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- [News](#)
- [WestCoast News](#)
- [Weekend Review](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Editorial](#)
- [Arts & Life](#)
- [Working](#)
- [BusinessBC](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [WestCoast Homes](#)
- [National Engineering & Geoscience](#)
- [B.C. Traffic Cams](#)
- [The Stocks Pages](#)
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- [30 Day Archive](#)
- [Headline Scan](#)
- [Newspaper Ads](#)
- [Special Sections](#)

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- [Automotive](#)
- [WestCoast Life](#)
- [Weekend Review](#)
- [WestCoast Homes](#)
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- [Working](#)

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Aboriginal child services deal more than just a contract

Historic agreement covering 300 children is first of its kind in Canada

Daphne Bramham, Vancouver Sun

Published: Friday, February 29, 2008

For the first time in Canada, British Columbia is delegating its full responsibility and authority for urban first-nations foster children to an outside agency.

The agreement, signed last week, goes far beyond any contracting of services.

Starting in April, the Vancouver Aboriginal Children and Family Services Society will provide the full range of child and family services to more than 300 children, who come from more than 100 different first nations communities but have ended up in Metro Vancouver.



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The society will be responsible for reviewing, assessing and investigating reports of child abuse, neglect or exploitation.

It will be responsible for recruiting, vetting and supervising foster parents. In addition to the usual services, the society promises to provide the resources for the caregivers to pass on cultural and spiritual traditions to the children.

As the agreement says: "The parties acknowledge the need to address the unique historically based problems that face aboriginal children and the need to develop the means of assisting those children and families within the context of their aboriginal heritage, spirituality and culture."

More simply, both the government and the society recognize that first nations children need to be proud of who they are in order to succeed in life. Inherent in that statement is an acknowledgement that Canada's history of attempted cultural genocide didn't work.

This is a bold and daring move by both the provincial government and a Vancouver-based aboriginal social services agency.

It took seven years to negotiate, which is part of the reason the signing ceremony was such an emotional one.

It was emotional not only for VACFSS president Kathy Louis, the other directors, staff and supporters, but for Tom Christensen, the Children and Family Development minister, and his deputy Lesley du Toit, whose support the society credits with having broken the negotiating stalemate.

Along with singing, dancing, prayers and all of the key players being presented with ceremonial blankets, there were many hugs and some tears.

But mostly there was hope that this might change the lives of children and provide a template for further agreements.

Louis is one of thousands of children sent to Indian residential schools. A Cree from northern Alberta, Louis says that at the school, she was told she was stupid. It took her many years to realize that she is anything but.

Louis served 25 years on the National Parole Board and was instrumental in establishing elder-assisted hearings. She has received Canada's meritorious service medal, been honoured as a woman of distinction by the YWCA and as a distinguished alumna of Simon Fraser University.

What sustained Louis at the residential school -- and has made her so tenacious in her fight to get child protection authority delegated to the society -- is the spirituality and cultural traditions that her parents passed on to her.

And she is convinced that if the society can provide that for children in care, there's a chance to turn around their lives and -- over time -- the shocking statistics.

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [next page](#)

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