

Community Conversations

Lac La Biche – May 11, 2012



A Space for Change...

North Central Alberta Child and Family Service Authority (CFSA), Métis Settlements CFSA, Métis Child and Family Wellness and the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy division together hosted a community conversation in Lac La Biche.

On May 11th, 72 people came together at McArthur Place to have a conversation about how to support children, youth and families who connect with child intervention services. The event started with a blessing and smudge from Elder

Many Elders have been connected in some way with child intervention for a long time. Elders generously shared their stories and wisdom with the diverse group of people who are dedicated to making positive change happen for children, youth families and communities.

Some participants stated that they have been having these discussions for years, and commented that this process felt different. The difference is that "government" engaging in conversation with an open mind and a willingness to listen and learn and to work together with people in the community to make change happen is a way that is right for them.

Maybe it was the sunshine, or the beautiful view of the lake, or the fact that so many people in the room already knew each other, but whatever the reason, a very safe space was created that allowed people to share their views in an open and honest way. We were all touched by the firsthand accounts of how people in the room had been impacted by their experiences with child intervention. The stories illustrated the importance of working together from a foundation of mutual respect and understanding.

Participant Quotes

"We need more Aboriginal mentors and role models in schools. Perhaps connecting the youth with Elders."

"Aboriginal knowledge has been de-valued and continues to be de-valued. We need to learn to respect their knowledge."

"We need to come from a place of love. It will change our perspective."

"People need skilled hand-holders and that takes time. Right now as government we aren't holding hands; we just bandage the issues and that creates more issues in the long-term."



Survey Responses

"Community engagement is an outcome in and of itself. Dialogue is healing and people feel better just engaging on issues."

"All Government staff need 'exposure' to first-hand Aboriginal experiences and stories."

"How can we change 'policy' now. Community conversations is wonderful, but don't we need additional healing?"

"I appreciated hearing the thoughts of the people at our table and am hopeful given their openness and awareness of Aboriginal issues."

"I will work harder toward obtaining secure funding for a family violence program that is helping families, and move forward with a potential facility that takes in families & helps them develop skills/tools and honor family."

"I'll support any efforts that agencies take to implement family group conferencing or alternative methods to keep aboriginal children out of government care."

"The best part was the opportunity for open conversation; speaking about possibilities."

Email the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy Division at:
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What We Heard – Themes & Quotes

The top themes from Lac La Biche are quite similar to what has emerged from other conversations. This conversation is unique in the utmost importance placed on working together to solve this problem.

We need to work together

- "Doing it with the people who have experienced child care situation, not just professionals. The voice who have experienced it is left out. We need to bring them into discussions."
- "All system is linked together, everyone needs to work together."

We need to be more family focused

- "Giving help to the mother and family, not just the child. Access to help is difficult."
- "Support liaison workers who can spend more time with families."

The system needs to change

- "All programs are still within a system that has not changed. Policy and process are limited. Policies are made to be rewritten."
- "When you have a family that has problems, the last resort should be apprehension, but it is usually the first."

Become more community-based

- "Each community is unique, what works in one might not in another."
- "Provide supports in the community where families can go for help without fear. Help them find and apply for support programs. Focus on prevention."
- "Recognize the strength and capacity in the family and in the community."

There needs to be more Aboriginal inclusion and autonomy

- "What are the aboriginal peoples' belief about children coming into care? Instill the belief that they do have the power to solve the problem. Give them the power."
- "We need more Aboriginal teachers. We need to promote Aboriginal culture and traditions to make our kids feel good about their background."

Survey Results – What You Told Us

At the end of each conversation we asked participants to fill out our survey, sharing with us their thoughts and feelings on how the event went. We want to thank the 50 people who took the time to respond!

We heard from participants that the event went extremely well. More than 90% of the respondents felt: the environment in which the conversation took place was respectful, they were given the opportunity to voice their opinion, their input was valued, the conversation was meaningful and that they have a greater understanding of the issues.

In addition to multiple choice questions, we asked participants several open-ended questions. When asked, "what new questions emerged for you?" people often said, "what's the next step?" or, "how do we fix specific issues with the system?" We also asked, "was there anything in today's session that made you think or feel differently about something?" what we heard most often was that people had a sense of hope. As one person so eloquently put it, "community engagement is an outcome in and of itself. Dialogue is healing and people feel better just engaging on issues."

When asked what actions will you personally undertake, there were four typical responses:

- Work to engage communities (30%);
- Enhance supports to others (20%);
- Ensure families as a whole are supported (15%); and
- Work to encourage and support the change they want to see (13%).

All of this valuable information will be put together with past and future conversations to help set the course to improve outcomes for children, youth and families.