

Growing Our Relations: Wahkohtowin

Second Aboriginal Forum unites partners in service to Aboriginal children, youth and families.

humanservices.alberta.ca/aboriginalforum



Left to right: Audrey Franklin and Trevor Thain, Co-Chairs of the Board of North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority; Chief Cameron Alexis, Alberta Representative, Assembly of First Nations; Del Graff, Child and Youth Advocate of Alberta; and Steve MacDonald, Deputy Minister of Human Services, at the second Aboriginal Forum hosted by North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority.

They came from many different walks of life, but they had one thing in common: a genuine interest in improving the lives of Aboriginal children and families.

About 150 stakeholders and partners associated with North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA) met on May 1-2, 2013 in Sherwood Park, Alberta at the second annual Aboriginal Forum. The intent of these forums is to help build new relationships and share insights into helping Aboriginal children, youth and families. This year's forum, Growing our Relations, centred on the theme of "Wahkohtowin" — a term from the Cree language to describe the interconnectedness of all things.

Participants included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal caseworkers, board members, band designates, staff from the Ministry of Human Services and Delegated First Nations Agencies, elders, agencies, partners, and an Aboriginal family who shared their personal experience with the child intervention system after two children in their family were taken into care (see *Wahkohtowin: A Family's Story* on page 6).

"What I heard gives me hope."

From a participant



NORTH CENTRAL ALBERTA
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES AUTHORITY



"We encourage you to open your hearts and your minds—and look to the future. A future that we can create together. A future where Aboriginal children and families can heal and grow strong."

Audrey Franklin,
Aboriginal Co-Chair
North Central Alberta CFSA



"Never before has there been such opportunity and such willingness to work together."

Trevor Thain
Co-Chair
North Central Alberta CFSA

Although Aboriginal children comprise about a quarter of the total number of kids in the North Central Alberta Region, more than half of all child protection cases are Aboriginal. "Those are numbers that call out for attention and thoughtful, concerted action," said Audrey Franklin, Aboriginal Co-Chair. "We need to talk to each other. Our ability to help Aboriginal children and youth depends on the strength of our relationships."

"Never before has there been such opportunity and such willingness to work together," said Trevor Thain, Co-Chair. "The principle of building relationships is now even embedded in government policy. The Social Policy Framework will promote greater collaboration between departments so we can find more effective solutions "

"We cannot let the challenges ahead keep us from recognizing what has already been achieved," said

Steve McDonald, Deputy Minister of Human Services. He noted that from

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

- Steve MacDonald, Deputy
Minister, Human Services



December 2011 to December 2012, the number of Aboriginal children in care went down by 176 children and that across the province, 1,300 Aboriginal families were provided support needed to enable children to remain safely with their parents rather than coming into care. "I'm very encouraged by the progress we're making."

Dr. David Rideout, CEO of North Central Alberta CFSA, said, "We hope the ideas raised at this forum will educate and inform our staff and ultimately translate into even better outcomes for Aboriginal children, youth and families."



To watch  a video of the opening remarks by the Co-Chairs, Deputy Minister and CEO, please visit the website at www.humanservices.ca/aboriginalforum.

Message from Honourable Dave Hancock, Minister of Human Services

I want to thank North Central Alberta CFSA for hosting this event. The partnerships and relationships amongst Aboriginal communities, organizations and government help to enhance the care Aboriginal children receive by ensuring they remain connected to their cultures.

For more than a year, community conversations have been occurring throughout the province as the first step in listening. Albertans who are involved in the system are looking at ways to do things differently. Themes emerging from these sessions align well with the conference: we need to work better together; our practice and decisions need to be inclusive of Aboriginal culture; we need increased community capacity and programming; and we need increased awareness of historical trauma.

Continuing to focus on breaking down barriers and trying different approaches to better support Aboriginal children and families will help to achieve positive outcomes. Thank you for your dedication to making a positive difference and engaging in deliberate and thoughtful change.



