



Commission to Promote
Sustainable Child Welfare

Commission de promotion de la viabilité
des services de bien-être de l'enfance

Unique Considerations for Aboriginal Children and Youth

**Companion Document to
Towards Sustainable Child Welfare in Ontario**

INTRODUCTION

The first report of the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare *Towards Sustainable Child Welfare in Ontario* includes many references to Aboriginal child welfare. This companion document consolidates the main points made in the report and elaborates on what the Commission learned during its initial conversations with leaders of some Aboriginal agencies and communities. The first report also sets out priorities going forward.

In the report, the Commission underlined the importance of responding to the unique and complex needs of Aboriginal children and families. It refers to the role of the six mandated Aboriginal Children’s Aid Societies (CASs) and the discussions underway in relation to seven “pre-mandated” prevention agencies. It also cites CASs uneven implementation of the requirements for working with Aboriginal communities under the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA).

THE VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE ABORIGINAL CHILD WELFARE

In its first report, the Commission also sets out its vision for sustainable child welfare in Ontario:

A future in which a modernized child welfare system functions as one of many programs working together to provide integrated, child-focused services fully aligned to improve outcomes for children and youth.

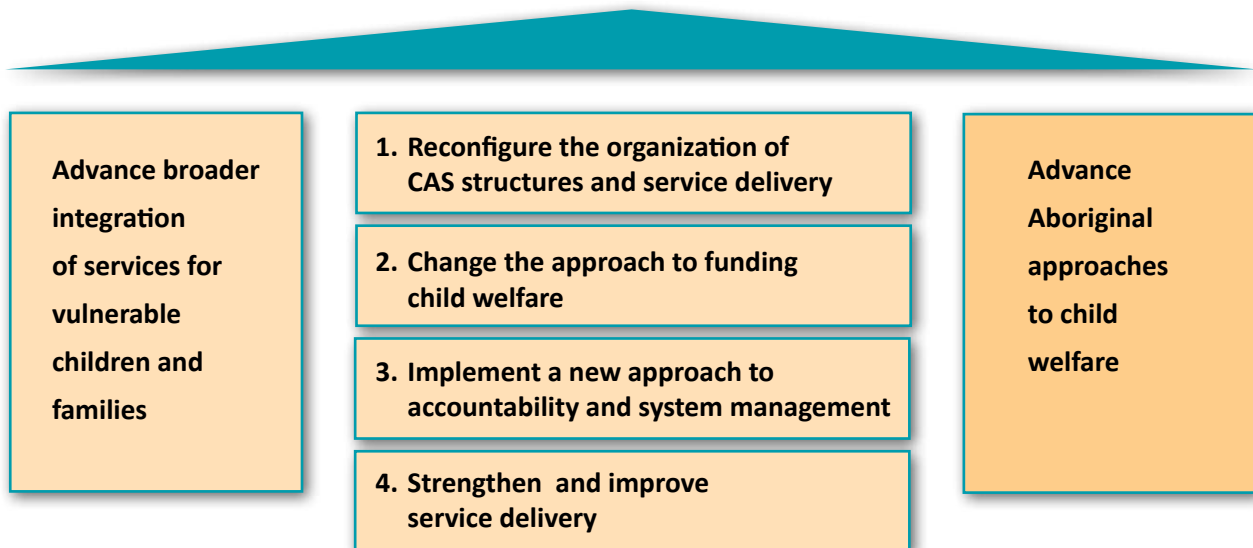
In elaborating on the vision, the Commission said that Aboriginal children, whether on-reserve or off-reserve, will have access to services that reflect their needs and that are delivered in ways that respect their culture, heritage, and traditions.

In its strategy for Sustainable Child Welfare, the Commission described four tiers of inter-related efforts with two additional thrusts cutting across all of these efforts. This multi-faceted strategy is illustrated in the diagram that follows. Advancing Aboriginal Approaches to Child Welfare is one of the two cross-cutting thrusts that are integral to the overall strategy.

