

# **The First Nations Family Advocate Office**

## **Introduction**

The AMC opened the First Nations Family Advocate Office (FNFAO) on June 1, 2015, with the office gifted the name “Abinoojiyak Bigiiwewag,” which translates to “our children are coming home.”

In Manitoba, there are approximately 12,000 children in Child and Family Services (CFS) care and 90 per cent of them are Indigenous. These staggering numbers today are the result of Indian Residential Schools and the 60s Scoop, both of which destroyed individuals, families and communities.

With the number of Indigenous children in CFS care reaching crisis levels, First Nations families involved with the CFS system wanted solutions. During community engagement events held in Winnipeg and Thompson, Manitoba, in May 2014, several hundred community members shared their stories about the challenges they faced while navigating the CFS system and the failures of the CFS system to operate fairly and justly.

From information gathered during the community engagement sessions, the AMC published the Bringing Our Children Home (BOCH) Report, which offered ten recommendations that would address many of the issues and concerns identified during community engagement sessions.

The BOCH Report recommended creating the FNFAO as a mechanism to implement further report recommendations.

The FNFAO is unique because our mandate is from Manitoba Chiefs, and our advocacy work supports the whole family. We work outside of the current Manitoba child welfare system, understanding that our work cannot empower a provincial system that has clearly failed First Nation children, families and communities. We work to empower First Nation families and communities under the broader mandate of the AMC to realize full jurisdiction and authority over our own children.

Completing intake for over 800 families since opening and seeing over 300 families reunited, we help families navigate the CFS system, advocate for increased parental access to children in the CFS system and provide supports and services to assist in restoring parental guardianship. More families, extended family members and First Nations seek the services of the FNFAO each day and demand for services continually grows.

## **Staff**

|   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Cora Morgan, First Nations Family Advocate    | Tara Remillard, Client Intake    |
| Cheryle Dreaver, Assistant Advocate           | Kendra Inglis, Family            |
| Reunification Worker                          |                                  |
| Jennifer Roulette, Assistant Advocate         | Michelle Klippenstein, Family    |
| Reunification Worker                          | Lana                             |
| Lindey Courchene, Executive Assistant         |                                  |
| McKay, Prenatal Support Worker                |                                  |
| Pam Cameron, Administrative Assistant         | Stephanie Edwards, Prenatal      |
| Support Worker                                |                                  |
| Mary Anne Clarke, Policy Analyst              | Candace Campbell, Family Support |
| Coordinator                                   |                                  |
| Janine Highway, Research/Writer               | Mary Burton, Grandmother         |
| Stephanie Sinclair, Client Intake             | Charlotte Daniels,               |
| Grandmother                                   |                                  |
| Melanie Outchikat, Client Intake              | Anna Smith, Family Reunification |
| Worker  |                                  |
| Catherine Richard, Restorative Justice Worker |                                  |

## Key Issues and Challenges

Since opening June 2015, the FNFAO has gathered numerous first-hand accounts from First Nations families detailing their struggles navigating the CFS system, including having little access to effective advocacy and resources to assist in family reunification. With only two full-time staff, we were limited in the help we could offer, focusing our time and resources on the most urgent cases usually involving birth alerts and permanent guardianship orders.

However, during this time, we identified the advocacy, supports and services First Nations families involved with CFS needed, which informed the activities in our three-year proposal “Working Outside of the Child Welfare System for Manitoba First Nations Children Caught in the System.” Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (now Indigenous Services Canada) provided financial support for the second half of fiscal year 2017 in our proposal, enabling us to hire 15 new staff to bring total staff to 17 by March 2018 and to offer several new supports and services, while building on the strength of existing advocacy work.

To accommodate our new staff, the FNFAO moved to new office space in the building in October 2017, and we began offering various family support programs. As with any organizational growth, growing pains are expected, and the FNFAO quickly found our new larger space was not large enough, forcing creativity to make sure our programs ran as scheduled. We also found we required flexibility to meet our families’ needs and hiring two Family Support Coordinators in lieu of other positions allowed us to create a program for families successfully reunited with their children who may require further support. At the end of fiscal year 2017-2018, we have a good

idea which programs needed strengthening and began the process of making those changes that will better meet the needs of families.

