikely to improve as long as the problems continue to be defined within the narrow scope of child protection systems. They argue that a new approach is needed that addresses the larger community and structural issues that have an impact on Aboriginal child welfare. “Resilient Aboriginal communities provide the best chance for resilient, safe and well Aboriginal children, young people and families.”<sup>7</sup>

These observations are echoed by many others who suggest that community approaches are needed to enhance the welfare of Aboriginal children and families. Connors and Maidman note that “[First Nations] children are protected through the natural healthy functioning of well communities.”<sup>8</sup> And research by Chandler and Lalonde has suggested that “individual and cultural continuity are strongly linked such that First Nations communities that succeed in taking steps to preserve their heritage culture and work to control their own destinies are dramatically more successful in insulating their youth against the risks of suicide.”<sup>9</sup> These calls are not just directed at Aboriginal child welfare. “A new, more capacity-building service model is not only *culturally appropriate* for Aboriginal communities; it is also more desirable than the present residual model for all communities.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet there is a dearth of research examining community oriented policy frameworks in off-reserve contexts, and even less theoretical anchoring of such frameworks. Consequently, there are few guideposts for developing community approaches to off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. Using a community-based participatory approach, our research seeks to understand community-oriented policy frameworks and institutional designs to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare in rural and remote communities. Current debates focus primarily on issues of Aboriginal self-governance in the delivery of off-reserve services, and encompass complex and multifaceted views of the structures through which it can best be achieved.<sup>11</sup> While not denying the importance of these debates, 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.<sup>12</sup>

Focusing on the members and work of an Aboriginal Interagency Committee in northwestern Alberta, specific objectives of the research include:

1. examining activities directed at community-based social change to address Aboriginal child welfare;
2. exploring roles and relations between individuals involved in these efforts as well as linkages between these individuals and other organizations relevant to Aboriginal child welfare, including federal and provincial government, regional government, and municipal government;
3. identifying factors affecting community based efforts to address Aboriginal child welfare, including institutional designs and policy frameworks.

Our research is connected to time spent working in formal “child welfare” systems. Our experiences left us with a profound awareness of the limited role that these systems play in addressing the needs of children and families as well as the ways in which healthy children, healthy families, and healthy communities are irrevocably intertwined. Each of us has followed a different path to pursue ways to strengthen the role of community in children’s lives—one through research and teaching and the other through ongoing practice. These separate paths have come together in the practice-focused research that is the basis of this paper.

Section I presents the conceptual framework guiding our research—in particular the distinction between child welfare and child protection, as well as the multifaceted meanings of the term “community.”

Section II discusses the research and research methods in more detail, noting that these have been and continue to be developed through processes of dialogue and reflection.

In Section III the findings of the initial phase of this research are presented. “Community networking” is introduced as an institutional design to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare and the components of this approach are discussed.

Section IV discusses the policy lessons that may facilitate such an approach in off-reserve communities. The paper concludes by stressing the need for further dialogue and research regarding community approaches to off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare.

## **I. Conceptualizing Community Approaches to Child Welfare**

Enhancing Aboriginal child welfare first requires making a distinction between concepts of *child protection* and *child welfare*. Child protection is the protection of children and youth from negative outcomes: abuse and neglect, addictions, sexual exploitation, and other situations that pose significant risk to their immediate and long term well-being. Within this paper we conceptualize child protection systems as the formal systems and services—the legislative authority and duly delegated administrative systems—that are developed to address such risks. 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.<sup>13</sup>

Aboriginal peoples have lived on the land now known as Canada for thousands of years, raising generations of children without the use of statutory systems of child protection. Their children’s welfare was sustained through rich and vibrant socio-cultural lifeworlds<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> European colonization of North America attacked these lifeworlds. European beliefs of innate superiority over Indigenous peoples of other lands were used to implement and justify formal systems of power that enabled genocide, confinement of Aboriginal people on reserves, outlawing of cultural traditions, and enforced removal of children to residential schools.<sup>16</sup>

The disturbance of a people’s socio-cultural lifeworld has profound impacts on individual and collective well-being. These impacts include the disruption and loss of tradition and collective identification of social roles and relations, and

of individual identity, motivation, and pride. Interpersonal violence, depression, addictions, alienation, and suicide become common.<sup>17</sup> All of these impacts have been identified for Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities and are further magnified by the barriers to housing, employment, and education that are experienced by Aboriginal people.

