

Check Against Delivery

1st Fathers and Child Welfare Conference March 15, 2013, Edmonton Hon Dave Hancock

I'm pleased to be here today on behalf of Premier Alison Redford, and to have the opportunity to talk with you.

The focus of this conference, "to engage and empower Aboriginal men", is an essential topic as we go forward with the transformation of social policy in Alberta.

We need to examine why Aboriginal fathers have been overlooked in the child welfare system and determine what can be done to prevent it from happening in the future.

I look forward to hearing from Bernadette about the comments and conversations that will take place.

There's no doubt in my mind this conference is occurring at a pivotal moment in time.

We heard loud and clear throughout the engagement process for Alberta's Social Policy Framework;

- Albertans desire greater collaboration and partnerships between communities and government;
- Albertans want us to focus on reducing inequality, protecting vulnerable people; and

- creating a system of high quality supports and services that focus on the needs of a family and individual.

We are working towards a number of policy shifts to achieve those goals.

Those shifts include:

- balancing prevention and intervention;
- creating a system of supports that puts people first; and
- focusing on outcomes, quality, values and dignity.

We are committed to working with you to implement this transformational change and to achieve positive results for Albertans.

But I recognize real change takes time.

We still have a long way to go when it comes to addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care.

However, I am very happy to report that we have seen a decrease in the number of Aboriginal children in care for the first time.

From December 2011 to December 2012, the number of Aboriginal children in care went down by 176 children which is a three per cent decrease.

I'm very pleased with the progress we have been making.

And we need to continue.

We cannot let the challenges ahead keep us from recognizing what has already been achieved.

The successes I have heard about from last year include working with almost 1,300 Aboriginal families to provide the supports needed to enable children to remain safely with their parents rather than coming into care.

That is a 15 per cent increase over the previous year.

We also assisted with the return of over 1,100 Aboriginal children to their families.

Despite needing to remove these children from their homes for a period of time, they were able to return home rather than coming into permanent care.

These Aboriginal children accounted for 54 per cent of all “family reunifications” in 2011/2012.

Family reunifications are what we all want at the end of the day for children.

Supporting the family as a whole unit is what is enabling us to do this.

Fathers are an important piece of the family unit, but have not always been acknowledged as such.

That is why the Human Services Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy Division held a focused conversation with Aboriginal fathers in January.

The conversations that took place emphasized men are essential to the family unit, but they have felt excluded and marginalized.

The men at the conversations expressed their feelings that government systems have disempowered them.

Those fathers desperately want to be a healthy part of their child's lives.

We are committed to building supportive relationships with families, communities and service providers to offer quality programs and services for families.

We need to listen to and learn from Aboriginal parents, communities and partners.

How we address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care needs to be uniquely suited to the needs of Aboriginal people in our province.

The community conversations that have been occurring throughout the province are helping create solutions and strategies that will inform the development of a framework to enable change.

I trust you will take comfort from the fact that some of the themes emerging from these sessions match up with what we are hearing across Alberta:

- the system must be family focused,
- we need to work better together,
- our practices and decisions need to be inclusive of Aboriginal culture,
- we need increased community capacity and programming, and
- we need increased awareness of historical trauma.

We must focus on breaking down our barriers and trying different approaches.

As with any effort to make improvements, we must engage in deliberate and thoughtful change.

I want to thank all of you in advance and commend you for collectively sharing your stories and thoughts today as we work together to address the complex issues in the child welfare systems.

Thank you to the Creating Hope Society of Alberta for putting this conference on and addressing this very powerful issue.

We have heard changes are needed and I can assure you changes are occurring.

The conversations from this conference will continue to drive those changes.

Thank you.