With Indigenous child welfare in crisis, it was encouraging to see both federal and provincial governments take the issue seriously enough to release their intentions for child welfare reform this past fiscal year. The federal government's reform plans align nicely with numerous historic and present resolutions where Manitoba Chiefs-in-Assembly mandated the AMC Secretariat to undertake the work to see First Nations' jurisdiction over our own child and family matters realized. Unfortunately, as details of the provincial government's child welfare reform plans emerged, the FNFAO contributed to numerous measured and counter responses from AMC to ensure grassroots citizenship and First Nations leadership were informed about the implications of the provincial government's reform plans in First Nations' lives.

It has been a busy year of working with the federal government and managing the provincial government.

## Activities and Accomplishments

### **Chiefs Assembly on Child and Family Services, April 2017**

The Chiefs Assembly on Child and Family Services started the new year with Manitoba Chiefs-in-Assembly endorsing numerous resolutions related to child and family matters. It was here, the AMC Women's Council received an expanded mandate to oversee child and family matters through Resolution APR-17.01. Expansion of the First Nations Women's Council Mandate to include Child and Family Services, and Resolution APR-17.02 supported the recommendation to amend the AMC Constitution to include the Grandmothers Council. At the July 2017 AGA, Resolution JUL-17.05 was introduced to include both a reference to the Grandmothers Council and a new Article in the AMC Constitution identifying the composition, role and function of the Grandmothers Council. Cora Morgan, the First Nations Family Advocate said, "We've been fortunate to work closely with the Women's Council and Grandmother's Council on the file this past year. It's been an honour supporting them and an honour to receive their support."

### **Keewaywin Engagement and Bringing Our Children Home event**

On June 30, 2017, we hosted Manitoba First Nation children, youth, citizens, Elders and leadership at the Thunderbird House to celebrate completion of our Keewaywin Engagement: Manitoba First Nations Child and Family Services Reform that began in December 2016. Keewaywin recommends First Nation-led reform options for First Nations CFS. The AMC Executive Council of Chiefs reviewed and approved the report in September 2017 and it was shared with all Manitoba First Nations. The report's recommendations

continue to inform and guide our work today. Twenty-three communities provided their feedback and built their dreams of what child welfare reform looks like in their communities. That day, we celebrated our children, their gifts and the upcoming changes to child welfare policy that will see First Nation people *Bring Our Children Home*.

### **2017 National Gathering of Elders, Edmonton**

The AMC Grandmothers Council and AMC support staff attended the inaugural 2017 National Gathering of Elders, “Coming Home, Voices of Elders,” in Edmonton, Alberta, in September 2017. Unfortunately, gathering organizers removed the CFS component; however, the Grandmothers Council still managed to share their Statement of Action on Child Welfare and spoke about their leading role in informing customary practice as Manitoba First Nations undertake child welfare reform. Following their statement, many attendees approached the AMC Grandmother’s Council, showing interest in creating Grandmother’s Councils in their own regions and sharing very similar challenges with high numbers of CFS child apprehension.

### **Provincial throne speech response**

The provincial government’s throne speech in October 2017 and its plans for child welfare required an immediate response from AMC, especially considering its plans for custody care, CFS agency block funding, social impact bonds and subsidized guardianship and its lack of First Nations consultation prior to announcing their reform plan. Through our Keewaywin Engagement on CFS reform, the FNFAO heard from grassroots citizens, Chiefs and council members, Elders, youth, CFS Authorities, Agencies and provincial and federal government representatives. It was a thorough engagement that allowed us to gather community-driven solutions and when considered alongside the provincial government’s reform plan, it highlights areas in their plan not in the best interest of First Nations, especially subsidized guardianship with its potential to result in 60s Scoop losses of our children.