However, these negative impacts should not be viewed as the only or the whole “truth.” Many Aboriginal people survived and resisted these assaults on their personal and collective identities, maintaining cultural traditions and positive social relations. Many others are reclaiming and revitalizing them. This is testimony to the strength of individuals and groups, and to the power of these Aboriginal lifeworlds. Nonetheless, the consequences have been and continue to be severe, and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children within child protection systems is one obvious reflection of this.

A community approach to address off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare also requires exploring the concept of community. From a non-Aboriginal perspective, Carniol defines community as “people whose interpersonal relationships are linked by a consciousness of common bonds which extend within geographic and/or social boundaries.”<sup>18</sup> Boothroyd defines community as: “[A] human system of more than two people in which the members interact personally over time, in which behavior and activity are guided by collectively evolved norms or collective decisions, and from which members may freely secede.”<sup>19</sup> Within these various meanings is the notion that “community” entails social bonds, and relations and interactions that are voluntary, guided by norms, values, and traditions that are socially transmitted. Socially cohesive communities serve as “spaces of belonging” for their members.<sup>20</sup> Yet this non-Aboriginal “ideal” of community often masks issues of conflict, oppression, and marginalization, for communities are also sites of difference: differences in cultural identity, knowledge, traditions, social norms, and values.<sup>21</sup> Within off-reserve communities, these issues continue to impact social systems, social relations, and Aboriginal child welfare.

Within traditional Aboriginal perspectives, “community” is intrinsic both ontologically and epistemologically. Similar to non-Aboriginal perspectives are notions of common bonds and shared values. As Morrissette states, “I speak of *community* as if it were a living entity, and rightly so, for a community has a life of its own. It is made up of many individuals tied together through a collective desire to live in a type of harmony.”<sup>22</sup> In Canada, this is reflected in First Nations on-reserve approaches to child protection—despite little support for these in face of government approaches that reflect Western individualism.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, traditional Aboriginal perspectives of community are situated within a view regarding all entities—human and non-human—as connected through a spiritual life force transcending both time and space.<sup>24</sup> Thus the concept of community encompasses a much broader perspective of universal relations of balance and integration:

collectivism is valued over individualism, and this collectivist “belief system” includes ... harmony with nature; a present time orientation; a collateral relational orientation that includes kin and extended family; an active orientation to “being” and “being in becoming” where attainment of inner fulfillment and serenity with one’s place in the community and the universe is the focus ... Most importantly, in this collectivist world view, the welfare of the individual is intricately bound to the well-being of the community and its relationship with more than the human world.<sup>25</sup>

## II. Community-Based Participatory Research and Aboriginal Epistemology

This research began in the spring of 2008 as a combination of longitudinal case study research and community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR has been defined as:

a collaborative process that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change.<sup>26</sup>

The research encompasses not just understanding the dynamics of social promotion in the governance of child welfare, but the development of community-based knowledge to advance the capacity and effectiveness of this social promotion. The methodology for this research includes community members in defining what we seek to know, and in gathering, organizing, and analyzing information, and reflecting on its relevance to our goals for social change.<sup>27</sup> Because this process occurs throughout the research, sources of information and methods of collection and analysis continue to be defined throughout the process.

