

**REVIEW OF THE
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES ACT
IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

FOR

THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Survey Findings

Prepared by: Betty Daley
Heather Nyamazana

Date: March 15, 2010

Contents

Preface.....	3
Executive Summary	4
Research Team	6
Methodology	8
Demographic Information.....	9
Statistics of People Interviewed	10
Historical	11
Their Children	12
Themes	13
General Issues	13
Social Work Practice	14
Cultural Needs	15
Foster Home Placements	17
Lack of Information	18
Unfounded Allegations	21
Gender Bias	23
Community Support	23
Children and Decision-making	25
Impact of System Intervention	27
Other Comments	28
Interviewer Observations	29
Recommendations	30
Appendix A Adult Interview Guide.....	33
Appendix B Teen Interview Guide.....	40
Appendix C Invitation	45
Appendix D Letter of Consent.....	46

Preface

The 16th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories' priorities includes the promotion of healthy choices and lifestyles. It also speaks to the role of personal and family responsibility. Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) see the need to work with families, communities and schools to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of children and youth.

The *Child and Family Services Act* guides what the government, communities and families must, or can do, to protect children if their safety and wellbeing is in danger and guides what kind of help can be provided to families and children. The *Child and Family Services Act* was introduced in 1998. Since then, changes to the Act were made, but a complete review has never been done.

Over the past few years, MLAs and their constituents have voiced concerns regarding child protection, apprehension, the discretionary powers of Child Protection Workers, the overall oversight of the NWT child protection regime, the role of the extended family in child protection matters, and the implementation of Child and Family Services Committees in the Northwest Territories. Members have pressed government to allow for a comprehensive review of the *Child and Family Services Act* and its implementation.

The 16th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories delegated the review of the *Child and Family Services Act* to the Standing Committee on Social Programs. The Standing Committee is providing many different opportunities for consultations with individuals, communities and stakeholders including asking for written submissions and responses to guided question. They are organizing public meetings throughout the Northwest Territories to gather information from the general public. In addition, the Standing Committee will be hosting consultations with stakeholders groups. The Standing Committee will also research to compare laws, programs and services in other Canadian jurisdictions and will review literature about best practices, including models that exist to support and involve families and communities. The Standing Committee will consider all input and feedback it receives when deciding on recommendations for its final report.

This report explores the experiences of both families and teens or young adults who are or have been involved with Child and Family Services in the Northwest Territories, with a particular focus on the implementation of the legislation. Fifty-seven (57) interviews were conducted with participation from people living in Yellowknife, Behchoko, Hay River, Fort Simpson, Inuvik and Fort McPherson. Individuals who lived in the Northwest Territories, but had moved to southern Canada were also interviewed. Interviewers endeavoured to ensure the survey was representative of a broad range of perspectives including youth, parents and extended family members. An interview guide was created to structure the discussion with a view to capturing the realities of people who had been involved with Child and Family Services and recommendations that could be put forward for developing a more responsive system.

The findings of this study are being presented to the Standing Committee on Social Programs in March, 2010 in preparation for their final report on the Review of the *Child and Family Services Act* scheduled to be tabled during the 2010 fall session of the 16th Assembly.

Executive Summary

The 16th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories asked the Standing Committee on Social Programs to review of the *Child and Family Services Act*. This report focuses on the experiences of both families and teens or young adults who are or have been involved with Child and Family Services with a particular focus on the implementation of the legislation. Fifty-seven people, the majority of which were First Nations, Inuit and Métis were interviewed. To ensure regional representation, more than half of the participants in the survey lived in communities outside of Yellowknife and included a few people who had lived in the NWT, but moved to southern Canada.

All of the people interviewed identified key social factors that had negatively affected their family including poverty, illiteracy or lack of formal education, the impacts of residential school and a lack of parenting skills. It was evident from the results of the survey that family breakdown would continue until these underlying, systemic issues were addressed.

Findings from the survey revealed difficulties might have had more to do with implementation of the *Child and Family Services Act*, rather than the legislation itself. Lawyers or the legal system also appeared to pose a barrier for families as well.

Although a few families indicated that the Social Worker was a positive influence in supporting their families, each person interviewed identified significant challenges and negative effects of decisions made by Child and Family Services. Lack of communication, or miscommunication was one factor that led families to mistrust Social Workers. Many who were interviewed had little education and a limited ability to read and write. Often, although information was provided, it wasn't clear and families felt there was little attempt by Social Workers to ensure they understood what was being presented.

When children were apprehended, families had limited access to information about their children particularly if there was an active custody case. Multiple workers involved with a single family contributed to poor information exchange. Families said it was hard to develop a relationship with workers because they constantly changed and information was either not shared or was misplaced. Families said plans of care did not clearly outline expectations of the Social Worker and the expectations changed prior to any discussion. Families said information they shared with Social Workers in the plan of care process was later used against them in court to extend the involvement of Child and Family Services or to take their children away permanently.

Some parents that were interviewed said their children were abused in foster care. They questioned the amount of screening and follow-up done with foster families. Families felt they were not listened to by the Social Workers and concerns about their children's health and safety while they were in foster care was not taken seriously. Parents said they weren't notified of significant events that occurred while their children were in foster care, e.g. medical treatments, abuse and when they returned home information did not follow them.

People who were interviewed said their mistrust of Social Workers was also as a result of decisions to remove children from their home before investigations were complete. And when investigations were done, parents felt it was biased. Fathers, especially felt the effect of false allegations and system bias. On the other hand, women felt higher expectations were placed on

them to meet the goals of the plan of care. Parents who had faced unfounded allegations as determined by the courts felt it was a case of "being guilty until you could prove you were innocent." Everyone who experienced false allegations described the devastating effect on not only them, but their children as well. Parents said having the truth come to light did not repair the damage that had already been done by the removal of children from their home.

The majority of families said non-Aboriginal Social Workers did not understand or respect their culture and that it was important to hire Aboriginal Social Workers. Some though, said they preferred to work with non-Aboriginal Social Workers because their Aboriginal counterparts acted like they were superior and showed favouritism along family lines that tended to work against them. In keeping with the demand for culturally specific approaches survey participants said if they couldn't parent their children extended family members should be identified as the foster home, or if that was not possible someone from their own cultural background. The legislation supports this premise. When children are removed from the family home, "the court shall place the child with first a member of the child's extended family, then a member of the child's band or native community; or another Indian or native family" (R.S.O.1990,c.C.11, s.57 (4,5)). Families said that foster families not from the same cultural background had different parenting styles, different diets, and different belief systems. The cultural loss was a key challenge for families and more extreme in circumstances where children were placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes outside of their community and the Northwest Territories.

Children, particularly if they were from large families tended to be scattered in several foster homes and in various communities. They also tended to be moved several times making it hard for parents and children to maintain relationships. According to survey participants, the disconnection between children and their families was so complete recovering the relationships were almost impossible.

Families had differing views about the age of responsibility for children 12 years of age or older depending on the focus of the question. Families whose children were in care felt that their children had a right to say they wanted to come back home. If the question focused on allowing youth who were at home to make decisions, families felt they were not mature enough.

Although families were able to identify some supports that were in place for children and families, they had major concerns about the gap in the support offered to children in care versus those who lived with or were returned to their families. One of the supports families identified as most helpful was having access to a third party advocate who could provide them with information and support. Other supports identified as being helpful were financial assistance, respite childcare and counselling or addiction treatment services.

Most parents and youth had great hopes that this review would take into consideration their experiences and change the system to better meet the needs of families, in particular their children.

Research Team

The Centre for Northern Families was contracted to carry out the portion of the review of the *Child and Family Services Act* that relates to interviewing parents and youth who have had experiences with Child and Family Services. The Centre has worked with marginalized families for more than two decades and has provided direct support to families who have come into contact with Child and Family Services. From time to time the Centre has worked in collaboration with that Child and Family Services delivering family support programs.

Having experience working with families in the North was integral to the structuring of questions in a meaningful way and setting the stage for the interview process. The Centre has been involved in several territorial and national committees that established parameters for research related to the fields of health and social services. The Centre was a key partner in research and was involved in publishing three documents: a) a global study of language nests published by the Government of the Northwest Territories in 2003; b) a training manual for the Nipissing District Screening Tool published by the Government of the Northwest Territories in 2003; and c) a pan-territorial study of homeless women in the North "You Just Blink and It Can Happen" published in November 2007.