“It’s really good to see you all here for the common good, working with children in need.”

Chief Cameron Alexis
Alberta Representative, Assembly of First Nations



“I think it’s very important to bring people together like this and increase understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Aboriginal children and families. This is a positive step forward.”

– Del Graff, Child and Youth Advocate, Province of Alberta



“I appreciate the fact that you are recognizing and acknowledging our traditions and cultures.”

– Elder Fred Campiou



“I found this Forum went way beyond theoretical lecture and truly got people talking to each other about what they could do to effect positive change through building healthy working relationships.”

- James Toner, Foster Care Supervisor



Moving Beyond Lateral Violence

Keynote speaker—day 1

Dr. Patti LaBoucane-Benson is a PhD researcher of Aboriginal Family and Community Resilience Ecology and Practice. She has worked for Native Counseling Services of Alberta for 17 years and is currently the Director of Research, Training and Communication. She spoke about lateral violence and the impact of historic trauma.

Historic trauma refers to traumatic episodes that are cumulative over the lifespan of individuals and across generations, she said. “As a result of this trauma, Aboriginals began to internalize the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal identity—that *colonized* belief that indigenous philosophy and culture was *inferior*. Aboriginals lost that internal locus of control and that began the introduction of pervasive cycles of intergenerational violence.”

When a group has been oppressed, they turn on each other, directing their anger not outward on the oppressor, but laterally, across peer groups.

“When we feel justified to retaliate, lateral violence can spiral out of control. Hurt people hurt people. It’s a traumatic response that comes from being hurt.”

Dr. LaBoucane-Benson said the first step to resolving lateral violence in Aboriginal communities is to recognize that it is a response to oppression and the next step is for individuals to seek guidance, through prayer, professional help, or ceremony.

Elder Campiou agreed. “I really believe that’s a way. It’s the spiritual foundation of ceremonies that allow us to cross the bridge to other cultures, beliefs and philosophies.”

When a group has been oppressed, they turn on each other, directing their anger not outward on the oppressor, but laterally, across peer groups.



-Dr. Patti LaBoucane-Benson

“It’s about our relationship as human beings. We’re all committed to the same place. Where we end up is up to us individually to determine .”

- Elder Fred Campiou



To watch a video of Dr. LaBoucane-Benson’s presentation, please visit the website at www.humanservices.ca/aboriginalforum.



Challenging Incremental Equality:

A Human Rights Approach to First Nations Children's Services

Keynote speaker—day 2



Dr. Cindy Blackstock is Executive Director for First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (www.fncaringsociety.com) and an Associate Professor at the University of Alberta. She is a member of the Gitksan Nation and has worked in the field of child and family services for over 20 years.

“They don’t have time to wait for us to figure it out. They only have one childhood.” - Dr. Cindy Blackstock

“The number of kids in care is staggering and exceeds the number of kids [who were] in residential care,” she said.

“They don’t have time for wait for us to figure it out.”

Dr. Blackstock urged the caseworkers in the audience to re-think *neglect* as a reason for apprehending Aboriginal children and to change the things that cause mothers to neglect their children—like poverty, homelessness and discrimination.

“I don’t know what *neglect* means, yet it’s the number one reason kids get removed,” she said.

“We are holding parents’ feet to the fire for things that are beyond their ability to change.” She

asked for a show of hands for the number of people whose caseloads would be reduced if workers could do things like get rid of black mold or get renovations for disabled children. Many hands went up. “When we give people a safe place to live, people are less stressed.”



Left to right: Band Designate Annie Stanley, Dr. Cindy Blackstock, DFNA Director and Band Designate Kathleen Gadwa, and CEO Dr. David Rideout. Dr. Blackstock is wearing a blanket presented by Tribal Chiefs Child and Family Services (East) as a gesture of thanks for her work.

To watch a video of Dr. Blackstock’s presentation, please visit the website at www.humanservices.ca/aboriginalforum.