However, the research is also guided by Aboriginal community members and their epistemology. While there is a certain amount of congruence with CBPR, notably the creation and use of knowledge for the benefit of the community, and the recognition that this requires reflection and attunement to subjective experience,<sup>28</sup> there are also tensions and areas of divergence. The notion of community as “case study,” and the idea of acting *on* one’s community to create change are concepts that do not necessarily resonate with Aboriginal methods of research.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the research methods are also a process of dialogue and reflection.

As noted earlier, the members and the work of an Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC) in northwestern Alberta provide the focus for this research. Situated within the Peace River valley, the area was originally the site of a diverse mix of Indigenous people including Cree, Dene Tha’, and Athapaskan Beaver. Métis communities also became established in the area as a result of the fur trade. To the north of these groups were the Inuit. Europeans came to the area, first with the fur trade, later as farmers and ranchers, and more recently as part of the oil and gas and pulp industries. The area’s Aboriginal population is more than double the provincial average of 5% and four times Canada’s national average of 3% and is

comprised primarily, although not exclusively, of all of the above groups.<sup>30</sup> The area is largely rural and encompasses the town of Peace River (pop. 6,315)<sup>31</sup> as well as several smaller towns, villages, and hamlets. First Nations located within this area include the Duncan's, Woodland, and Lubicon Cree First Nations.

The Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC) has a twenty-year history in the community with a mandate to enhance the welfare of Aboriginal children, youth, families, and elders. Begun originally as a way of sharing information between service providers, over time the group has become more action-focused, engaging in social promotion to improve the lives of Aboriginal people. Yet the committee remains an informal organization with no formal funding. In all its activities it relies on voluntary participation, donations, and funds contributed by agencies and organizations both within and outside of the community.

We gathered the initial information by participating in interagency meetings, by conducting two focus groups, and through semi-structured interviews with AIC members. In addition, we examined documents including minutes of interagency meetings, correspondence to or from the interagency committee (or its sub-committees), and documents from the member agencies themselves. This information is being analyzed qualitatively using a reflexive-dialectical approach that encompasses four broad "domains of analysis": subjective individual meanings and values; social discourses and dialogues; individual words and actions; and social systems, structures, and events.<sup>32</sup>

### **III. 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* emerges as a specific institutional design that can 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 of a specific group of people who have a consciousness of common bonds, a common vision, and shared norms and values. *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.<sup>33</sup> The non-hierarchical nature of the community network is a characteristic of both communities and networks.<sup>34</sup>

The membership of the AIC encompasses a diverse mix of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and, perhaps most importantly, the involvement and input of Aboriginal elders in all its activities. While the research is only beginning to map the networks of the committee membership, it is already apparent that the AIC members are connected to children, youth, and elders; to men and women; to individuals living in the town of Peace River as well as those living in surrounding communities; and to 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 employ them. For example, the mission statement of the Sagitawa Friendship Society states that the society will work “in partnership with community agencies and service providers [to] provide opportunities and programs that assist Aboriginal people to feel valued, supported, and capable of reaching their full potential.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Alberta Learning has implemented a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit program that emphasizes a vision of collaborative relationships to address the needs of Aboriginal learners.<sup>36</sup> The involvement of Larry Stewart, a community development officer with Alberta Culture and Community Spirit, is supported by an organizational mandate to assist, where requested, with community collaboration and capacity building efforts. The AIC is one of the committees to which a town council representative is appointed. Dennis Whitford’s role as Senior Advisor for Aboriginal Services with Region 8 Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA) encompasses work with Aboriginal inter-agency committees. This work is a part of CFSA’s strategic priority to improve services for Aboriginal children, youth, and families through building and sustaining relationships with Aboriginal Partners.<sup>37</sup> Many of these member organizations also contribute financially to the work of the AIC by providing funding for specific events or through in-kind contributions.

In the first focus group, held in June 2008, “Keeping the Circle Strong” emerged as one of the major themes that members felt typified the work of the committee. In examining and reflecting on the meanings of this theme, it became apparent that the “circle” encompassed multiple interrelated dimensions. One dimension is the committee itself, as a circle that needs to be kept strong. Another dimension is the circle of Aboriginal people residing in the area—whether they are living “on-reserve,” “off-reserve,” or both. And a third dimension is the entire community of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that make up the inhabitants of this area.