In this instance, the Centre for Northern Families took a different approach because of the potential for conflict of interest. The Centre is often seen as an advocacy group and provides frontline services to families who are oftentimes in conflict with Child and Family Services. As a result, they made a decision to hire outside contractors who have not provided frontline services to families in the North to complete the interviews. The interview team consisted of Betty Daley (Lead Researcher) and Heather Nyamazana (Interviewer). Both have experience carrying out research relevant to this field of study and have worked in the North as interviewers.

Ms. Daley has a Bachelors of Arts Degree in Disability Studies from Ryerson University and has 35 years experience working with multi-stressed families, and in particular with persons with disabilities. Ms. Daley is experienced with qualitative and quantitative research and has carried out independent and group research projects related to Disabilities, one in Nunavut. Ms. Daley was also hired by the Centre for Northern Families to work on the two early projects listed above that were contracted to our organization by the Government of the Northwest Territories in 2003. As team leader, she managed the project and was responsible for the development of the interview guide, consent forms. She carried out interviews and wrote the draft report.

Heather Nyamazana has a Bachelors of Arts Degree with Honours in Anthropology from the University of Toronto. Ms. Nyamazana is experienced in qualitative and quantitative research, and has carried out independent and group research projects related to Anthropology, Sociology and the Environment. Ms. Nyamazana interviewed many of the participants and provided input into the interview guides and the draft report.

Arlene Hache has been the Executive Director of the Centre for Northern Families for 20 years. She is well respected by community people, agency leaders and decision-makers for her capacity to design programs and services that meet the complex needs of marginalized families. She was recently nominated by members of the community for the Order of Canada and was inducted into the Order this winter. Ms. Hache has participated in several territorial and national

collaborations around research and was involved in writing several research reports and developing trauma recovery and family support tools and programs. As technical consultant, she was involved in the development of the interview guides and the consent forms. Ms. Hache promoted the survey along with other stakeholders groups. She was not involved in the participant selection, interviews or writing of the report because of the perceived conflict of interest.

Methodology

The research carried out was designed to focus on the experiences of families and teens or young adults who have been involved with Child and Family Services in the Northwest Territories with a particular focus on the implementation of the legislation.

Two interview guides were developed by the research team and then approved by the Standing Committee on Social Programs to aid in the gathering of relevant information from participants. One interview guide focused on the experience of families who have been or are involved with Child and Family Services (Appendix A). The second was developed to gather information from youth or young adults who were or are in care (Appendix B).

Participants were recruited using a number of methods.

- A few individuals contacted their MLA who then passed their names on to the research team.
- An “Invitation” (Appendix C) was created and emailed to organizations in the different communities targeted for the research.
- Personal contacts were utilized.
- Participants referred others whom they knew.

The research team attempted to ensure there was a broad perspective by including women, men and youth/young adults who have been or are in the care of Child and Family Services. The Terms of Reference and subsequent contract required that twenty-five (25) interviews be carried out in Yellowknife and fifteen to twenty-five (15 – 25) interviews be carried out in the outlying communities of Behchoko, Inuvik, Fort McPherson, Fort Simpson and Hay River. Interviews were arranged at a time and place that was most convenient for the participants. In addition, phone interviews were held with people who had lived in the NWT, but had moved to southern Canada.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, how it was going to be used and the confidential nature of the information they would be sharing. Participants were assured that no identifying information would be used in this report unless they provided written consent. All participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D). Interviews were audio taped, then transcribed. Each participant received a \$50 honorarium to compensate them for their time.

The information provided during the interviews was analyzed to gather general information and identify themes that comprise the bulk of this report.

This report is being presented to the Standing Committee on Social Programs and will be a part of their evaluation of the Child and Family Services Act in the Northwest Territories.

Demographic Information

A total of fifty-seven (57) people were interviewed during this process including forty-three (43) women, ten men and three youth/young adults who have been or are in care. There were twenty-five (25) interviews conducted in Yellowknife and thirty (30) from the outlying communities of Behchoko, Inuvik, Fort McPherson, Fort Simpson and Hay River. In addition, two phone interviews were completed with parents who had lived in the Northwest Territories, but moved to southern Canada. The majority of those interviewed were First Nations, Inuit and Metis. Every participant was anxious to share their story although all were concerned about their identity becoming public and known to Child and Family Services.

In Yellowknife, sixteen (16) women between the ages of 30-50 years old were interviewed including two grandmothers who had their grandchildren apprehended. Seven men between 30-60 years of age and two youth who are presently in care were also interviewed.

Six women from Hay River were interviewed. Two were grandmothers over the age of 50 years old, three were women 35-40 years old, and one was a 22 year old young adult who had been in care.

In Fort McPherson, three mothers were interviewed who were between the ages of 30-55 years old. One woman and a couple in their 50s who were foster parents for family members were interviewed as well.

In Fort Simpson, four foster mothers between the ages of 30-50 years old were interviewed. They were foster families for extended family. A former Social Worker also wanted to share her experiences. There was also one 22 year old woman who was in care who was willing to be interviewed.

Four women from Inuvik, one grandparent and three aunts between the ages of 56-62 years old were interviewed.

In Behchoko, a 49 year old man, 5 women aged 27-39 years old and one couple in their 50s were anxious to share their stories. All were parents who had their children removed from their home.

In addition, two women in their 40s who had lived in the Northwest Territories, but moved to southern Canada were interviewed. One of the women is still involved with Child and Family Services and the courts in the Northwest Territories. The other had her son returned to her.

Statistics of People Interviewed

Community	Relationships	Gender	Age Range	
Yellowknife	23 Parents	7 Male 16 Female	13 7 3	30-39 40-49 50+
	2 Children in/were in Foster Care	2 Male	2	15-18
Behchoko	8 Parents	2 Male	1	20-29
			5	30-40
		6 Female	2	40-50
Hay River	4 Parents	4 Female	4	40-50
	1 Child in Foster Care	1 Female	1	20-25
Fort Simpson	5 Extended Family/Foster Parents	5 Female	5	40-50
		1 Female	1	20-25
	1 Child in Foster Care			
Inuvik	4 Extended Family/Foster Parents	4 Female	4	40-50
		1 Female	1	16-25
	1 Child in Foster Care			
Fort McPherson	6 Parents	1 Male	2	30-40
		5 Female	2	40-50
			2	50+
Other	2 Parents	2 Female	2	40-50

Participant Experience

This section provides some basic information about the participants and their children. It shares historical experiences that parents have and identifies some of the barriers they face today. Statistical information about the children who were or are in care is presented including why they were in care, where they were placed and the resulting damage that parents' believe resulted from their experience while in care.

Historical

Families and the youth/young adults who were interviewed were eager to share their story, but most were also very hesitant to have their personal information shared. They said they were afraid of what would happen if Child and Family Services had their names. They did not trust the system and needed reassurance that their names and identifying information would not be revealed. This was true whether families had their children returned to them or they were still in foster care.

Participants in the survey had a wide range of childhood and young adult experiences that contributed to their adult involvement with Child and Family Services. Forty three (43) parents, particularly those from smaller communities lived in poverty or lived on Social Assistance because there were few jobs and very limited employment options. Everyone involved in the survey was exposed to alcoholism and violence in the home as children. Two participants talked about their experiences in residential school and how that affected them and their ability to parent.

Many were raised in their immediate family or lived with extended family members. Fifty (50) out of the fifty-seven (57) parents said Child and Family Services were involved with their family throughout their childhood, although they generally didn't describe themselves as being "in care." One participant shared about living in her aunt and uncle's home as a foster child where she was sexually abused on an ongoing basis by another child in the home resulting in the birth of her first child. In adult life, she says that experience made her afraid to touch her own children. Participants in the survey talked about experiencing long-term "damage" and feeling powerless.

Thirty-one (31) participants in the survey had only a few years of primary school education and had difficulty reading and writing. Although everyone who was interviewed spoke English, ten people had a significant language barrier in that they weren't very clear about what words meant and how to use them. Some parents pointed to legal and social work jargon used in documents and verbal communication as problematic. As a result, parents said it was difficult for them to access and understand information that they needed in order to prepare for plan of care meetings and court hearings.

Of those families who were interviewed, approximately half of them had their children returned to them. They believed the reason their children were returned was that they did what the Social Worker told them to do.

"They break my heart; they break my power, lose self esteem just like residential school."

"I was brought up in the system when I was a baby. Today I find that I am a damaged person because of the welfare system. So when it came to the apprehension of my grandchild, I had to go around and get as much support system for myself."

Their Children

The fifty-seven (57) families and extended family members who were interviewed had ninety-five (95) children, fifty-three (53) girls and forty-two (42) boys. One person interviewed had no children involved with Child and Family Services. Five people who were interviewed were children who are or were in care so they are not reflected in these statistics.