Wahkohtowin:



This is the true story of one Aboriginal family's experience with the child intervention system. They agreed to share their story in the hopes that it will help caseworkers and families work better together in the future and ensure the best possible outcomes for children.

What began with two little girls in crisis ended up as a success story—and an example of the power in relationships.

When their mom and dad were arrested, the little girls needed a safe place

immediately. Assessor Caleb Anacker found them an emergency foster home.

It was not until the next day that the girls' aunts, Donna and Doris, learned that the children had been taken into care. (*Auntie* is an Aboriginal term often used to describe a close female relative or friend). They made a frantic call to DFNA Director and Band Designate Kathleen Gadwa, who was able to locate the girls.

First thing Monday morning, the aunts were at the CFSA office, hoping to obtain private guardianship of the girls. Caseworker Brandi Vigne and Supervisor Melanie Fakely were there to meet them.

"It made me think about how traumatic apprehension is for families."

-audience member



Left to right: Caseworker Brandi Vigne, Donna, Doris, DFNA Director and Band Designate Kathleen Gadwa, caseworker Caleb Anacker shared their personal experience of being involved in a child intervention case involving two little girls (pictured on the screen behind them).

Brandi described the rush that followed.

"They literally met with us, rushed to St. Paul, got the application, rushed to Native Counseling where the band designate helped them bring the application to court the very same day that the CFSA was bringing its application to court.

"The only way we can do something very powerful is to engage in relationships."

- Kathleen Gadwa, Band Designate

"The [Statutory] Director's lawyer helped navigate their application through the process in front of the judge," Brandi said. "He was extremely helpful."

A Family's Story

Staff at Tribal Chiefs East were quick to do all the environmental safety assessments and the CFSA staff arranged some furniture for the little girls to have in their new homes. "It was an extremely emotional and powerful day and proved the strength and trust in families," Brandi said. "Many tears were shed and hugs were given."

Within just a few days, the children were living in the familiar surroundings of their auntie's home. DFNA Director and Band designate Kathleen Gadwa credits the already established relationships as a key contributor to the successful outcome, pointing out how CFSA leadership and staff had often visited the Kehewin First Nation to learn about Aboriginal culture – "to see who we are and where we come from," Kathleen said. "The only way we can do something very powerful is to engage in relationships. We cannot always keep children from coming into care but we can do our best to [address] the lack of adequate housing, lack of resources within the community. As we work together, hold hands and begin to move this situation to give us a brighter future, not for us – for our children."

Caseworker Brandi Vigne



"It was an extremely emotional and powerful day and proved the strength and trust in families."



"Auntie" Donna

"I give thanks to Kathleen, Caleb, Melanie and Brandi for bringing everything that happened to light. Keep up the good work."

"I take to heart impacts on the life of the child—what is this going to do as they grow up, become parents, have children of their own, become grandparents? That's important to keep in the forefront of my mind."



Caseworker Caleb Anacker



DFNA Director and Band Designate Kathleen Gadwa

"Engage band designates and communities to help bring kinship homes to the forefront of placements."

"Know that we are all connected. How? Through our hearts, my beloved, through our hearts."



"Auntie" Doris

To watch a video of the panel presentation, please visit www.humanservices.alberta.ca/



Talking Circles

After each of the three keynote presentations, participants broke off into *talking circles* to share perspectives on what they had heard and learned. The circle is a safe place where everyone is respected and has a voice.

Each circle had a centerpiece that included items such as a piece of cloth, rocks, an *inukshuk*, candle and feathers, provided by Native Counseling Services of Alberta. Participants took turns holding an item of significance for them, passing it along when they had finished speaking.



The centre piece is an offering to participants in the circle to help on their journey in discovering togetherness and understanding. The *inukshuk* is symbolic of letting us know that we are on the right path.





Note-takers in each circle captured the discussion points and shared them with the larger group.