## **Keeping the Circle Strong: Vision and Values of the Aboriginal Interagency Committee**

AIC documents suggest that the work of the AIC is grounded in a vision and values that have been developed by its members, which are periodically reviewed to ensure their continuing relevance. This vision is to “promote unity, respect, tradition, values, and culture of the Aboriginal people for the well-being of our communities.” Stated values and beliefs include mandates that the organization:



- Involve all people—race, colour, creed—that come together in a safe and caring environment.
- Respect the equality and dignity of individuals and agencies.
- Practice respect, confidentiality, and integrity.
- Act with honesty, kindness, compassion, and discretion.
- Work together in partnership with other agencies and communities to promote the traditions, values, and culture of Aboriginal people.
- Honour the seven teachings: courage, honesty, humility, love, respect, strength, wisdom.<sup>38</sup>

Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participation suggest that the vision, values, and beliefs of the AIC are congruent with the personal vision, goals, and values of individual members. Prominent in interviews with members were personal values of inclusiveness and respect for diversity.<sup>39</sup>

just the respectfulness with which we treat each other...there can be differences of opinion, and I guess one of the things that, that tends to happen is that we just uh wait until we have more of a consensus. There's no hurry to overrule people and move on. It [the AIC] will try to allow different opinions in a respectful way, and still move forward towards [a common] goal. (AIC Member)

A lot of our programs are inclusive too, non-Aboriginal kids as well. So, and that's to break down stereotypes. (AIC Member)

Because Little Red is different than Peace River and Métis from the Manning area are a little different yet again, and then we have towards Worsley, so yeah, there's some Beaver here, some Dene influence and that, some Cree, so yeah, you know...we are trying to unify it, but create sort of equal representation and then bringing in that knowledge, as well respect for and belief in the importance of the traditions, values, and culture of Aboriginal people. (AIC Member)

Also prominent in many responses was the importance of the role of culture and spirituality to the work and success of the AIC. In all its activities, the committee is grounded in and incorporates an awareness of the strength inherent in Aboriginal approaches to child, family, and community well-being. Having elders participate, prayer and ceremony is accepted, promoted, and encouraged.

I like that we open with a prayer, I really appreciate that. I like the way we have the Elder if she's there or he's there opening with a prayer...a traditional prayer. I like the respect that is there. (AIC Member)

The more a person walks with First Nation, or among the people, we have discovered that they are a very spiritual people. It is woven into their culture. It is so a part of who they are that if we want to be an Aboriginal interagency, then we need to walk that path too. (AIC Member)

The AIC holds an annual cultural awareness event for the benefit of the membership. This event serves the purpose of keeping the membership in touch with Aboriginal traditions, values, and beliefs. These traditions, values, and beliefs

are the very lifeblood of the AIC. It appears to be accepted that the committee must make efforts to be grounded in the Aboriginal culture in order to be best positioned to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal people. This approach is consistent with the writing of Basil Johnston, who informs us:

If the Native peoples and their heritage are to be understood, it is their beliefs, insights, concepts, ideals, values, attitudes, and codes that must be studied. And there is, I submit, no better way of gaining that understanding than by examining native ceremonies, rituals, songs, dances, prayers, and stories. For it is in ceremony, ritual, song, dance and prayer that the sum total of what people believe about being, existence and relationships are symbolically expressed and articulated; as in story, fable legend, and myth fundamental understandings, insights, and attitudes toward life and human conduct, character, and quality in their diverse forms are embodied and passed on...But it is not enough to listen to or to read or to understand the truths contained in stories: according to the Elders the truths must be lived out and become part of the being of a person. The search for truth and wisdom ought to lead to fulfillment of man and woman.<sup>40</sup>

For Aboriginal members of the AIC, the committee provides an important source of connection and shared purpose with other Aboriginal people.