Number of Interviewees	Number of Children in Family	Boys	Girls
6	No Children		
25	1 child	11	14
16	2 children	17	15
7	3 children	9	12
3	4 or more children	5	12

Ninety-five percent (95%) or fifty-four (54) parents and youth interviewed were told the reason their children, or they, were being removed from their home was because of alcohol addiction and/or family violence. Thirty (30) of those did not really understand why they were being told those issues had to be addressed because they didn't see their drinking as a problem.

Approximately fifty percent 50% or forty-seven (47) children from families that were interviewed were placed with extended family or community members who share the same ethnic background. The remaining half was placed in homes where the foster parents were non-Aboriginal. About half of the parents, particularly in small communities, felt their children should have been placed with relatives or another family from their same cultural background.

Every family that was interviewed believed their children had been damaged by the child welfare system. When children did come home, parents said they had difficulty managing the child's behaviours. Mothers said their children no longer listened and seemed to be quite angry. The older the child was, and the longer the child was in care, the angrier they seemed to be according to parents. When parents asked for counselling to be provided to their children, it was difficult if not impossible for them to access the services. Children where there were four or more siblings were particularly impacted. They were placed in different foster homes and some were moved out of their community making it difficult for them to see their families.

Five young adults between 16-22 years old were interviewed. They were or had been in foster care and seemed to understand the need to be removed from their family home. They viewed their experience as necessary, although they loved their parents deeply. Having said that, one teen still in care openly admitted to taking drugs on a daily basis to get by and identified that Child and Family Services did not keep children safe.

Themes

The following themes were identified through a combination of focused interview questions and self-disclosure expressed by families. The interview questionnaire was used as a guide and when a topic arose, probing questions were used to explore the issue further. Focused questions were asked to gather statistical information about families including levels of education/literacy and poverty, understandings around why children were apprehended, and the knowledge people held about their rights and the legal system. In addition, families were asked about their experience with Child and Family Services and the foster care system and in particular whether or not their culture heritage and traditions were taken into consideration when decisions were made. Families were asked to comment on the age they thought children should be in order to become involved in making decisions. There was some exploration of the types of supports provided by Child and Family Services to families and whether or not they were effective. And, families were asked to identify community-based supports they found helpful. The final three questions were open ended and asked for suggestions that would make improve the responses to families who struggle. Families identified other themes such as lack of consistency in workers, the effect of false allegations and others without prompting questions.

After the interviews were completed, transcripts of the dialogues were coded according to themes that were generated from the data itself. Once all the data was coded, the material related to each theme was compiled. Quotes from participants are used to highlight the themes.

General Issues

It was clear from the interviews families love their children very much. It was also apparent they recognized they needed resources to support their children. Some causal factors they identified related to poverty, illiteracy and lack of formal education, effects of residential school and a lack of parenting skills. Without addressing these underlying issues, participants acknowledged family breakdown and apprehensions would continue to happen.

"The system should acknowledge the root causes family breakdown, pain, abandonment, confusion and anxiety."

"When I got my kids apprehended, my child tax and everything got cut off. I had no way of living and having my kids to my house so I asked if they could help out with groceries, but they just shut me off. How can I take my kids to my house everyday when I don't have anything to feed them?"

"This system is built for people with money to navigate their way by use of lawyers. I have spent \$22,000 on trying to keep my son with me. And as a person with knowledge and education, found my way through the system. What about the communities with poverty and a lack of information?"

People that were interviewed felt lawyers were not helpful and most importantly not accessible to many families who were dealing with Child and Family Services. For some participants, the lack of family lawyers and in particular lawyers that understand Aboriginal people is a barrier.

"When it went to court, I never had the advice from a Northwest Territories lawyer. I had already been misled by several Northwest Territories lawyers. Most of them hold government contracts and they don't bite the hand that feeds them."

Social Work Practice

Issues identified by families that were directly related to their experiences with Child and Family Services were numerous. The majority didn't necessarily have to do with the legislation itself, but its implementation. There were a small number of parents and those in the system who felt that their social workers were helpful, however the majority (52) identified their social workers as one of the biggest barriers they faced.

"The worker tried his best. He helped me to go to meetings. That is how I got my kids back."

"Counselling was helpful to resolve our family conflict and I went back home within two months."

"I was in agreement with the decision and the separation provided a time for reflection. The foster parents were loving and caring. They gave me child tax benefits for shopping."

"Both my parents and me were involved in all the decisions that were made from the day I left home until I was ready to get back with my family."

"Social Workers should build relationships with the community and not sit in an office with paperwork."

"Social workers should have more experience. New people act like the RCMP because they don't know the community and they have no experience."

"The social workers need to have a bit more experience. This girl was just out of school and was new to the town and she didn't know the system. She was acting just like a cop or something."

"We are human beings just like they are. They don't need to act so high and mighty. They are very good to the foster families, but they treat us like crap. We're not human beings in their eyes. Even now, I see them in town and I say hi and they look at me with disgust. They're mad at me because the court said I was innocent."

Consistently changing Social Workers resulted in an inability to develop relationships with the family, the children and the community. Plans that had been agreed too were changed with each new worker and information was often misplaced. The lack of consistent support created turmoil for families and their children and resulted in the creation of more work for both the families and the workers.

"I've had four workers this year and that was hard."

"We planned on letting those kids go live with my Auntie in (an outlying community) cause she is a foster parent there and she looks after kids good. We were planning on going all three of us, but then the worker took a holiday off and those other workers took over and they changed it all and cancelled the plane tickets so we didn't go."

"The workers changed and the information wasn't passed on in the file."

The majority of participants in the survey said non-Aboriginal Social Workers did not understand Aboriginal culture or respect them. They thought Aboriginal Social Workers should be hired. On the other hand, some families did not feel better supported by Aboriginal Social Workers saying they acted like they were superior and showed favouritism. The perception of bias extended to family members of Workers in the community who believed their relative could have helped, but didn't because they didn't want to be seen as showing favouritism. For a smaller proportion of families, the worker's ethnicity was irrelevant.

"All of the Child Welfare Workers know nothing about Inuit culture, so how can they take that into consideration. All of the workers are non-Aboriginal."

"The Social Workers behaviours and decisions were influenced by stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples as alcohols, abusive and neglectful."

"Many of the workers were bigots because most were white and none were Aboriginal. There have been a few good ones, but they leave."

"Social Workers need to get some cross cultural training or education and workshops, for them operate with respect for the Aboriginal culture".

"I think it might be easier to talk to Social Workers because people are apprehensive about talking to Social Workers if you are Aboriginal or Inuit. But here the Social Workers are all Caucasians and maybe if they had some Native and Inuit Child Protection Workers, then maybe people might feel more at ease talking to them about their problems and not so scared of them. As everyone knows, it seems like Native people and Inuit are always a lower class than white people. That is how I see it. So when you have white people— white people represent authority in this country – so white people IS the system. So when white people come into your home to take away your child and you are Native or Inuit you are going to have a problem with that. Where as if it were a Native or Inuit person coming into your home to talk to you and to take your child, I bet it would go more smoothly."

"There is favouritism. Her son's girlfriend was to go to treatment, but she didn't but still got her kids back".

Cultural Needs

Culture and tradition were very important for families. One of the ways families felt that their children's cultural identity and traditions could be maintained was to have their children fostered by either a member of their extended family, or if that was not possible, by a family from their own cultural background. The legislation supports this expectation and says that when children are removed from the family home, "the court shall place the child with first a member of the

child's extended family, then a member of the child's band or native community; or another Indian or native family" (R.S.O.1990,c.C.11,s.57 (4,5)).

Social Workers did place children with extended family in many cases. When that didn't happen, families couldn't understand why the decision was made and became frustrated. Extended family also became frustrated and often gave up trying. When placed with non-related foster families, there was an attempt to match Aboriginal children with Aboriginal foster families. In many cases, that was not possible because of the lack of Aboriginal foster homes. Families said that foster families who are not from the same cultural background they have different parenting styles, different diets, and different belief systems. The result is that their cultural identity is eroded.

"Social Services never allowed a family member to take care of my sister's kids. I tried and my mother was denied temporary care of the kids. The Social Workers later agreed to give the kids to me after the four year old was sprayed by chemicals at the foster parent's house and ended up in hospital."

"The Act calls for the recognition of the community child by considering keeping children with family and relatives, but in reality this act is not being implemented correctly. For example I offered to take care of my sister's kids after apprehension. I didn't get any support from Child and Family Services and I had to give up."

"My children went to live with my sister who was continually harassed by Social Services until she gave up."

"Aboriginal foster parents are not getting adequate support to care for children in a culturally relevant home."

