



**Ministry of Children's Services Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Special Report
*"Voices for Change: Aboriginal Child Welfare in Alberta"***

October 2017



Background

In July 2016, the OCYA released its Special Report: “Voices for Change: Aboriginal Child Welfare in Alberta”. The report examines the continued over-representation of Indigenous children and families in the child intervention system. The report acknowledges that there has been an overall reduction in the number of Indigenous children in-care, however rightly identifies that more work needs to be done.

The OCYA report echoes much of what Indigenous leaders and communities, academics and previous reports have identified relating to the issue of over-representation. Reports include: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, the ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, the work of Cindy Blackstock and the First Nations Caring Society, and the July 2016 report from the Office of the Auditor General of Alberta.

The Ministry of Children’s Services recognizes that the tragic reality of over-representation of Indigenous children is the single most critical challenge facing the child intervention system, and is working to make sustainable changes to support positive outcomes, family engagement, cultural connections, and increased community capacity. As this report and others have indicated, there are many complex factors at play that have contributed to the over-representation of Indigenous children including the intergenerational trauma of colonialism, the tragic legacy of the residential school system, and the ongoing effects of the Sixties Scoop. These, along with a host of other challenges, have resulted in profound socio-economic disparities for Indigenous peoples and communities.

The Ministry of Children’s Services, along with its partners, and with Indigenous communities, is actively working to strengthen the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the government as part of Alberta’s commitment to reconciliation.

The report’s eight recommendations outline opportunities for improving the relationships with and the outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities. The ministry will continue to work with the OCYA, Indigenous communities and the federal government to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and families.

Response to Recommendations

The Government of Alberta accepts the intent of the OCYA’s recommendations. The findings of this Special Report are consistent with what the Ministry of Children’s Services knows from working with Indigenous partners and communities. It also aligns with the findings of other reports on child welfare for Indigenous peoples in Alberta and Canada. The ministry is taking action through a multi-faceted and comprehensive approach, recognizing a new path is needed. Effective solutions to these complex issues require a shift in how we work with Indigenous people and communities. As the OCYA suggests in the report, this must include engaging Indigenous partners and communities up front in a meaningful way to develop sustainable, respectful, and culturally relevant actions. In order to implement solutions that are effective both on and off reserve, it also requires engagement and collaboration within and between Government of Alberta ministries, First Nations Leadership, the Government of Canada, and community agencies.

The Ministry of Children's Services will continue to leverage existing partnerships and ongoing engagement processes, including the Child and Family Services Tri-lateral Engagement Process (CFSTEP) of all three Treaty Areas in Alberta, the ministry and the federal government on the 10 year plan to reduce the over-representation of Indigenous children in care. The engagement process for initiatives under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People will also help inform next steps.

The Ministry of Children's Services will also continue to work on policy and practice improvements that are already underway, focussed specifically on building resiliency and capacity in Indigenous children, families and communities. Some of these improvements include the development of a cultural understanding framework and training for staff, strengthening the assessment and support for kinship homes, ensuring children are actively connected to their family, their community and their culture and focussing on returning children home whenever it is safe to do so. We are also the lead ministry for the implementation of Jordan's Principle in Alberta. We are working collaboratively with Health Canada to ensure that Indigenous children access the programs and services required to meet their needs.

Investment in prevention and early intervention is critical to truly impact the on-reserve service disparity. This is an area that has been identified as a key priority by First Nations leadership and Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNA) Directors. As a result, the Ministry of Children's Services is also working with First Nations communities on several pilot projects to create capacity for culturally appropriate early intervention and prevention services for families both on and off reserve.

In February 2017, an all-party Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention was convened to explore ways to strengthen the intervention system by addressing root causes of why children and families become involved with the system in the first place. The Panel's work has included listening to Indigenous leaders and communities, as well as families with lived experience with the system, and visiting reserves to better understand what solutions work for Indigenous families. The Panel's recommendations will identify opportunities and concrete actions to improve the child intervention system, address over-representation of Indigenous children in the intervention system, and improve outcomes for all children receiving child intervention services; and will explore ways government can address the on-reserve service disparity. As part of its work, Panel members have met with representatives from DFNAs, First Nations Designates, community members, and Chief and Council members from First Nations across the province. The Ministry of Children's Services looks forward to receiving the Panel's recommendations and taking action to improve the way we support Indigenous children and families.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Children's Services thanks the Advocate for his Special Report and recommendations. The OCYA continues to be a valued partner that supports our work to improve the ways we support children and families.

We have heard that the challenges Indigenous families face, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families in the child intervention system, are a result of historic and intergenerational trauma. Residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and a host of government policies and programs, have had a profound impact on families and communities throughout Alberta, and across Canada. Sadly, as we continue to learn from these tragic past mistakes in our relationship with Indigenous communities, Indigenous children and youth continue to experience trauma today.

And we know that in a place like Alberta, with so much opportunity, for so many, we need to ensure that every child can reach those opportunities, no matter where they live.