

Community Conversations

Northwest Alberta – September 11 & 13, 2012

Alberta



Participant Quotes

" People need to feel free to speak, continue these types of conversations so we can work together."

" Recognize the value of what the Aboriginal worker brings to the situation. Their lived experience is very valuable and it needs to be honored."

" We all need to think outside the box. Continue to build trusting relationships between stakeholders. The families need to receive wrap around services."

" Redefine how we look at the current reality. These conversations need to continue and result in action."

" How can we be flexible in our services to meet the best interests of our clients?"

A Space for Change...

Northwest Alberta Child and Family Service Authority (CFSA) and the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy division worked together to host two community conversations with people from Northwest Alberta.

Participants were honoured to take part in the feast and pipe ceremony in Peace River on September 11. The ceremony, led by Elder Albert Desjarlais, provided a blessing for the conversation the next day.

It helped the conversation to be grounded in history and tradition, and created an openness for honesty and respect to emerge when people come together to have a meaningful conversation about an important subject.

The Peace River conversation brought together 59 people representing Elders, parents, youth, law enforcement, education, elected officials, community organizations, business and various levels of government, to share their stories and perspectives on how we can better support children, youth and families in Alberta. There was a deep commitment to working together, listening to each person's story and appreciating the wisdom that emerged throughout the conversations. People reported leaving with a sense of hope about their individual and collective ability to create positive change.

Similar to Peace River, the conversation in Grande Prairie began the day before with a traditional feast and pipe ceremony, led by Elder Dennis Whitford. Roughly 30 people attended the ceremony, and for many, this was their first time attending a feast. The ceremony helped reinforce the sense that people of all cultures can come together, and it reminded us that we are all working towards the same goal – creating and supporting healthy families.

The conversation the next day followed in the same spirit as the ceremony – a sense of connectedness and recognition of the importance of talking, listening and working together. It became apparent throughout the conversation that there was a strong sense of community and this conversation provided the space for people to build on existing relationships. There was such a depth to the conversation and a commitment to continue the collaborative work that is creating positive results.

In both conversations, the presence of Elders provided a sense of comfort and support as people discussed important issues. The stories and wisdom that Elders shared with participants inspired a sense of dignity and illuminated the rich history of Aboriginal people.



Survey Responses

"The conversations and facilitation created a good level of sharing and risk taking."

"The best part was sharing stories and finding that we are not alone facing the problems we presently face."

"Where do we go from here? what am I responsible to do?"



"This is exactly what I recommended because you guys did it perfectly - thanks for asking me to come."

"How can the child protection system change to be more respectful and inclusive of families who need support and resources to become healthy?"

Email the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy Division at:

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What We Heard – Themes & Quotes

These themes have been notably consistent with what has emerged from other conversations across the province.

We need to be more family focused

- "System has to change that when we see a child need help, we respond. We should provide supports to the family, not by taking the child. Steps 1 – do what we can to keep the child in the home."
- "We need to find new ways to work with our families so they can access the supports they need to stay successful."

There are many issues and challenges with the current system

- "Problem is that the system is designed around crisis and fear, that's the bigger issue - that tells you what the priorities of the system are. It's not about helping people, it's looking good."
- "Perception still remains that we are coming to take the children."

Become more community-based

- "Are there opportunities to lean towards a more community responsive system – communities have the answers to their own issues."
- "Communities need education and knowledge – they need to be empowered to take responsibility."

We need to work together

- "Has to be a holistic view. 67% is just a symptom. If you get the family healthy, but they are in a sick community without jobs, now what?"
- "We need to explore ways to build bridges between the agencies/community."

Education on and awareness of Canadian Aboriginal history

- "CPS workers need more education on Aboriginal families – how they parent, the history, the culture – so much prejudice – need to learn to understand them."
- "As Aboriginal people our history defines us. Our culture and traditions are important to us, and healing and change is the path forward."

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. Eighty five people completed the surveys for a response rate of 71%.

We heard from participants that the event went extremely well. More than 98% 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, "when do we start making change?" We also asked, "was there anything in today's session that made you think or feel differently about something?" We heard a few different things, for example:

- We need to provide better supports to families and parents, especially before problems escalate into crisis;
- People were surprised by the lack of understanding of the history and trauma faced by many Aboriginal people; and
- How we all need to do a better job of listening.

When asked what actions will you personally undertake, we heard three common responses:

- Participants will work to enhance the capacity of their community;
- People will be more open to others' perspectives, will actively listen to clients, and will share their own stories; and
- A greater emphasis will be made to support the whole family.

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.