"I can't accept those white people to be a foster parent to a foster child. If it is a Native family, they will watch them wherever they go. White foster parents are more stricter than Native families."

"A white foster child should be with a white foster parent and a Native foster family should be with their family or a Native foster family instead of a different colour living with each other. That is going to be more aggressive living with these white people."

"The foster family was not Aboriginal. My daughter said that they don't feed them good. They changed their diet."

"Aboriginal kids got to do what they got to do. You can't just push a kid aside and say don't do that."

"I appreciate the government's attempt to give my nieces an opportunity for a safe and healthy environment, but I regret the fact that kids are removed from a cultural settings and blood line relatives where they end up with negative outcomes such as incarcerations, drugs and alcohol abuse."

The ultimate loss of culture and tradition was experienced in instances where children were placed or moved outside of their community and/or the Northwest Territories. This occurred when extended family members or a foster parent transferred or moved out of the territory and took the child with them. The resulting break in relationship between the parent and the child negatively affected both and repairing the relationship was almost impossible.

"They should think about the kids residing in the community so they can have tradition and teaching all the Native skills. When they go to school they speak English and they don't understand dogma."

"Foster parents use to take care of them and then they got transferred to Edmonton and took my son with them."

"They sent him out of the NWT so I couldn't see him."

Foster Home Placements

Five survey participants had several children that were scattered in different foster homes and in other communities. This made it difficult for the parents to see their children on a regular basis. It also was very hard emotionally on the children. In addition, children were moved a number of times, making it more challenging for children to develop relationships with foster families. Four families that were surveyed believed their children were not safe in foster care and they questioned the amount of screening and follow-up done by Child and Family Services with foster families.

"They were scattered. I went and asked Social Services why they were being scattered and I tried to get them placed with my mom under foster care. So she did that."

"If a Social Worker wants to apprehend kids they need to stay in one place for the whole six months or three months instead of putting them here and here, maybe one here two there, another there. I kept going to the office saying that I wanted all my kids in one place, in one foster home and they said that they couldn't. That was not good."

"The court system has to give attention to cases that involve children. My nephews changed four different foster homes during the ordeal which took 3 years. Court cases should not go that long while disrupting children's lives."

"My oldest went to five different foster homes. When he was in one foster home, he came home with a permanent scar because of diaper rash. He wasn't cleaned good. He also had Spray and Wash in his eyes. Apparently the foster parent was sleeping when the two kids were playing with the chemicals. They are supposed to be put away so kids can't get into them. When the Social Worker told me, I was really upset and screamed at her saying you are telling me you can't even put my own child with my family but you put my son with some woman who don't even care."

"It's hard to trust people when you have been moved around so much."

"The foster parents they have, I don't know how they do the screening, but one of my children was abused in one of the foster homes and they didn't tell me about it. I heard it from my son. He told me why they were taken out of that house and he was only four years old."

"I think foster families need to be screened better. My son was abused in a foster home".

"I kept bringing it up to the Social Workers that there was a problem in that home. My 7 year old daughter complained that they weren't treated fairly and they weren't being fed so I started bringing food to my visits. I would sit there and watch my kids eat like they were starved. Social Workers would shrug it off and wouldn't take me seriously."

"One time I went there to pick her up with my sister and she was gone. Then I heard a little noise and she was in the washroom in her car seat. And I said, 'What the hell, why she was in the washroom?' and they said that she needs to sleep and it's too noisy out here. That is the quietest place. I looked at my sister and a big heavy lift went on my heart just looking at her. I just started yelling at him and he said there wasn't nothing wrong with it. It's just a little cry. To this day, I can feel her pain."

"Social services isn't doing a good job at keeping them safe. I know they are older and they don't want to listen to anybody but they're not doing anything to enforce the right thing. They are the guardian. We would be gone for weeks and weeks and weeks, drinking all the time but they don't try to do anything to prevent it".

Extended family members who were also foster parents felt that there were many issues that had to be addressed. They indicated there was a yearly review of foster homes, but it was the only follow up or support they received from Social Services. They were also concerned about the effect of children being removed from their family home.

"Foster children are not a success in school, they get into drugs and alcohol and some end up in jail. When children turn 18, they have nowhere to go. They are out of the system and have little connection with their family."

"I have had thirty or forty foster kids and I was never followed up on."

"She was happy when her mother came to see her at our home. I don't think kids should be taken out of their family home. Families need supports to keep their kids."

"Social Workers blow up situations if they are not from the community."

Lack of Information

The lack of information and miscommunication was a significant factor that contributed to the mistrust families had toward Social Workers and Child and Family Services. The vast majority of survey participations, or fifty-two (52) families, felt they were not listened to and none of the concerns they expressed were taken seriously. When information was provided to families by their worker it was not clear, and there seemed to be little attempt to ensure that families understood the information provided. Thirty-one (31) families that were interviewed had very little education and a limited ability to read and write. The result was that they didn't understand what was being presented when they signed the plans of care or other documents. As well, workers were not clear with families about what they needed to do to have their children returned. Expectations kept changing. In many cases, families described feeling like the workers were "lying to them." When families shared information with Social Workers, that information was eventually used against them. That created an atmosphere of mistrust.

"For me, I went to Social Services and spoke to the Supervisor about what I was going through. Trying to find ways to get help, but when my grandson was apprehended, they used all of that against me and my daughter saying we always having conflicts or not getting along. They didn't think my grandson would be safe in the home with both of us."

"I made these complaints and ill behaviours known to Social Services and nothing was done until a teacher at the school noticed that there were behavioural problems with my son. At that point in time, finally the Social Workers put plan of care agreement in place because it was obvious his mother wasn't performing her role as a mother and looking after the kid."

"We were not listened to. As a grandmother in the Gwich'in culture, grandparents take care of their grandchildren and I didn't have any rights to my grandchild. They didn't want him to come live with me. I felt that my rights as a grandmother was ignored by the system. They tried every way to take my grandson away, particularly when we were living in ____."

"My boyfriend had become violent and I called Social Services for help and it was the biggest mistake I ever made. I needed help at that time."

"Sometime Social Service lies to you. They said that I was going to get my kids back in August, but they hold onto my kids until December."

"I know sometimes they lie, but I didn't say anything."

"Why can't they be honest?"

"Social Workers were not consistent with a set of rules; rather they made rules as they went along."

"Their excuse why I couldn't take my son home was that I needed to learn to feed him (he was tube fed). Their second excuse was he needed to be weaned off his foster family. So I got mad and said they never weaned him off of me, they straight up took him off of me. Four months to learn how to feed him which I did. Then four months to wean him off of his foster family. I had to have someone weaned off of my child. That was the strangest thing that I ever heard. To top it off, they still didn't want to give him back. They served me with court documents for permanent custody."

"They should have just told me I had to go for treatment around the time when they took the kids instead of telling me after the whole six months. Like three months they looked after them, then another three months. Then they told me I had to take a program for me to have them back so I did that. Then they asked me to go to parenting class."

"The other plans of care have not been followed. There were expectations set out which I met, but the child welfare did not support my daughter's return. I don't have any information about what I need to do to have my daughter back. They are saying my daughter will be returned this year, but that is all I know."

"The Social Worker said the only way you will get your kids back is to go to treatment. I don't know why I went, I just went. Since the day I came back from treatment, they gave my kids back to me."

"Social Workers should support mothers, not find supporting evidence for apprehension. I spend six months following their instructions only to be shunned. Counselling and alcohol treatment was later used against me in court. I felt betrayed by the Social Workers."

"Nothing was offered, but instead prior counselling sessions I had taken were used against me in court and I felt betrayed."

"They say, 'this is the plan of care' and you just go and follow the plan of care. I had no choice, I signed."

"I didn't understand the documents, but signed them anyway because I wanted my kids back."

"Social Workers used big terms even though they knew I couldn't read or write very well. I went to court with absolutely no knowledge of any rights and the Social Workers kind of set me up that way, so I would lose my kids."

"I had some very passionate discussions several times that day with the Social Worker and she basically called me one of the most irresponsible parents she had ever met. I have done a lot of hard work here and all of my efforts have been over-minded."

When children were apprehended, families had limited access to any information about their children. Again, this was particularly true with the fathers interviewed. Men felt that Child and Family Services used the fact that a custody case was in the courts as an excuse to not share information. Even when their children returned home, information did not follow them. This was very frustrating for families who believed that Social Services were holding back information.

"There has been times, including now, when I haven't been able to get any information about my daughter's schooling. I recommended counselling but it took Child Welfare one year to arrange it. I was being told that my daughter is in permanent care so I have no right to know what is going on."

