

Check Against Delivery

Treaty 8 Annual General Meeting June 9, 2014, Fort McKay Honourable Manmeet S. Bhullar, Minister, Human Services

Thank you very much for inviting me.

I would like to acknowledge all of your Elders today. It is truly a blessing to start the day with a pipe ceremony and opening prayer.

It is an honour to acknowledge all of the Chief and Councils for their leadership and commitment to the work they do with children, youth and families.

The opportunity to be a guest on Reserve is special, especially being in the Treaty 8 territory.

I also congratulate you on the tenth anniversary of this important gathering and thank the Fort McKay First Nation for inviting me.

I am honoured to be the Minister with responsibility for child and family matters and other areas important to your communities including disability services and employment supports.

We see the value and importance of relationships and working together where possible. It is important to hear your ideas about what can make a difference.

I want to let you know about the good work underway in Human Services and how we are working together to improve the lives of children and families.

I would like to update you on the progress of my Five-Point Plan to improve the child intervention system.

The first step in the plan was the roundtable held in January that included Aboriginal leaders from Treaty 8 and across Alberta.

The next step was creating an expert committee to review the child intervention system.

I am pleased to say that Chief Wilton Littlechild, member and former Chief of the Ermineskin Cree Nation, is the newest member of this committee.

This committee has been meeting and presented me with its first activity report.

Later this year, this committee is going to be looking at why there are so many Aboriginal children in care.

The third step of my Five-Point Plan is about sharing information.

I strongly believe that more and better data leads to better decision-making and better care for our children and families.

A great deal of information about the system is now available online, and we continue to look at how we can use data to set the direction for further improvements.

The fourth step of the plan is about better education and support for workers in child intervention.

We've made great steps forward here: I'm pleased to tell you that last week, we partnered with the University of Calgary to create greater focus on child intervention.

This partnership will allow 25 new students and people working in social work to complete their Bachelor of Social Work degree online.

We are also helping our staff to deliver more culturally appropriate services.

This is part of helping connect Aboriginal children, youth and families to their communities and culture.

We are also committed to kinship care as a way of helping children stay with family whenever possible.

Recently, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Calgary Police Service that ensures criminal record checks for kinship care placements are not delayed.

This is the first of its kind in Alberta. I hope more are to come.

The final element of my Five-Point Plan is to address root causes of many of the issues that affect the safety and well-being of children.

We cannot do this alone and will continue to work with you, as First Nation leaders, building on work that is already being done.

One of the ways in which we are working together is through the new Family and Community Engagement Councils.

Some of you may have put your names forward to be members or Aboriginal Co-Chairs.

I am pleased that nearly 20 per cent of our applications came from Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal Co-Chairs and the Aboriginal Council of Co-Chairs will have a voice about matters impacting First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in the province.

There are a number of other actions I'm taking.

Human Services is developing a Children's Charter (as part of the Children First Act) to develop principles for things such as health, safety, and quality of life.

We have talked with Elders from Treaty 8, Treaty 8 Delegated First Nation Agencies' (DFNA) Directors and representatives from Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta.

This Charter will be presented in the Legislature this fall.

We're also helping more youth. I am working on changing the system to ensure young adults in care can receive supports for two more years: up to age 24.

More information will be available soon.

I spoke earlier about reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care.

The good news is that over the past several years, the number of Treaty 8 First Nation children in care has gone down.

Although the number recently went up slightly, overall, there has been great improvement.

The total number of all First Nation children in the child intervention system is also going down.

And we want to continue that trend – so we are taking a new approach to child intervention called Signs of Safety.

We are also creating a Child Intervention Practice Framework that respects Aboriginal experience.

Another important way we work with you for Aboriginal children is with the band designate on-reserve.

I'm very pleased that Treaty 8 is partnering with us to develop the band designate role.

A band designate makes sure First Nation children and youth who are in care are connected to family, community and culture.

Another way we are working together to reduce Aboriginal children in care is through the Child and Family Services Engagement Process.

This process includes Treaty 6, 7, and 8, Human Services, Aboriginal Relations and the Government of Canada.

Everyone is working together on a shared Action Plan to further the collective interests of First Nation children.

In fact, the legislation and policy of the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* itself is being reviewed.

We will be with you and all of our Aboriginal partners as we work together to make changes.

Amendments are planned for the Fall of 2016.

Lastly, Human Services is more than child intervention and we are working with First Nation people in other areas.

We are looking at how people with disabilities are served by the federal and provincial governments.

We provide safe spaces for vulnerable women. Human Services funds emergency women's and homeless shelters as well as local community-based organizations in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray.

First Nations and Métis community members may access services at any of these shelters.

We also have numerous partnerships with First Nations to connect Aboriginal people on- and off-reserve to employment opportunities.

In the north, we are helping prepare Aboriginal people to work in the booming industrial sector: in the Shell Carmon Creek project in the northwest and, with Fort McKay First Nation and the Blood Tribe, training 131 Blood Tribe members to work on projects in Fort McKay.

In the northeast, we offer training to employment for people on- and off-reserve. Last year, over 800 people attended this training.

We can only make progress when there is a strong respect for an equal partnership between First Nations and my ministry.

The relationships we are forging will make a real difference for the people we serve.

In closing, I thank you very much. I look forward to working together in the future.

Thank you.