Voices from the circles:

On lateral violence: “It’s passed on from generation to generation.” ☞ Racism is on every level; it’s not just an “Indian” thing.” ☞ “Do not let our hurt hurt others.” ☞ “Go back to culture – the teachings – honour children, rites of passage of men and women.” ☞ “Be proud of who we are.” ☞ “Support each other.”

On challenging incremental equality: “Fix poverty rather than react to the effects of it.” ☞ “Mentor and support Aboriginal families.” ☞ “Have trust and faith in the families you work with.” ☞ “Teach workers about domestic violence.” ☞ “Understand the hurt.” ☞ “Help Aboriginal children be proud of who they are.” ☞ “Equality is a human right.” ☞ “Be aware of people’s cultures and be curious.” ☞ “Ask families for their solutions.” ☞ “Utilize the Band Designates.” ☞ “Hold each other and Canada accountable.”

On the Wahkohtowin Family Story: “It made me realize how traumatic apprehension is for families.” ☞ “The family was pro-active.” ☞ “They kept the best interest of the child.” ☞ “What I heard gives me hope.” ☞ “Extended family is so important.” ☞ “Their courage telling their story.” ☞ “In spite of their fear, the family came together.” ☞ “Think about the impact on a child across the span of their lifetime.” ☞ “We need to take personal responsibility for relationship building.”



For a summary of comments recorded in all of the talking circles, please go to www.humanservices.alberta.ca/aboriginalforum

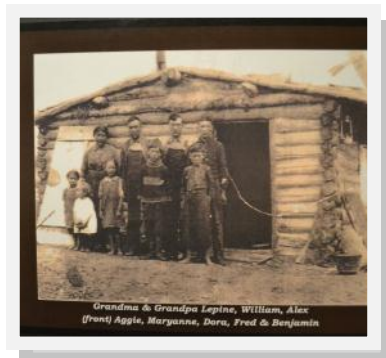
Aboriginal culture

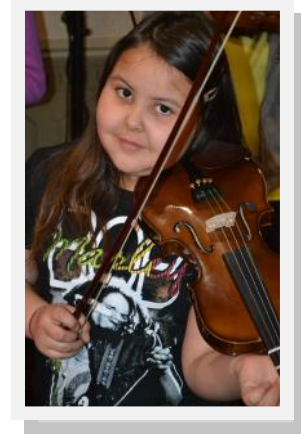
Part of the intent of the Forum was to raise awareness of Aboriginal history, customs, traditions and protocols, for example—the tradition of giving an Elder the gift of tobacco. Elder Campiou explained, “Our belief is that tobacco is a spirit that speaks to us for the Creator so our voice is heard in the heavens and this is where it is important for us to relate and have that relationship.”

The Forum also included displays of Métis and First Nations information, art, and history. It also featured entertainment by the Prince Charles School Guitar and Fiddle Group, a troupe of First Nations and Métis students, and an Aboriginal drumming group called the One Fire Singers who led Forum participants in a Round Dance.

“Our belief is that tobacco is a spirit that speaks for us to the Creator so our voice is heard in the heavens.”

- Elder Fred Campiou





Prince Charles School Guitar and Fiddle Group



“The drum is like the heartbeat of Mother Earth. It calls to us.”

**Joshua Alexis,
One Fire Singers**

One Fire Singers



Feedback from conference participants indicated that 100 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the Forum increased their understanding of Aboriginal culture and what they learned could help children and families.



Left to right: David Rideout, CEO; MCs Darice Henderson and Jason Higgins; planning committee co-chairs Pauline Cardinal and Bonda Thompson.

“I want to express my appreciation to the co-chairs of the Forum planning committee, Bonda Thompson and Pauline Cardinal, all the planning committee members, MCs Darice Henderson and Jason Higgins—and especially, everyone who joined us here to day: thank you for helping make this Forum such a phenomenal success.”

Dr. David Rideout, CEO,
North Central Alberta CFSA