"The workers encouraged me to go to court, but when it came down to it, they didn't support me getting my daughter back. They don't tell me anything, won't give me any information and treat me like I am no good. My calls are not returned and they punish me for speaking out and asking questions."

"Our son was removed from our home because of an accusation of sexual assault by a relative. He was taken to Edmonton for tests and there was an investigation. After being in a foster home for almost a year and having our visits supervised, he was returned home to us. He has been home eight months now and we have never been able to find out what the results of the tests were. We don't know if he was abused or not. They won't tell us anything."

"My son was put away in a group home in Saskatchewan. Recently he went missing, but they never told me until about two weeks passed. I was calling, but they never told me about him being missing."

"Children's Services should stop blacking out notes. I don't see how anyone can make a decision if they can't read what is before them. I think it is really poor practice. Children's services often use parenthesis sic as an acronym to describe parents and I think that is a very hostile approach and maybe should be looked at. Children's Services focus should be on the children and helping their parents develop a healthy relationship."

"I made a complaint to Social Services and said that my daughter was left alone at 10 years old for hours at a time by her mother. I was escorted from the building and told they may investigate, but I wouldn't be privileged to any information or knowledge about what happened in that investigation. To this day, I don't know if they ever investigated. You are left not knowing if the department is looking after your best interest especially if you are a guy and there are custody issues that are yet to be resolved. I have been told on numerous occasions that they can't tell me the result of their investigation if there are custody issues."

"Social Services is abiding by the statutes that guide them and I don't think they really have a choice. The statutes say that if you have a file engaged with the federal/provincial family courts they do nothing, they leave it up to the judge. That is where I see Children's Services, in my case, as a failure. And so that statute could and should be changed. Children's Services should always focus on the children and the needs of the children and we all know that healthy family is the core to a healthy society. And until that statute is changed, I don't blame Children's Services. They are just following the rules. I just don't necessarily agree with the rules."

Unfounded Allegations

Mistrust was reinforced when Child and Family Services listened to and acted on unfounded allegations before completing an investigation. Even when the investigation was done many participants felt it tended to be biased against them. Unfounded allegations were very difficult for families to deal with. Seven parents who were surveyed said unfounded allegations had been lodged against them. They talked about the devastating effect it had on them and their children. Having the truth come to light did not repair the damage that was created by the accusations according to parents.

"The mother at 6 months old used a false allegation of assault to escape the relationship and took the child out of the relationship and used him for nothing more than a meal ticket for up to 10 years, breached the terms and conditions of court orders for visitation and access, lied and misled support services and housing divisions so she could have a roof over her head and money in her pocket. And basically used that child as a meal ticket, didn't look after him. Used the Nintendo as a babysitter while she sat upstairs and smoked dope all of the time."

"Social Services interfered because the 14 year old had made false accusations to get back at her strict parents. She was put in foster care and later ran away. Now she is in the streets doing drugs and has three kids she can't take care of."

"The current legislation allows malicious accusers to be protected and get away while families are broken and children are affected by these accusations. This boy lost friends and neighbours because of the news of sexual abuse."

"The school reported to child services that I had abused my daughter. I forced her to go to school on that day. Teachers taped her and reported abuse. I lost my kids for eight months. When it went to court, the case was dismissed."

"Social Services and the RCMP were working together to have me convicted of a crime that I didn't do without any evidence that had any fundamental value. It was only a tool that she could use. However, when it comes to family law, there is no acknowledgement about the damage that is done by these false allegations."

"I am dismayed with the fact that we have legislation and policy in place that has created an environment where this behaviour is acceptable. But yet we don't have tools in place to deal with the victim of false allegations. I can be told that there are victim services and all this other stuff but let me tell you it doesn't do what it needs to undo the damage of those false allegations. It is happening every day to other people. It's destroying a lot of lives out there. We have created an environment where false allegations can be made. It is very unfortunate for those who have been assaulted. I am very damaged from this experience. I have no faith in Social Services, the RCMP, lawyers, judges, anybody. I am standing there trying to tell the truth, but I have been crucified and no one wants to listen or acknowledge that they have made a mistake. I was scared because the whole process was against me and none of the evidence that suggested that this person was lying was put forward and I was afraid I was going to jail. At the end of the day when I went to court and I finally got acquitted."

"They videotaped her for a good twenty minutes to half an hour and they kept repeating constantly - what did your mother do to you - and she kept saying I don't know. And so they charged me, a criminal charge. Then I kept missing court and the dates kept changing and finally in May we went to court and the judge watched the video tape of my daughter and he said case dismissed. There was no case and shortly after that I got my kids back."

"Social Workers listen to hearsay and act on gossip with parents having no chance to explain yourself. They should have reliable information before they take your kids."

"You need to have the hard evidence that this was done before an allegation is made. I don't think we have the statistics in the Northwest Territories about the number of false allegations of this nature that go through the system. And I am sure that we have no data about the damage that it does to society and the burden that it creates."

"We need to create environment where false allegations is not acceptable. Victims are being created where there were no victims before."

"A 16 year old with mental illness can decide where he wants to live, but an 18 year old can make false allegations, but not be old enough to accept responsibility for her actions. So where is the parity there?"

Gender Bias

Fathers particularly felt the effect of unfounded allegations and believe the system is biased against them. Five men who were interviewed felt that they were being discriminated against simply because they were men. On the other hand, several women (10) felt that there was a higher expectation on them to meet the goals of the plan of care. There was little expectation or follow-up to ensure that men go to treatment or counselling.

"They told him to go to treatment and he went to counselling, but he didn't want to go to that twenty-eight days program."

"The whole system is biased against men and the Social Workers are biased in the way they talk to us. We just have to walk through the door and we are guilty. That is the feeling I get. You are guilty until you are proven innocent."

"They should not blame the mother for the father's wrongs."

"There were serious issues in that home and I made it known, but I could never be privileged to information or any follow-up because she had day-to-day care and control and I only had access and there would be outstanding custody issues in the court yet to be resolved. And whenever I made complaints known to Social Services they would say they couldn't tell me what happened in the investigation because there was outstanding custody issues. I'm the father and I should be made aware of what's going on with my son and shouldn't have to go through the access to information to find out if there is an investigation with my son. I needed that information so I could prove that this wasn't a good home for my son. I was never allowed to get that information. When I was trying to make my point that the kid needed to be in better care, they excluded me and pushed me off to the side. No we can't tell you, we can't help you, we'll go have a look, but we'll not tell you what we find."

Community Support

Although families were able to identify some supports in the system that were positive, they had major concerns about the withdrawal of services once children left the care of Child and Family Services. Families tried to access financial and emotional support for their children, but were refused because their children had been returned home.

"My kids aren't getting no help for their anger."

"Parents need support when their kids get back from care. My stepson has problems, but Social Services never checked if he was settling in ok."

"Social Service is there to help us, but when we ask, they say your kids aren't under Social Services. They don't help. Do they really have to be under Social Services to get

help? When they shut us off we turn to something illegal and then they get involved. We don't know where to turn."

"The system should take responsibility for consequences in kids that grow in the system like homelessness and incarceration."

"There are kids who have been in foster care for most of their life and the transition from foster care to income support is not seamless and is often dangerous and difficult. If the kids are moving from Social Services to Income Support, Social Services personnel should lead them through the process and have everything done ahead of time."

The lack of support from the community was a constant theme throughout the interviews (51 parents). Families were not aware that Social Services has a responsibility to "consult with their bands or native communities about the provision of the services or the exercise of powers and about the matters affecting the children" (R.S.O.1990,c.C11,s.213). Families felt that was something that was needed and that Child and Family Services could work at developing those relationships.

"All these years, I have been bugging the Chief and Grand Chief since – and they gave no support."

"The community has to take responsibility for their kids."

"Elders in the community didn't help. I didn't know it could happen so I didn't ask."

"Nobody helped me in the community. I and my worker had to do it on my own."

"Elders and communities should control where apprehended children go, as in selection of foster parents. They need to have direct input in care for children."

"Social Workers should build relationships with the community and not sit in an office with paperwork."

Families were able to identify some supports that were helpful. Forty-four (44) families identified the importance of having access to a third party advocate who was able to provide them with information and support during meetings with Child and Family Services. In addition, having support to attend counselling or addiction treatment helped families deal with some of their issues. As well, financial supports provided by Child and Family Services allowed families to meet their children's needs.

"They are there to keep the families together but they are tearing them apart. If they want the families to look after their children, have family programs for healing and help them work together as a family instead of doing paper work all the time. Let them do home visits and work with the families, work with the children and not just stay in their office and push paper and just phone the parent and say you have a meeting to come see us."

