National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
Truth-Gathering Process
Part 1 Statement Gathering
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Prince George Native Friendship Centre

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Statement - Volume 497
Barbara “Barb” Ward-Burkitt

Statement gathered by Kerrie Reay

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Documents submitted with testimony: none.
Upon convening October 3, 2018 at 11:32 p.m.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** And so just for the record, Kerrie Reay as the statement taker is with Barbara Ward-Burkitt. [Registrar’s note: informed consent discussed omitted]. So, Barb, please, when you're ready.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** Thank you.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** So I'm just going to move this back a bit, or if you could just slide back a bit. There we go, excellent. All right, Barb, when you're ready.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** So, yeah, so I'm -- I'm sharing these recommendations in the capacity of my own personal journey as an Indigenous woman. As a very, very proud Cree woman. Not only as Barb Ward-Burkitt, but as Wahiyow Cawapata Scoo, and all that that means, and also as -- as my journey has evolved, and I'm now the executive director of the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, which is the largest Friendship Centre in Canada. And so, you know, the role is -- is -- is -- is really important to me and -- and that journey that I've made.

And -- and my recommendation is that, you know, we do everything in our power collectively, you know, as women and as an Indigenous people and as government to ensure that everybody can have the same kind of journey
that I've had. You know, we don't want women to have to go through domestic violence, and all of those things, and family breakup, but -- breakdown, but for those that have, that we put things in place so that they can have those opportunities to sometime get to the place where they can succeed in whichever way that means for them.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** M'hm.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** And so what are all of those things that we need to be aware of and to put in place for that to happen? And for that journey to not be as challenging perhaps as it was for me.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** Right.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** So, you know, we need to look at those institutions that are out there, and how can we work with those institutions to better support our women, right, so that our women are safe.

When they are trying to get out of a relationship that's not safe for their children, how can we put everything that we need to -- to -- in place for them to be able to do that? So that they can continue to be a part of their community. So that they can improve themselves in whichever way they define.

If they say that's what they need to do, that should be good enough, they shouldn't have to defend that to everybody in the world. That is not okay. So whatever
it is that they need and the supports that they need to ensure that the safekeeping of their children is happening during that period of time, is really, really important.

So, you know, I know from my experience I wanted so badly to finish my grade 12 and yet those supports weren't out there for me to do that in a seamless way. I had -- it was a challenge.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** M'hm.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** By God, I did it anyways, right. And for most of us, that's really what it's about. We have that internal desire to take -- to do what we can to take care of our children, so that needs to happen.

And I think that some of those changes need to happen through legislation. So I know that when legislation changed and the RCMP were then the ones that were making the decisions about laying charges, and that was taken out of the hands of those vulnerable women, that that made a big difference. So I think that having things legislated is really, really important as much as possible. So, you know, those are -- are some really important things. To have RCMP, you know, they've -- they've come a ways, but there's still so much work to do.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** M'hm.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** You know, there's
Barbara Ward-Burkitt

-- yeah, like, you know, we talk about reconciliation. I think that as Indigenous people we always have been in reconciliation. That's what we've been doing the whole time.

But now how do these other entities do that? How do the -- the RCMP be in reconciliation with us as Indigenous people? How do school districts do that? How do municipalities do that? How do the provincial government? It's really critically important.

And do I have the magic bullet that says you do it like this? No, I don't. But I do know that it's so critically important.

So, you know, that it's got to be taken away from -- from it being our responsibility and to say, you know, we still hear in our community, where I live at, "Why don't those Natives just get over it?"

MS. KERRIE REAY: Right.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: And so how do we move away from that? Because it's not -- you know, just when you think that you should get over it, you're hit with something else. And you go back to the way things were. So I think that those are really, really important pieces.

I think a lot more work needs to be done in the school district, so that we're working with children at a really, really young age. You know, that's what we do in
our family with our little children, we talk to them about culture. They all have their name. They know what that name means. They -- we talk to them about addictions, and we don't do it in an ugly way. But we do it in a way that they know about it. You know, “Mommy and daddy are really sick right now. And they need to get better and that's why you're not living with them right now.” So that they've got something to hold on to.

My little grandson, who's 9 now, we talk to him about violence against women and children. So I was wearing the Moose Hide pin and he --

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** M'hm.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** -- and he was wondering what that was. And so I was telling him that, and so was his Uncle Paul (ph) who founded it. And so we got a phone call from the school one day, that's why it's so important in school, why I'm telling this story. And he was in the first grade. And the principal said to me, “Barb, do you mind if [Son] talks to the students at the assembly on Friday?” And she told me the story about how a little boy in class was asking, he wears his Moose Hide patch, and [Son] said to him, “My Uncle Paul said I have to wear this because it's rude to be mean to girls.”

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** Oh.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** And so we got
called in to the school for the assembly, and this little boy, only 6 years old, stood up in front of the whole school and he talked about that, and the importance of that. And so it's so important that we start with our young kids.

And the school district has some work to do around that, to make sure that those conversations happen. That they happen in a way where it's not around trauma and, you know, all those things where it's just -- he just naturally stood up there and talked about that. And isn't that what we want? So that it's a part of that and it's not about blaming or any of those things. So that would be my recommendation.

