



Aboriginal child services deal more than just a contract
Historic agreement covering 300 children is first of its kind in Canada

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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.

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.

Of the 9,000 children in foster care in B.C., nearly half are first nations children, even though they account for slightly more than nine per cent of the total child population. And each year the proportion of aboriginal foster children increases, because while the total number of children in government care is declining, the number of aboriginal children in care continues to increase annually.

In the ministry's Vancouver-Richmond region, nearly three-quarters of the aboriginal foster children are in continuing -- as opposed to temporary -- care, compared with 30 per cent of the non-aboriginal children.

Ted Hughes noted in his 2006 report on B.C.'s child protection services that because of the residential schools, several generations of first nations children never learned any parenting skills.

That legacy is apparent in almost every comparative statistic, whether it's health (one in eight aboriginal children is disabled, twice the national average), education (more than a quarter of working-age people didn't graduate from high school), crime (incarceration rates are nearly six times higher, urban crime rates are four and a half times higher) or unemployment (nearly three times the provincial average).

Small wonder that off-reserve first-nations children in Vancouver are 2 1/2 times more likely to come from single-parent households and almost twice as likely to live in homes needing major repairs.

Bernadette Spence, the society's chief executive officer, is convinced she can help turn those statistics around. However, both she and the ministry expect that initially, the number of children in care will jump by one-third or 100 children because aboriginal families are more likely to trust their children to the society than to the government.

There is no fail-safe child protection system. Just as Matthew Vaudreuil and Sherry Charlie fell through the cracks in the provincial government's child-care system, at some point it is almost inevitable that a child will fall through some crack in the society's system.

But that's a risk that must be taken. Because by every measure, the status quo is simply unacceptable, and has been for decades.

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