"Counselling was the best thing you could ever do because you can let out everything you want to, so that's what I did."

"I go to Social Services for help sometimes and they talk to me, they help me."

"I went to Social Services and asked them to arrange for detox in Yellowknife and they helped me with that. They told me not to let anyone including my common-law push me around."

"Social Service helps in other ways, not taking my kids, but helping with clothes and taking them to Yellowknife."

"The Social Worker changed their approach when I brought an advocate."

"I was fighting for my children and I wanted to do right, but I was naive. So after, I got so sick of their treatment of me so I started taking _____ with me as an advocate. They completely changed their attitudes. They acted nicer and they left me alone. So every visit, I had to take her with me because they treated me with a little more respect. Their attitudes towards the parents have to change. They can't treat people like that. What gives them the right to judge us like that? They need to be more supportive."

"The system should support advocacy in cases of apprehensions."

"Support should be provided for third party advocates so families can have the help they need."

"Before we had a parent advocate they would write some nasty things about me and him, some evil things and when I read it, I just want to get mad. How can they write that? I am not like that. Nobody was yelling at anybody or hitting anybody. They blow everything out of proportion. They presented all that garbage in court. After we began having a parent advocate, all of our visits that they put in an affidavit was positive. All of a sudden they are positive. Why weren't they all positive from the start? All of our visits from the start were positive but why didn't they write that. Why did they have to wait until we had a parental advocate to write positive stuff?"

Children and Decision-making

The legislation defines children as being 0-15 years old. Children over the age of 12 years are to be involved in making decisions about their life. Youth between 16-19 years of age cannot be found in need of protection and services can only be provided to them if they agree. Parental consent is not required. Families had differing views about the appropriate age for decision-making depending on how the question was asked. Families with children in care said their children should be consulted and returned home if they made that decision. However, when the question focused on allowing youth over the age of 12 years old to make decisions in their home, the answers were much different. In that scenario, families felt 12 year olds were not mature enough to make decisions about their lives.

"Kids over 12 have the right to make decisions. That is why kids rebel if not asked about their needs and they should be involved in decisions that affect their lives."

"12 years old is way too young to contribute to their well-being. This is a tender age where they are rebelling against every rule put around them and making experiments."

"I don't think it is healthy to put a 12 year old child in a position where they are being asked to make life choices. Probing these children is not the solution. I think these decisions are made by parents and if the parents aren't seeing eye to eye that Children's Services should look at that first and to develop a vehicle to assist these parents so that they can start to see eye to eye."

"At 12 I couldn't make good decisions. I was always drinking and getting drunk. It started when I was 11 and it has been on and off since then. At 16, I was f??? up quite bad."

"I think you are asking a lot of a 12 year old child who is caught in the middle of a terrible, terrible family situation to make a decision."

"The system is not giving parents support for parenting teenagers. Rather the system gives teenage kids a way to decide to put their lives in danger and destroy their future. This is too much power for a 12 year old."

"They are saying my daughter will be returned this year, but that is all I know. I feel that my daughter wants to come home and the only reason they're planning on returning her is that she is about to turn 12 years old."

"It was up to him to determine if he was going to stay (at a residential program). This is a 16 year old suffering from a mental illness and he decided that he wanted to go back home, undermining all of my efforts over the past year trying to identify what the problem was and trying to get him into an environment where he can be cared for and deal with his illness. He was just allowed to make up his own mind. I told the department that you can't let him make up his own mind to come home because he's not old enough in my opinion and he is in my care, in a matter of speaking, and I have changed my whole life to accommodate this process. They flew him home and there wasn't anyone at the airport to meet him. A 16 year old with mental illness standing outside of the Yellowknife airport in January with no place to go."

"By allowing the child to make up their own mind at 16 or even 12, under minds every effort of the parent. So legislation needs to be put in place that clearly identifies where the parent maintains full responsibility for that child. If it is 16 or 17 or 18 or 19 just make it clear. If you accept responsible for that child and are responsible for that child until they are 19, then they can't come home and pack their bags and say they are moving out and were going to do whatever we want. Up until that date, the parent releases their obligation to that child. "

"Right now the children are in control and parents can't do anything about it."

"He was 16 years old with mental illness can remove himself from care. He was old enough to make that decision, but then when he came back here and I had my discussion with the Social Worker, saying ok, you flew him home you look after him now because I have exhausted everything I have. She called me the most irresponsible parent she had

ever met. How do you think that made me feel? I gave him all that I had to be called that after she undermined every effort and continue to do so, and destroyed the child."

"A twelve year old is wise enough to be involved in their plan of care; they sometimes give valuable information in regards to issues dealing with abuse and neglect."

"Sixteen year old teens are too young to make decisions for their lives; this is a vulnerable stage of children's lives and they don't always make the best decisions. They need guidance from parents and the system should take responsibility for teenage kids that grow up in care."

Impact of System Intervention

All families talked about the negative effect of decisions made by Child and Family Services on their families and in particular on the children involved.

"I ended up quitting my job because I was only allowed to see him during work hours."

"My twins have grown to be angry kids. There is no sign of a positive impact from the foster family."

"My kids have been destroyed by the system. The boy now takes psychological pills and it is very painful. He was sexually abused at the _____ (residential facility)."

"I got no support from Social Services; they don't follow the policies, that is why my son ended up in Calgary and Edmonton so now they have no relationship. We don't get along because they split us up. It is hard to say I love you."

"They (her children) always yell at me ever since Social Services took them, they don't listen to me. They don't have no respect for me."

"To this day, they don't listen to me. They blame me for everything. Sometimes my son, he says welfare took me. They took us til six months. Sometimes he gets mad at me about that."

"They (their children) don't want to hear the name of Social Services."

"Once your kids are taken out, it is like you are garbage."

"They come home to us and they are out of hand. My daughter is out of hand right now. She is really scared when you talk about Social Services."

"I almost gave up on my life, gave up on my hope."

"Right now it's like their attitude has changed a lot from being in foster home too long. The three oldest have changed a lot. They have been away too long from me and it's like different home after different home. They're not in one spot all the time they're like

places. They were put her and there and there. So that's why I think they're so angry about it."

"It got to the point that I drank almost everyday because my kids weren't there with me. I had just had enough; I just wanted to have my babies back."

"When they went out of town, they kept on telling me if I wanted to go and visit them and I couldn't do that because if I go and I leave, I'll cry and those kids will cry after me and I didn't want to have that feeling, but I called her from the Social Services office."

"They took my kids from school. They never got a chance to say goodbye."

"What does the system do to fix the people it damaged?"

Other Comments

Most parents and youth had great hopes that this review would take into consideration their experiences and change the system to better meet the needs of families. One parent wanted to suggest that the Standing Committee on Social Programs conduct a forensic audit of Child and Family Services so a thorough investigation could take place.

"I was hoping this process would do much more of a forensic audit of what is going on and explore and find the weak areas and clearly identify what prevents this department from doing what is right. I am certain these things are not documented because if they were, it would be incriminating against the department and they would have to answer for it."

"My position is that the system is a great failure. The family courts are a failure. The statutes that guide their code of conduct or how they proceed is in desperate need of change and the system itself is in need of a complete overhaul so that it is more equitable and fair for children and that will spill into equality for their parents. As far as I am concerned, it is too late for me, but it is never too late for the children."

"Social services should find out what kinds of programs are provided from Inuit organizations so youths can continue to learn their cultures, heritage and traditions so they won't lose it when they are adults instead of being ashamed and embarrassed of not knowing them like I was."

Interviewer Observations

The following information is interviewer observations of participants in the survey that may contribute to the discussion around the *Child and Family Services Act*. These observations are strictly those of the interviewers and are subjective.

The emotional toll on families involved with Child and Families Services was evident. Several survey participants broke down crying and were unable to share the details of their situation. It was clear that most of the participants had been traumatized by their childhood and had little help to deal with that trauma. One of the effects of that trauma was that although they were told their children were apprehended because they were drinking, parents didn't understand why. They had grown up with drinking all of their life. That trauma made it more difficult for families to deal with other issues in their life such as poverty, unemployment and inadequate housing, etc. A combination of those factors made parenting difficult.

Although everyone who was interviewed spoke English, there was an extensive language barrier in terms of comprehension. Poor literacy levels made it difficult to carry out interviews and every question had to be explained. There were instances where the meaning of words used in the interview did not easily translate into the context of the participant's language base. This was particularly evident in the smaller communities and it made it more difficult to ask probing questions.

There was a lack of knowledge about the system. Some participants couldn't say whether they had a lawyer or not. They did not have the skills to advocate for themselves or their children. Parents often said, "I just did what they told me to do so I could get my kids back."

