

New Brunswick

New First Nations child welfare agency aims to reverse decades of children being seized



Agency represents 7 Mi'kmaq First Nations, with a focus on keeping children with their families

[Karissa Donkin](#) · CBC News · Posted: Apr 13, 2018 6:00 AM AT | Last Updated: April 13, 2018



Mona Sock took her own life behind an arena on Elsipogtog First Nation in 2007. She is one of the children who died from unnatural causes in New Brunswick's child protection system. (CBC)

Seven Mi'kmaq First Nations in New Brunswick have created a new child welfare agency aimed at preventing children from being taken away from their homes and families.

The long-promised consolidation comes nearly 11 years after the death of Mona Sock, a 13-year-old girl who was placed in a foster home with a sex offender.

No one did a background check on the man, who went on to abuse Mona. She took her own life behind the rec centre on Elsipogtog First Nation in 2007.

- [Former youth advocate to join First Nations effort to transform child welfare](#)
- [First Nations child welfare facing reform a decade after abused teen's suicide](#)

Mi'kmaq NB Child and Family Services Inc. — made up of First Nations in Eel River Bar, Fort Folly, Indian Island, Buctouche, Pabineau, Metepenagiag and Eel Ground — has a five-year funding agreement with the federal government. It officially opened on Jan. 1.

"I think this is a massive step in the right direction for all our children," said George Ginnish, chief of Eel Ground First Nation and a member of the new child welfare agency's executive.

Elsipogtog First Nation and Esgenoopetitj First Nation will keep their own child and family services agencies, Ginnish said.



Chief George Ginnish of Eel Ground First Nation is one of the people at the head of a new First Nations child welfare agency for seven Mi'kmaq communities in New Brunswick. (Radio Canada)

The new agency has recruited a CEO and hired former child and youth advocate Bernard Richard as a senior adviser.

They've doubled their staff, hiring more social workers and prevention field workers, aimed at helping families in crisis situations before a child is taken away from the home.

It has also hired aboriginal cultural staff to integrate traditional customs into the agency's work.

Indigenous children more likely to be in care

Mona's death was reviewed by New Brunswick's child death review committee, which recommended better guidelines for background checks on foster parents.

But the committee didn't tell the public that Mona was placed in a foster home with a sex offender, and that no one did a background check on him.

- **THE LOST CHILDREN:** [Mona Sock, a life stolen by abuse](#)

After her death, Richard was asked to review the province's First Nations child welfare system.

[His report, released in 2010](#), found that Indigenous youth in New Brunswick are six times more likely to be taken from their homes and placed in foster care.

He described a confusing web of 11 different First Nations child welfare agencies. Many didn't share information and some had an antiquated filing system, using pen and paper instead of computers.





Bernard Richard will leave his post as British Columbia's representative for children and youth to work with a new First Nations child and family services agency in New Brunswick.

Richard recommended the 11 agencies be merged into three: one for Mi'kmaq First Nations, one for Maliseet communities and one for Elsipogtog, given the size of its population. He created a roadmap for the merger, setting a deadline of April 1, 2011.

Seven years later, it's still a work in progress.

First Nations chiefs went back and forth with the federal government for three years before securing funding last fall, Ginnish said.

No money for prevention

"It's been so disappointing to see how long it's taken for them to get the support they need from the federal government and from the provincial government so they can actually move forward," said Cindy Blackstock.

- **FULL COVERAGE:** [The Lost Children](#)

The executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society has spent years arguing that child welfare services and funding on First Nations reserves are inadequate.

[The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal](#) agreed with Blackstock in 2016, ruling that the federal government discriminates against First Nations children by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services as a child off-reserve could access.

- [Ottawa to increase funding for First Nations child welfare services](#)

The problem was especially stark in New Brunswick, according to Blackstock.

"[New Brunswick has] got a wonderful diversity of First Nations communities," she said.

"But that means they have small populations. Canada funds on the basis of population, not on the basis of need."



Cindy Blackstock, executive director of First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, took her fight against child welfare funding inequality to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. She won. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

That, she said, provided an incentive to take children away from their families.

For example, Four Directions Child and Family Services in northern New Brunswick had only three social workers, juggling cases from five different First Nations communities.

They spent most of their time and energy dealing with crisis situations, such as finding foster parents, and there was little money left over to do preventive work or buy computers.

"If you're in an adoptive situation, if you're in care, there's more money for that situation, which is totally wrong," Ginnish said.

Mona's legacy

But it's not smooth sailing yet.

Ginnish said the agency will work with the federal government to understand what kind of activities qualify as "prevention" and will be eligible for funding.

"We don't want to spend a bunch of money only to find out, 'we don't think that's prevention,'" Ginnish said.

“No one would argue that we've done a good job imposing our system on them.”

- *Bernard Richard*

Richard will be tasked with making sure the agency has consensus from First Nations leaders in seven communities.

He also suspects the agency's work will face bias and prejudice, as it tries to overcome a system that historically seized Indigenous children from their families.

"Colonial Canada thought we knew what the answers were to all we felt was wrong with Indigenous peoples in Canada," Richard said.

"We bungled it terribly. No one would argue that we've done a good job imposing our system on them."

Richard will take on the job with Mona, and children like her, on his mind.





Mona's death led to a review of the First Nations child welfare system in the province. (CBC)

Her story has stuck with him. And after more than a year working as British Columbia's representative for children and youth, Richard has heard even more stories of children like Mona who have fallen through the cracks.

It's what lured him back to his home province.

"There is real possibility of making change happen more quickly," Richard said.

"Real change that can make a difference in the lives of girls like Mona and other children."

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