The FNFAO continues to support the AMC to ensure grassroots citizenship and First Nations leadership are informed about the implications of the provincial government’s reform plans in First Nations lives and continues to counter those most harmful plans; but more importantly, together, we continue working together to advance First Nations’ goals, including reasserting First Nations’ jurisdiction over our own child and family matters.

### **AMC-Canada Memorandum of Understanding on Child Welfare**

In November 2017, AMC Chiefs-in-Assembly endorsed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Child Welfare between the AMC and Canada with the AMC Secretariat mandated to develop a collaborative agenda, workplan and budget to transform the child welfare system and to continue pursuing long-standing AMC mandates to return First Nation child welfare jurisdiction to Manitoba First Nations and reform Canada's First Nations CFS program. The AMC and Canada signed the MOU on December 7, 2017, in Ottawa, ON. In drafting the MOU and other related documents, the FNFAO has been supporting and informing the work towards First Nations' jurisdiction that must take precedence over provincial government reform plans.

### **Federal government's child welfare emergency meeting and reform plan**

In January 2018, the federal government held a two-day child welfare emergency meeting in Ottawa. Our Grandmother and Family Advocate participated on panels to inform the federal government's child welfare reform plans announced at the emergency meeting. The federal government's reform plans support the AMC-Canada MOU on child welfare, specifically in the area of drawing down jurisdiction in the area of child and family services and exploring the potential to co-develop federal child welfare legislation. The opportunity exists to develop a First Nations system reflective of First Nations traditional laws for child and family welfare; it is something Manitoba Chiefs have worked towards for years, and the FNFAO continues to support and inform the AMC's work in this area.

### **Southeast CFS Audit**

In December 2017, the FNFAO began a unique relationship with Southeast CFS, enabling us to move forward with Resolution APR-17.04 A File-by-File Audit of Child and Family Services Agencies. We partnered with Southeast CFS to examine case files where there is no real concern for protection and the children can immediately be sent home to their families or home communities or where immediate supports will assist in family reunification. It has been a pleasure working with very accommodating Southeast staff, and we have seen many successful family reunifications in a very short time. Our audit work continues in 2018 with Southeast and other potential agencies interested in partnering with the FNFAO.

### **Office of the Auditor General meeting**

In January 2018, the FNFAO met with the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) of Canada in Ottawa as part of the federal's government commitment to First Nations citizens informing CFS system reform. The Family Advocate carried the voices of the families we serve to the OAG, understanding that any reform must include those who have already been affected by system flaws

so they can inform those crucial changes. We received a commitment from the OAG that they heard your voices.

### **Office of the Auditor General Sharing Circle**

In February 2018, at the invitation of the FNFAO, the OAG met with several families in a traditional Sharing Circle. The families that had successfully reunited had a chance to speak with the OAG of Canada, where they bravely and honestly shared about their struggles with an often unfair and unjust CFS system.

### **Honouring Our Families Feast**

In March 2018, the FNFAO held a celebratory event at the Thunderbird House to honour the families we work with and to recognize their hard work towards family reunification. Minister of Indigenous Services Jane Philpott and her staff joined the celebration as we feasted 50 families and their children, showing our appreciation for their strength and bravery in fighting for their families. The families visited with Minister Philpott and her staff, lending their stories to inform her work in addressing the child welfare crisis. The families we serve truly inspire us; their contributions have been invaluable in informing the many areas requiring advocacy.

### **Chiefs' Emergency Meeting on Child Welfare, Strategic Plan, MOU Workplan and Declaration of Principles**

In March 2018, Manitoba Chiefs held a two-day emergency meeting on CFS in response to the province's unilateral reform initiatives. The Women's Council presented a draft strategic plan titled Setting the Foundation for Change: A Strategy Towards First Nations' Jurisdiction of Child Welfare in Manitoba and a draft MOU workplan. Manitoba Chiefs-in-Assembly accepted the report and workplan at the March 2018 Special Chiefs Assembly on Education in Long Plain First Nation. Additionally, a Manitoba First Nations Declaration of Principles on Inherent Sovereignty and Responsibility Over Our Own Children was developed to lay out a collective position that advances First Nations' jurisdiction in the area of children and families. Through resolution, the Chiefs mandated the AMC Secretariat to move forward with the necessary work to see full jurisdiction and authority over our own children realized.