You could see the love that parents had for their children. They have high hopes that the Standing Committee on Social Programs will work to make things better for children.

Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations which were provided by parents or came out of their experiences that might be helpful for the Standing Committee on Social Programs to consider.

1. Carry out a forensic audit of Child and Family Services.

One parent recommended that a forensic audit of Child and Family Services be carried out to determine how effective they are and what they are doing to support families. Other parents had questions about the information that was in their files.

2. Support children and families' cultures and traditions.

A connection with culture and traditions were important to families. The best way to ensure that culture is retained was to have their children placed with extended family or if that was not possible with a foster family from the same cultural background.

3. Involve Elders and the community in supporting families.

None of the families felt they had support from their community other than that of a few extended family members. There was a desire by most participants that work be done with the community and Elders to help them take a more active role with the children in their community.

4. Provide families with advocates.

A number of families expressed frustration with the lack of information and support they received from the legal system and lawyers. They found that independent advocates were a positive support, providing information and advocacy.

5. Train and hire Aboriginal Social Workers and provide non-Aboriginal Social Workers with training around cultural diversity.

Most families, particularly in the urban centres, felt they were discriminated against because the Social Workers were non-Aboriginal and didn't know anything about Aboriginal culture and traditions.

6. Complete thorough investigations of accusations before removing children from the home.

Accusations, that were later proved to be unfounded, were used to remove children from their home before a thorough investigation was done. Participants talked about false allegations being used in retaliation by one parent against another.

7. Keep parents fully informed about their children while they are in care.

Parents felt that they had little information about their children when they were in care. Some said that when their children were returned to the family, no information followed them.

8. Offer parenting programs.

All of the participants wanted to parent their children properly, but didn't have the skills in large part due to their childhood experiences. Strengthening parenting skills would, in some cases, avoid the need to apprehend children and place them in foster care.

9. Recruit and support more First Nations, Inuit and Metis foster homes.

The majority of parents wanted their children placed in foster homes from their own cultural background. Given the limited number of First Nations, Inuit or Metis foster homes, it was not always possible.

10. Improve the consistency of workers and foster care placements.

The lack of consistent workers resulted in an inability to develop relationships, misplaced or missing information and changing of plans. Moving children around from one foster home to another created the same disruption.

11. Clearly lay out at the beginning of the process what a family must do to have their children returned.

Families became very frustrated when they met the goals laid out in the plan of care only to be told that there was another expectation they had to meet before their children could be returned. Families wanted to know right from the beginning what they needed to do to have their children returned. The changing dates and expectations were difficult.

12. Improved screening of foster parents and regular follow-up to monitor foster homes.

Some families had concerns about their children's safety while in foster homes. One child had chemicals on their face and another baby was left in the bathroom to cry. Families described foster homes that were overcrowded and inappropriate. Foster parents interviewed who were extended families said the only contact they had with Child and Family Services was a yearly review.

13. Help families deal with underlying issues related to poverty, trauma and addictions, illiteracy, isolation etc.

Participants identified underlying issues that impacted their ability to parent. If those are not addressed children will continue to be apprehended.

14. Recognize the effect of apprehension on children and families. Support, including ongoing counselling for children and their parents should continue after children are returned home.

Families were very concerned about the effect involvement with Child and Family Services had on themselves and their children. When children return home, they tend to have behavioural issues that parents have a hard time dealing with. When they ask for support or counselling for their children, they are told that nothing is available because the children are no longer in care.

Appendix A Adult Interview Guide

Review of Child and Family Services Act Interview Guide for Parents

The interviewer will:

- Introduce themselves to participants.
- Assess the comfort level of participants.
- Engage in a brief conversation with participants to ease any discomfort.
- Ask participants if they need support to participate in the interview (interpreter, someone from their family or community, a support person).
- Let participants know how long the survey may take.
- Briefly recap the main purpose of the interviews. (The interview is to gather information from participants about their involvement with Child and Family Services so supports provided to families who are struggling can be improved.)
- Remind participants about the introductory letter and ask if they have any questions about it.
- Go over the consent form to ensure participants know the steps that will be taken to keep their identifying information confidential.
- Inform participants they can skip any question they don't feel comfortable answering or they can stop the interview at any time.
- Ask if participants have any questions before the interview begins.

Demographic Information

The information given in this section will help identify any potential indicators that might have impacted decisions taken by Child and Family Services.

1. What is your age? _____
2. Are you male or female?
 Male
 Female
3. Which community do you live in?
4. What is your relationship status?
 Single
 Dating
 Common-law spouse
 Legally married
 Separated but still legally married
 Divorced
 Widow
 Other _____

5. How many children do you have?
 ___ girls ___ boys
6. What are their ages?
7. Are you in a relationship with the children's other parent?
 Yes
 No
 Explain.
8. Were you involved with Child and Family Services as a child and if so, how?
9. If you were born in the NWT, what is your home community?
10. What is your first language?
11. What other languages do you speak?
 English
 French
 Aboriginal Language
 Other _____
12. Please tell me the highest level of education you have completed:
 None
 Elementary/Primary
 High School
 Some university/college
 Completed diploma/certificate/apprentice
 Completed university degree
13. Do you work for pay outside of the home and if so, how many hours per week do you work (on average)?
 None
 Less than 5 hours
 Five to 9 hours
 Ten to 19 hours
 20 to 35 hours
 36 hours or more
14. On average, how many hours did you spend doing unpaid work such as caring for children or elderly family members?
 None
 Less than 5 hours
 Five to 9 hours
 Ten to 19 hours
 20 hours or more
15. Last year, what was your total household annual income?
 Government assistance/ housing & income support

- Less than \$15,000
- \$15,000 to \$25,000
- \$25,000 to \$35,000
- \$35,000 to \$45,000
- \$45,000 to \$55,000
- More than \$55,000

16. Have you lived in subsidized housing or received Income Support?

- Yes
- No

INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

The next set of questions is about your involvement with Child and Family Services.

History

17. When and where was your first involvement as a parent with Child and Family Services?

18. How old were you?

19. What was your involvement?

- Child in Care
- Parent
- Grandparent
- Other _____

20. How old were your children?

21. What was your relationship status at the time?

- Single
- Dating
- Common-law spouse
- Legally married
- Separated but still legally married
- Divorced
- Widow
- Other _____

22. Were you in a relationship with the children's other parent?

- Yes
- No Why/why not?

23. Why did Child and Family Services get involved with your family?

Description of Involvement

24. How long have you been involved with Child and Family Services?

25. Are you still involved with Child and Family Services?

- No
- Yes

26. Have your children been placed in the care of Child and Family Services?

- No
- Yes

If so, when were they apprehended?

Children Who Have Been Apprehended

27. What would the Child Protection Worker say was the reason your children were apprehended?

- Addictions
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Other _____

28. What type of agreement was in put in place

- Temporary Care Agreement
- Permanent Care
- Special Needs Agreement
- Adoption placement
- Other _____

29. Did you understand documents you signed?

30. Were you told about your rights and did you speak to a lawyer?

31. Did you:

- Sign a plan of Care
- Go to Court
- Both

32. Did you have the advice of a lawyer:

- At the time your child was apprehended
- Before you signed a plan of care
- When it went to court

33. What type of support did you have while dealing with the legal system and was it helpful?
Why or why not?

34. Where are your children living?

- with a family member
 - with a foster family
 - Aboriginal
 - Non-aboriginal
 - Family from your ethnic background
 - in a group home
 - other _____
- Why?

35. Are all of your children living together?

- Yes
 No

If no, why not?

36. Was placement with a relative, neighbor or other member of your child's community considered when your children were removed from the family home?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not?

37. Do you feel that Child and Family Services kept you informed about your children while in care?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not?

38. Were regular visits scheduled with your child? Where were the visits?

39. Does the plan of care include returning your children to your care?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not?

40. Do you feel that Child and Family Services met your family's needs by putting them in care?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not?

41. Do you think your children were safe while they were in care?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not?

42. The legislation says youth 12 years of age or older should be involved in making decisions about their life.

Do you agree or disagree? Why?

43. The law defines children as 0 to 16 years old and if services are provide to a 16 to 19 year old, it is done with the agreement of that youth. The parents' agreement is not needed. Child and Family Services Workers cannot apprehend children 16 to 19 years old. If that is the case, what is your role as a parent?

44. Parents are financially responsible for their children until they turn 19 years old. How do you balance the right of children to make their own decisions and your obligation to support them?

45. Did foster parents buy things for your children you couldn't afford?

46. Do you feel that the Child and Family Services Worker took your culture, heritage and traditions into consideration when working with your family?