Well, there's a ... connectedness that we have there. You know, sometimes when you're working in mainstream sometimes ... there's connectedness there, but then there's even more so when you're amongst your own, your own kind of people I guess ... because you share the same values and beliefs and you have the same goals and visions. You know you want the people and the students you're working with to be successful in every way, so you're all working towards the same goal you know. (AIC Member)

On a personal level it offered an opportunity to connect with the Aboriginal community in the area. That is important on a personal level because I'm from the Aboriginal community...so then it is an opportunity to connect with my own people. It sounds kind of discriminatory maybe, but when you work in a large non-Native organization and there's your own people out there, well for me anyways, it's always been rewarding—fulfilling maybe is a better word—to connect with other Aboriginal people, so it offered that. (AIC Member)

Members indicated that what they appreciate most about the AIC is its action-based approach. In other words, members appear to be motivated to contribute to the committee's work, the actual “doing” as opposed to an interagency organization that uses dialogue or planning only. The “doing” occurs using a partnership-based model, which contributes to a sense of connection.

We're all working individually but we're working together as a whole with the same goals and visions. (AIC Member)

It is really working at something outside ourselves...We are all working into the circle to further the...build up the life and values of First Nation, in whatever way each of us, and through our organizations, can do it. So we are kind of turned outward and we all meet there in the middle somehow. Each one is not worried about guarding their own pet project, somehow we have a sense of “what I'm about,” is building up this community of Aboriginal people, but everyone in the circle is contributing toward that. So we are all affirming what is happening. (AIC Member)

The committee also honours 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 honoured by committee members) is to respect each individual's—and each organization's—contribution to the work of the committee and their right to choose the nature and extent of that contribution.

## **Keeping the Circle Strong: Events and Activities of the AIC**

The vision and values of the AIC, as well as its events and activities, can be seen as embracing three elements: 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***

Aboriginal lifeworlds are strengthened by celebrating Aboriginal identity, repairing and enhancing social relations (including respect for elders, and 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, strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds also involves building awareness and respect among all of the different Aboriginal nations and cultures residing within the community. Above all, it requires enhancing cultural knowledge and participation in cultural traditions; it is this that serves as the cornerstone for Aboriginal community resilience.

### ***Enhancing Relations between 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. No matter how strong and cohesive Aboriginal communities may be, Aboriginal children and families living off-reserve will continue to be vulnerable if their cultures, traditions, beliefs, and identities are not respected and valued within their broader communities. A community approach entails educating and sharing information, as well as creating opportunities for ongoing interaction and relationship-building between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In off-reserve communities, it is particularly important to strengthen the relationship between the municipal government and the Aboriginal community.<sup>41</sup>

Without mutual understanding, a renewed relationship is impossible. Part of the answer is better information. Indeed, we were told many times during our mandate that most Canadians know little of Aboriginal life and less of Aboriginal history.

...Building awareness and understanding through public education is certainly a first step. Also needed are opportunities for meaningful interaction and commitment. A relationship among peoples is not a once-and-for-all transaction. It needs to be adjusted regularly and, from time to time, reaffirmed.<sup>42</sup>

### ***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 affected by forms of racism embedded in Euro-Canadian structures and institutions in ways that are blatant and direct as well as more subtle and insidious.<sup>43</sup> Institutional policies reflect limited understanding of the profound cultural differences and change is slow to occur.<sup>44</sup> It is vital that links are created to open up dialogue between these institutions and the Aboriginal community in order to promote greater cultural respect and cultural safety for all Aboriginal people. For example, the C.D. Howe Institute has noted that in terms of educational success for Aboriginal students, “collaboration between school-district personnel and local Aboriginal communities is a prerequisite to improved academic outcomes...The involvement of Aboriginal communities has important beneficial consequences not only with respect to the responsiveness of programs to Aboriginal students, but also in terms of buy-in from Aboriginal families and the local Aboriginal leadership.”<sup>45</sup>

While it is impossible to offer a comprehensive examination of all of the activities and events that the committee coordinates, the following activities briefly highlight some of the most recent efforts to illustrate the concepts presented above. As noted earlier, many of the events rely on the involvement and financial contributions of community members and organizations that extend beyond the membership of the committee itself, or the organizations that committee members are connected to.