The other thing that's happening in British Columbia that I think should happen across the country is that there's a Minister's advisory council on Indigenous women. And it's a part of the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, and it's made up of ten Indigenous women. One of the representatives is an Elder and one is a youth. And that council sits with the Minister and provides advice to government on making legislative changes so that women can be safe in our province, and I know about that because I'm the co-chair.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** Oh.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** And I think that
if every province had that, where the voices of women can be brought to a provincial level, where our voices are raised, and we can talk about the things that are happening at a community level with government, that's going to lead to changes legislatively.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** Right.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** So, you know, I think any opportunities that there are out there for women to be raised up in that way and held up as really, really important people that have a voice is exactly the kinds of things that need to happen in this country, so I think that those are the kinds of things that I want to share.

You know, that there's work to do with the Ministry of Children and Family Development around our children.

**MS. KERRIE REAY:** M'hm.

**MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT:** There's -- the epidemic right now across our country of the number of our children who have been apprehended or are in the care of the Ministry is greater than it was for residential school; that's not okay. And that's women are losing their children. And the hoops that they have to jump through are unrealistic. I've been a part of that personally, as well as professionally, so there's work to be done there. The school district. The RCMP. You know, every level of
government. And so, you know, maybe part of that is hearing the voices of strong women leaders.

MS. KERRIE REAY: M'hm.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: And you don't have to have a title to be a leader. You know, there are so many women out there that in their own right have their story to share and how important that is because nobody else can tell my story the way I can tell it. And so we need to open up the space so that we can have that happen.

And then finally -- and it's not finally because I've got all kinds of things to say, we need to make a space for our men. It's so incredibly important. You know, my [Family member] is a survivor of domestic violence, and he as well perpetuated domestic violence himself. But I can tell you, when he was that baby in my arms and I looked down at him, that wasn't ever what I thought would happen. And so he deserves that consideration. He deserves to be treated in an honourable way. He deserves to have people look at him and not make judgment, because he's got his story too.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Yeah.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: And so what are we doing for our men? That's a really, really important part of this as well.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Yeah.
MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: So, you know, our men are also victims.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Yes.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: And so, you know, I want to be able to speak to that as well. And, you know, there's way too -- too -- there's few resources.

MS. KERRIE REAY: M'hm.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: For those kinds of supports and programs and, you know, all of those kinds of things, including treatment centres and cultural centres, and all of those kinds of things that will help to lift up our people.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Right.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Because that -- at the end of the day, that's what's going to work, is lifting up our people.

MS. KERRIE REAY: And healthy men.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Yeah.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Healthy women.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Healthy men, healthy women, healthy children.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Children. Yeah.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Right.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Yeah.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Healthy culture
and communities.

    MS. KERRIE REAY: Yeah. And I just -- just
want to offer an observation, if I can?

    MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: M'hmm.

    MS. KERRIE REAY: And it was when you spoke
to the Ministry, and particularly in B.C. it's called the
Ministry of Children and Family Development. And you talk
about the families and -- and -- and how they look at --
and perhaps maybe one of the pieces is -- is -- is shifting
a lens from the Indigenous families, putting the onus on
Indigenous families to prove that they're capable to take
care of the children that are in foster care, and rather
come from a lens that -- that they are capable.

    MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Yes.

    MS. KERRIE REAY: As -- as part of a shift in
-- in -- in working with Indigenous people, rather than the
onus being on the family as a grandparent or as an aunt or
an uncle to have to prove that you’re -- you’re capable,
rather than coming from a lens that you are capable and --
and that's where.

    MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Yeah.

    MS. KERRIE REAY: So there's so many things
that could be done in --

    MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Yeah.

    MS. KERRIE REAY: -- those institutional.
MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Yeah, and I think you know, like -- and perhaps this is final, for the Ministry of Children and Family Development, when children are removed from their family, you know, there's this focus on these culture plans. Well, for most family, the cultural plan is being in that family.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Yes.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Right. It's not necessarily about the nation that you belong to, because the cultural practices happen from within that family because many of us don't live in a traditional way. Many of us don't even live on reserve. We live in an urban community. So we practice our cultural ways in a way that makes sense within our family, and based upon our own teachings. You know, so the way I am in a cultural way is different than what my mother's cultural way was in some respects.

MS. KERRIE REAY: M'hm.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: And it's different certainly, I think, than what my grandmother would have lived like. I never got to meet her. So there's got to be some acknowledgment and honouring and respect for that. We can't duplicate exactly, you know, the Cree way of doing things in my home and, you know, or --

MS. KERRIE REAY: Right.
MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: -- in -- in an urban area. And so there needs to be some recognition and honouring of that. Not following what Ministry says, “Okay, this is what it's supposed to look like.” Because it might not look exactly like that --

MS. KERRIE REAY: Right.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: -- in my home.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Right.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: And so I think that that's a really critical piece of that work. And that's really what caused -- was one of the things that caused me a lot of trauma and pain, and you saw the tears earlier, was as a result of that, right. And not that acknowledgment, and as family I know the story of my family, and I know best.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Right.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: I think I might know a little wee bit more than that social worker.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Okay.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: So those are my recommendations.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Well, thank you very much, Barb, I appreciate the time that you've given this morning. And we are in a public statement, so I'm going to close it off. It's 11:47, and want to thank you once again for your
time.

MS. BARBARA WARD-BURKITT: Thank you so much.

MS. KERRIE REAY: Thank you. And we're still on the record -- we're still on the 'til I turn this off.

--- Upon adjourning at 11:47 p.m.
LEGAL DICTA-TYPIST’S CERTIFICATE

I, Shannon Munro, Court Transcriber, hereby certify that I have transcribed the foregoing and it is a true and accurate transcript of the digital audio provided in this matter.

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Shannon Munro

November 3, 2018