Yes

No

Why or why not (give examples)?

47. If you are connected to a band or native community, was that community consulted in the development of a plan of care for your children?

Yes

No

Why or why not (give examples of how they were involved)?

48. Where you provided support and services to avoid a decision to apprehend your children?

counselling

in-home support

respite

parenting programs

financial help for your parents

housing

drug or alcohol treatment

mediation

other supports _____

Where these services or support helpful?

49. Do you feel you were treated with respect by the workers from the Child and Family Services? Please provide examples

50. Did you have supportive people, such as friends, family in your life during that time? If so, could you please explain?

51. What other organizations and community resources helped you? What did they do and was it helpful?

Suggestions

Lastly, it would be great if you could provide key suggestions that would be helpful to Child and Family Services so they could meet the needs of families who they are involved with.

52. Based on your own experience, do you have any suggestions for Child and Family Services so they can better meet the needs of families they come into contact with?

53. Where you provided with support and services e.g. counselling, conflict management or mental health /addictions to avoid a decision to remove your children from your care? Where these services or support helpful?

54. Is there any additional comments you would like to add?

Thank the person for their participation in this study

Appendix B Teen Interview Guide

Review of Child and Family Services Act Interview Guide for 16-19 Years of Age

The interviewer will:

- Introduce themselves to participants.
- Assess the comfort level of participants.
- Engage in a brief conversation with participants to ease any discomfort.
- Ask participants if they need support to participate in the interview (interpreter, someone from their family or community, a support person).
- Let participants know how long the survey may take.
- Briefly recap the main purpose of the interviews. (The interview is to gather information from participants about their involvement with Child and Family Services so supports provided to families can be improved.)
- Remind participants about the introductory letter and ask if they have any questions about it.
- Go over the consent form to ensure participants know the steps that will be taken to keep their identifying information confidential.
- Inform participants they can skip any question they don't feel comfortable answering or they can stop the interview at any time.
- Ask if participants have any questions before the interview begins.

The interview process will follow a discussion format rather than a questionnaire format. This is to be used as a guide only and just relevant questions will be asked.

Demographic Information

The information given in this section will help identify any potential indicators that might have impacted decisions/actions taken by Child and Family Services.

1. What is your age? _____
2. Are you male or female?
 Male
 Female
3. Which community do you live in?
4. Who do you live with?
 Parents
 Foster parents/Adoptive parents
 Grandparent/Another family members
 Boyfriend/Girlfriend
 Friends/Room mates

 Group Home
 Move from house to house
 Other _____

5. What is your relationship status?

- Single
- Dating
- Married
- Common-law
- Other _____

6. Do you have children?

- Yes
- No

7. How many children do you have?

___ girls ___ boys

8. What are their ages?

9. Have your children been placed in the care of Child and Family Services?

- No
- Yes

If so, when were they apprehended?

10. Are you in a relationship with the children's other parent?

- Yes
- No

Explain.

11. If you were born in the NWT, what is your home community?

12. What is your first language?

13. What other languages do you speak?

- English
- French
- Aboriginal Language
- Other _____

14. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Elementary/Primary
- High School
- Some university/college
- Completed diploma/certificate/apprentice

15. Do you go to school?

- High School
- Some university/college

16. Do you have a job? Yes No

If so, how many hours per week do you work (on average)?

- Less than 5 hours

- Five to 9 hours
- Ten to 19 hours
- 20 to 35 hours
- 36 hours or more.

17. Are you on Government Assistance/housing or income support

18. Last year, how much did you make?

- Less than \$15,000
- \$15,000 and above

INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

The next set of questions is about your involvement with Child and Family Services.

History

19. When and where was your first involvement with Child and Family Services?

20. How old were you?

21. Why did Child and Family Services get involved with your family?

22. How long were you involved with Child and Family Services?

23. Are you still involved with Child and Family Services?

- No
- Yes

24. Were you removed from your home?

- No
- Yes

Can you describe what that was like for you?

25. Were you given information about your rights and did you speak to a lawyer?

26. The legislation says youth 12 years of age or older should be involved in making decisions about their life.

How were you involved?

27. The law defines children as 0 to 16 years old and if services are provide to a 16 to 19 year old, it is done with the agreement of that youth. The parents' agreement is not needed. Child and Family Services Workers cannot apprehend children 16 to 19 years old. If that is the case, what is your role as a parent?

Were you permitted to make your own decisions?

28. Have you needed or asked for help because you were worried about your safety or well-being eg. homelessness, no money etc.

29. Have you asked for a Volunteer Service Agreement for support to meet basic needs eg. rent, food, clothing, counselling, transportation, books etc.?

30. Do you feel that the Child and Family Services Worker took your culture, heritage and traditions into consideration when working with your family?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not (give examples)?

31. How did Child and Family Services prepare you for life eg. continue your education or to get a job etc).

32. Were your parent(s), extended family members or community members involved in the plan of care?

- Yes
 No

Why or why not (give examples of how they were involved)?

33. Where you and your parents provided support and services to avoid a decision that you would be removed from your family home?

- counselling
 in-home support
 respite
 parenting programs
 financial help for your parents
 housing
 drug or alcohol treatment
 mediation
 other supports _____

Where these services or support helpful?

34. Do you feel that you and your parents were treated with respect by the workers from the Child and Family Services? Please provide examples

35. What other organizations and community resources helped you and your parents? What did they do and was it helpful?

Youth In Care

36. What would the Child Protection Worker say was the reason you were removed from your parent's custody?

- Addictions
 Abuse
 Neglect
 Other _____

37. Do you and your siblings live together?

- Yes
 No

If no, why not?

38. Do you feel that Child and Family Services met your needs by putting you into care?

Yes

No

Why or why not?

39. Did you feel safe while you were in care?

Yes

No

Why or why not?

Suggestions

Lastly, it would be great if you could provide key suggestions that would be helpful to Child and Family Services so they could meet the needs of children who they are involved with.

40. Based on your own experience, do you have any suggestions for Child and Family Services so they can better meet the needs of children they come into contact with?

41. Is there any additional comments you would like to add?

Thank the person for their participation in this study

Appendix C Invitation

YOU ARE INVITED TO BE A PART OF THE REVIEW OF CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

The Standing Committee on Social Programs in the Northwest Territories legislature is doing a review of the Child and Family Services Act.

Purpose of this Project:

The MLAs and their constituents have concerns about child protection, apprehension, the role of the extended family, and the implementation of Child and Family Services Committees in NWT communities. Members have pressed government to allow for a comprehensive review of the *Child and Family Services Act* and its implementation.

Therefore, the Standing Committee on Social Programs wants to know how child welfare works for you and your family.

Being involved in the project is voluntary and all information shared will be kept confidential.

The benefits of participation include:

1. Being able to tell your stories about child welfare in private.
2. Having your stories and opinions said in a report that will be used to review child welfare without anyone knowing who you are.
3. Receiving \$50

Who Should Be Involved: Parents and young people involved with child welfare.

This is your opportunity to share your stories about your experiences and what would have been helpful to you and your family.

If you are interested in sharing your story and identifying what would have been helpful for you and your family, please contact:

Heather Nyamaza or Betty Daley
at nyamazah@gmail.com
or call 867-873-2566
to set up an interview time that works for you.

Appendix D Letter of Consent

Letter of Consent

Interviews for families and teens involved with Child and Family Services.

I agree to take part in the research project entitled Standing Committee Review of the Child and Family Services Act. I understand that the purpose of this study is to carry out an evaluation of the Child and Family Services Act and how it is put into practice. The results of this study will provide valuable information to the Standing Committee on Social Programs for its review of the Child and Family Services Act.

I understand I will be interviewed. The interview will take about 1 - 1½ hours and will be tape recorded and then transcribed. No personal information that will identify who I am will be released unless I agree. All the information will be kept in a locked place so no one other than the researcher will be able to see it.

The benefits of participation include:

1. A chance to share my experience being involved with Child and Family Services.
2. Having my story and opinions reflected in a report that will be used to review the Child and Family Services Act and improve support to families.
3. Per diem of \$50

I understand my participation is voluntary and that the per diem provided does not mean I have to complete the interview. I can refuse to answer any question and I can stop the interview at any time with no negative outcome.

I understand I may ask questions about the study before, during, or after the interview. I can direct my questions to Betty Daley, researcher by calling collect to (867)873-2566 or emailing her at betty.daley@hotmail.com.

I have read and understood the information in this document and by signing it, consent to participate in this research.

Signature (or verbally record consent)

Date

- agree disagree to be identified
 agree disagree to be quoted in the report

Signature (or verbally record consent)

Date