### ***Aboriginal Gathering and Pow-wow***

In 2009 the AIC will host the fourteenth annual Aboriginal Gathering and sixth annual Pow-wow. This event draws both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participation as all people from all cultures are invited to participate. The diverse Aboriginal cultures are championed and showcased to the broader community through song and dance and displays of arts and crafts and a tepee village. The event is staged by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizers and volunteers. This spirit of co-operation builds bridges and unites the community. The event also serves as a venue for honouring families who have experienced loss and grief by way of the memorial dance component of the pow-wow.

### ***Sisters in Spirit***

The AIC organizes and hosts the annual Sisters in Spirit Walk. Agents responsible for community safety include: the Peace River Regional Women’s Shelter, the

Town of Peace River, the RCMP, CFSA, and Mental Health. Numerous other services as well as the people of Peace River and surrounding towns and communities also participate in this event. This walk contributes to safety by engaging community and bringing attention to the violence inflicted on Aboriginal women, many of whom have been murdered or have gone missing.

### ***Aboriginal Education and the Aboriginal Youth Conference***

The AIC questioned Northland School Division about low scores achieved by their Aboriginal students in achievement tests. It was apparent that students were scoring extremely low when compared with tests from other school divisions. The AIC subsequently entered into a dialogue with Northland School Division and Northlands has joined the AIC membership as part of efforts to better address Aboriginal student needs. Also, the AIC provides incentives for all Aboriginal students in all school divisions to achieve success by honouring Aboriginal high school graduates with an eagle feather and blanket. This community-based recognition occurs at the annual National Aboriginal Days Aboriginal Gathering and Pow-wow. The AIC membership has also partnered with school divisions, Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), and other community support services in organizing annual student conferences that promote cultural awareness and esteem and student health and success. And while the focus of these is on Aboriginal culture and traditions, in keeping with the principle of inclusion, they are open to all interested students.

### ***Little Buffalo Walk***

Awareness of the plight of Aboriginal people living at Lubicon Cree First Nation, with primary concerns being a lack of water and sewer facilities for community members, led to the organization of a four day, forty kilometre walk from the town of Peace River to the community of Little Buffalo. The walk was a form of non-violent protest to advocate for improvements to the Lubicon Cree water situation. The AIC also wrote letters of advocacy to the Minister of Indian Affairs, as well as to local Members of Parliament and the Municipal District of Northern Sunrise County. A press release was also provided to local newspapers. Although the community continues to go without these basic amenities subsequent to the walk, it is thought the walk served the purpose of informing the broader public about this unhealthy situation. This may over time result in the changes necessary to address the social needs of the situation.

### ***Aboriginal Dance Arbour***

For the past five years the AIC has worked to secure land and uncover funding processes that will result in a permanent Aboriginal dance arbour being built in Peace River. The dance arbour will be a permanent facility at which to hold the Aboriginal Gathering and Pow-wow. This will raise the profile of Aboriginal people and give this population more of a presence in the Peace River area. This

thought runs counter to the situation of most cities, towns, and villages of Alberta where there is little or no recognition of Canada's First Peoples in the public buildings, statues, and edifices. The presence of the arbour will surely communicate to Aboriginal children, youth, and adults that they are an important part of the fabric of the community.