### **Intervenor Status**

We received several family referrals to the FNFAO where we applied for and received intervenor status in their pending family court cases. We often speak with families whose interactions with the CFS system are so

inadequate they require our support in court. Going forward, we expect to participate as recognized intervenors in additional matters because of the provincial government's subsidized guardianship initiative.

## **MMIWG**

The FNFAO supports the AMC Women's Council and the AMC's Community Liaison for Women, Children and Families Issues in their lead work with MMIWG. Children previously in CFS care are at risk of exploitation and the two issues are intricately linked. We work collaboratively whenever the Women's Council and Liaison require any CFS-related information to support their work.

## **Speaking engagements and interviews**

The First Nations Family Advocate has spent a year advocating for the families we serve at various speaking engagements locally, regionally and nationally, bringing more attention to the CFS crisis in Manitoba and pushing for First Nation-led solutions. Numerous media interviews and news articles highlight the work we do, and we are often approached to offer the grassroots First Nations perspective on child welfare issues.

## **Programs and services**

It has been a busy year, hiring staff and implementing various programs and services. The need for the following programs and services currently offered at the FNFAO came from the families we serve:

Orientation Sessions: All families requesting advocacy must attend one orientation session prior to client intake appointment. The orientation session covers helpful information about navigating the CFS system, including supports available through our office.

One-on-one Appointment with Assistant Advocate: An opportunity to meet with an assistant advocate to determine what type of advocacy is required.

Wewaynii Nindinawemaan is an Ojibway translation for "A Good Journey with Our Relatives." An opportunity for families successfully reunified with their children to learn Indigenous teachings, build support systems and partner with SEED Winnipeg's Saving Circle Program.

Niingwayakochigemin is an Ojibway translation for "Setting Things Right." Support for First Nations families involved with the CFS and/or justice systems. Healing relationships through Indigenous justice circles, one-on-one assistance and mediation. Topics include teachings on Who We Are Not, Circle Teachings, Spirit Name, Teachings, Clan Teachings, etc.

Traditional Parenting Workshops: Topics include the Seven Sacred Teachings, Star Blanket Teaching, life skills, bonding with baby, food nutrition, breastfeeding, baby safe sleep, building a birth bundle, birth planning, caring for your belly button and sacred bundles, ways of play and soft spot and moss bag teachings.

Red Road to Healing Workshops: Awareness about the impacts of domestic violence on our families and communities.

Grandparents' Sharing Circle: Supports and services for grandparents who currently have guardianship of or provide kinship care for their grandchildren involved with CFS.

Empowering Our Youth Workshop: Topics include self-esteem, time management/budgeting, anger, values, problem solving and feelings, etc. Opportunities provided to retrieve personal identification, open bank accounts and write resumes.

## Acknowledgements

This past year has been incredibly rewarding, and as we move forward with our plans for 2018, we offer acknowledgements and give special thanks to our supporters: the families we serve who inform the changes that need to take place and who inspire us daily to continue working towards bringing our children home; Manitoba Chiefs-in-Assembly who gave us the mandate to work closely with the Women's Council to advocate for families and whose support and guidance is invaluable; Grand Chief Arlen Dumas whose encouraging words we always welcome; the Grandmother's Council who always supports our endeavors and who deserve our heartfelt gratitude for their presence; First Nations CFS Agencies, Authorities, workers and First Nation leadership serving on Agency boards who support our work, collaborating with us to find solutions; and Minister Bennett, Minister Philpott, Prime Minister Trudeau and all those involved from the Department of Indigenous Services who support our commitment to bringing our children home.

Thank you for believing in and believing our families.

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: Parts 2/3 Winnipeg

Witness: Cora Morgan

Submitted by: Joëlle Pastora Sala

Add'l info: P02-03P03P0101

Date: OCT 01 2018

Initials

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