A Strategy for Sustainable *Aboriginal* Child Welfare

A modernized child welfare system providing integrated child-focused services fully aligned with the broader network of children's services to improve outcomes for children and youth.

In which... Aboriginal children, whether on-reserve or off-reserve, will have access to services that reflect their needs and are delivered in ways that respect their culture, heritage and traditions.



The Commission has concluded that children in many communities in Ontario would be better served by agencies that are larger, more able to achieve economies of scale, invest in their people and capacity, and manage budgets in the present tight fiscal environment. In some rural communities, scale and sustainability may be best achieved by joining with other agencies serving children and families.

Generally speaking, these considerations are also relevant to Aboriginal agencies, and there may be ways to move towards larger and more sustainable agency models by improving the collaboration between Aboriginal agencies, or sharing support services and areas of expertise. As the Commission explores options for the future, it will be mindful of the balance to be struck between a strong Aboriginal community and cultural connection, on the one hand, and the sustainability of the Aboriginal child welfare agencies, on the other.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES AND FINDING SOLUTIONS

The child welfare services to Aboriginal children and families experience many of the same challenges and demonstrate many of the same strengths of child welfare services across the province. But there are additional, distinct factors that make it imperative to take a separate

view of Aboriginal Child Welfare. As the Commission proceeds with its work, it will bear in mind those changes to the overall child welfare system that will also benefit Aboriginal child welfare as well as the changes that are specifically required for the benefit of Aboriginal children and families. In addition, the Commission will look at the lessons from Aboriginal child welfare that should be adopted by other children's aid societies.

The Commission recognizes that there are differences in the way Aboriginal children are served across Ontario. Some Aboriginal children are served by the six mandated Aboriginal Children's Aid Societies, some through mainstream CASs, and others through inter-agency service agreements. The Commission also understands that it is critical to recognize the service needs of children based on where they live, those who live in Aboriginal communities as well as off-reserve; children in the north and those in the south; those in remote areas and those in urban communities.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Although the Commission has only begun its work, it has concluded that one size does not fit all. The way services are organized, managed and delivered must take into account the needs of the children and families served, as well as the social and economic circumstances of the communities in which they live and the availability of other services and supports in the local area. It is important to recognize these differences across all communities and all CASs – but when it comes to Aboriginal Child Welfare, there are also the unique and profound challenges associated with culture, history, geography, and current social and economic circumstances.

For example, the size of the Aboriginal child population in Ontario continues to grow very rapidly--unlike the non-Aboriginal child population. Many Aboriginal communities also face the impact of poverty, inadequate housing, poor amenities, health and mental health problems, and substance abuse. The Commission also heard about the conditions in remote communities, in particular those in the North where few services are available, costs for basic goods and services are high, and transportation is difficult and expensive.

The Commission is aware that Aboriginal children are significantly over represented in the CAS in-care population. Too often many of these children are placed hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away from their home with limited ability to maintain connections with their family, community and culture. And we have a deepening appreciation of the impact of the legacy of the residential schools and the removal of hundreds of children from their communities into non-Native adoptive homes in the 1960's and 1970's. We also recognize the central role played by the community in promoting the welfare of Aboriginal children.

NEXT STEPS

As the Commission moves forward, more listening and more dialogue is required with Aboriginal agencies and communities. As we do so, we will be working closely with John Beaucage, the recently-appointed advisor to Minister Laurel Broten, on Aboriginal Child Welfare, to identify culturally specific solutions to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth. These solutions must ensure that Ontario's Aboriginal children benefit from services and protections that should be available to all children. At the same time, services must reflect the unique considerations related to Aboriginal history, jurisdiction, culture, as well as the socio-economic challenges facing many Aboriginal communities as they are rebuilding their communities.

For further commentary and analysis of unique considerations relating to child welfare for Aboriginal children and youth, please refer to *Aboriginal Child Welfare across Canadian Jurisdictions* in section two of the Commission's Working Paper No 2, *Jurisdictional Comparisons of Child Welfare System Design*.

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