### ***Aboriginal Caregiver Event***

It came to the attention of the AIC that there was a lack of culturally appropriate homes for Aboriginal children entrusted to the care of Northwest Alberta Child and Family Services and that the region experiences great difficulty in recruiting homes of this type. The AIC addressed this challenge by organizing and implementing an Aboriginal caregiver recruitment event. The AIC applied a recruitment method consistent with Aboriginal approaches to community problem solving. In practical terms, this meant that the event was opened with prayer by an elder. A meal was provided in the form of a feast complete with a food offering ceremony. A community member provided a spiritual and humanistic sharing of her story, as opposed to an event where policy, statistics, and regulations are prominent. This recruitment event resulted in sixteen persons expressing interest in becoming caregivers and an equal number indicating they wished to have more information about being caregivers.

### ***General Aboriginal Advocacy and Health and Social Planning***

When it came to the attention of AIC that First Nations people in Peace River would not receive dental care without pre-paying for services, AIC approached local dentists, the dental association, and Health Services at Indian Affairs and Northern Development in an effort to find a solution. As a result, local dentists committed to continue making dental services available for Aboriginal people without requiring pre-payment. The committee has also advocated to the health and municipal sectors on occasions when Aboriginal community members were at risk of not receiving optimal health care. This advocacy led to the creation of Aboriginal health liaison positions within the regional Health Authority. The AIC also provides regular input to Northwest Alberta Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA) serving as a linkage between the provincially operated child and family services and the recipients of child and family supports and services. The AIC was thus better able to address concerns related to child and family well-being through enhanced coordination and communication among government and non-government helping agents.

## **IV. Policy Lessons for Off-Reserve Aboriginal Child Welfare**

The following five lessons are emerging in our understanding of a policy framework to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare.

### ***1. The Importance of Social Promotion Activities***

The first and most cogent lesson 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. We echo the perspective of many others who acknowledge that social promotion is one element in a continuum of approaches to child welfare. Prevention, early intervention, and protection are also necessary elements.<sup>46</sup> However, along with them, we emphasize that social promotion has been a missing element in off-reserve child welfare policy. While specific strategies need to be developed within specific community contexts, 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***

This approach 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, and common 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 the willingness to pool and to 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 space and time dedicated for meetings, financial and administrative support, coordination and leadership as well as regular reviews 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 Aboriginal Interagency Committee, the formal structure through which the community network operates is the Aboriginal Interagency Committee and while Northwest Alberta Child and Family Services Authority provide considerable financial and administrative support, the committee is truly a multi-sectoral 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 seeking 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 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.

Policy approaches to strengthen off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare must also recognize the diversity of political, geographical, and cultural milieus that comprise the landscape of child welfare in Canada. The division of federal and provincial powers in Canada has resulted in institutional regimes that are often very different among provinces.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, there are important differences between urban, rural, and remote community contexts that are often not considered in policy and program development. Zapf speaks eloquently of the implications of failing to recognize the uniqueness of northern areas within provincial regimes.

Provincial policy and program planners view their own separate northern regions as variations of the provincial south posing service delivery problems. Northern Albertans are treated as disadvantaged southern Albertans entitled to the services of Edmonton or Calgary; northern Manitobans become disadvantaged southern Manitobans entitled to the services of Winnipeg. ...[A]cceptance of the province as a unit of analysis carries with it a mind-set that can be damaging for northern people. A provincial perspective limits our ability to move beyond problems of service delivery towards appreciation of the very lifestyle and ideology that might serve as the foundation for relevant social policy in the North.<sup>48</sup>

Additional issues of diversity must be considered in terms of the individuals and families residing in Canadian communities. Aboriginal peoples, including members of various First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups, comprise a much higher percentage of residents in northern and remote communities. And while European settlers generally comprise the largest non-Aboriginal ethnicity, Canada is becoming increasingly multicultural and federal immigration policies have resulted in specific settlement patterns. In presenting this research based on a case study in one rural/remote community in northwestern Alberta, we are mindful of all of the above. We suggest that this research offers a fruitful foundation for adaptation to many other contexts but we emphasize the need for further dialogue and investigation.



## Endnotes

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