



What We Heard

Summary of the
Community Conversations

December 2011 – May 2013

Alberta 
Government

Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy Division – Human Services

Introduction

The Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy (AES) division was formed in the fall of 2011. This division fulfilled a recommendation of the Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel to “establish a senior executive position at the Assistant Deputy Minister level tasked with enhancing the capacity and cultural competency of the child intervention system to serve Aboriginal children and families.”¹ The goal of this recommendation is to ensure that there is a dedicated and committed focus on improving the capacity of the system to respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and families.²

It is well recognized that the over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in child intervention is complex and linked to broader historic, social and economic issues.² Any process set up to address this over-representation required an approach that was proven to embrace this complexity. After researching a number of options, the AES division decided on the Community Conversation model to gather information as part of the process to meet this mandate. The Community Conversation model was based on the processes used by Tamarack—An Institute for Community Engagement³ in their work on initiatives such as poverty reduction.

What are community conversations?

Community conversations bring together people with diverse perspectives to share their insights on a topic of common importance. Through creating a safe space to discuss open ended questions, community conversations:

1. Start with the premise that solutions to complex problems lie within the diversity of skills, perspectives and strengths that exist within the community;
2. Incorporate the views of people who play a variety of roles in the community;
3. Do not start out with a solution in mind;
4. Start with a sense of curiosity about the variety of perspectives on the topic; and
5. Are structured to build a common understanding of the issue and the roles of people connected to the issue.



Community conversations bring together people with diverse perspectives to share their insights on a topic of common importance.

¹ Closing the Gap between Vision and Reality: Strengthening the Accountability, Adaptability and Continuous Improvement of Alberta’s Child Intervention System. Final Report of the Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel – June 30, 2010, Page 6.

² Government Response to the Child Intervention System Review – October 2010, Page 9.

³ Tamarack – a charity that develops and supports learning communities that help people to collaborate, co-generate knowledge and achieve collective impact on complex community issues.



The success of the community conversations was dependent upon having people from a variety of sectors and with diverse perspectives all sharing their insights at the conversation.

More about the conversations

In the fall of 2011, the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy Division contacted Child and Family Service Authorities and Delegated First Nation Agencies in Alberta to determine if a community conversation was appropriate for their area. In the areas that wanted a conversation, a steering committee was established to plan the logistics of the day, and identify the people to invite to the event. The involvement of local leaders at the planning stage of the conversations led to a gathering of people that provided rich and valuable insights that have formed a solid base for future action.

The success of the community conversations was dependent upon having people from a variety of sectors and with diverse perspectives all sharing their insights at the conversation. Participants at the conversations included:

- > Youth;
- > Elders;
- > First Nation and Métis community members;
- > Individuals with lived experience;
- > Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers including those from the areas of education, health, law enforcement, prevention and early intervention, family support, justice and municipal and band councils;
- > Staff from Delegated First Nation Agencies and Child and Family Service Authorities.

The participants represented both government and non-government organizations in both urban and rural areas.

The presence and leadership of Elders was an essential component of each conversation. The ceremonies that preceded each of the conversations created an air of respect, humility and sacredness for the interactions that were about to take place. Throughout the conversations, the wisdom and teachings of the Elders kept the participants grounded in the importance of the work, and modeled the enriching power of indigenous worldviews, stories, language, traditions and ways of being.

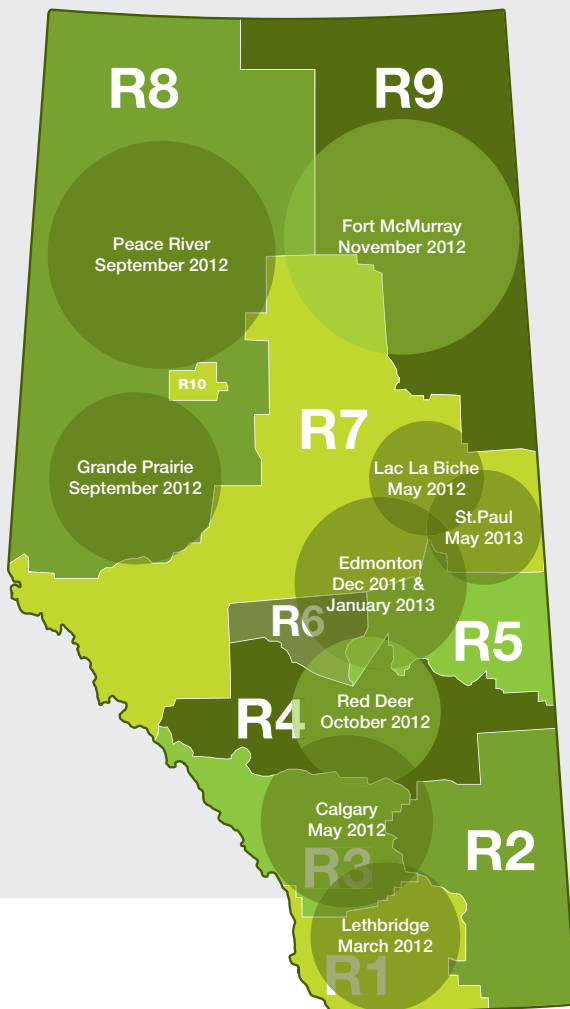
Where did we go?

The following map shows the dates and locations of the community conversations, and identifies the surrounding areas from which people were invited to participate.

- > 1,628 individuals from 126 communities were invited to conversations held throughout the province.
- > Between December 2011 and May 2013, the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy division met with 1,333 people throughout the province.
- > 782 participated in community conversations.
- > 551 participated in focused conversations on topics that emerged in community conversations, which required further discussion and information in order to better understand the complexity of that topic.



Chart 1 – Community Conversations



R1	Southwest Alberta CFSA
R2	Southeast Alberta CFSA
R3	Calgary and Area CFSA
R4	Central Alberta CFSA
R5	East Central Alberta CFSA
R6	Edmonton and Area CFSA
R7	North Central Alberta CFSA
R8	Northwest Alberta CFSA
R9	Northeast Alberta CFSA
R10	Métis Settlements CFSA



Chart 2 – Open and Focused Conversations

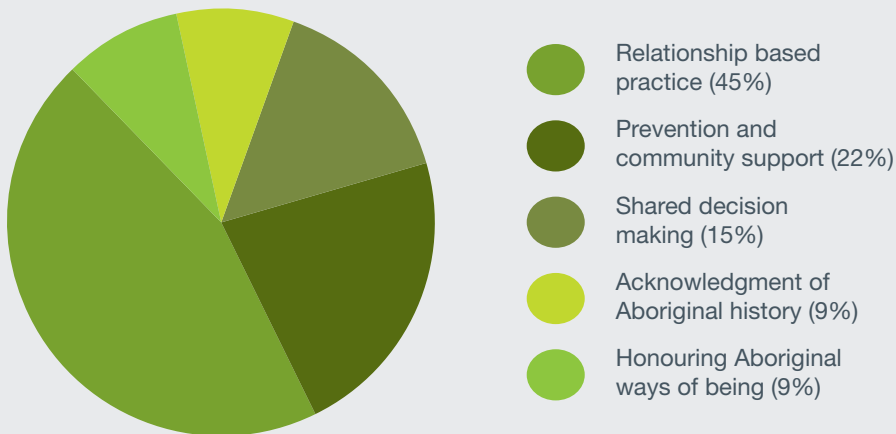
Location	Date	Number of People
Open conversations		
1. Edmonton	December 2011	88
2. Lethbridge	March 2012	113
3. Lac La Biche	May 2012	72
4. Calgary	May 2012	127
5. Peace River	September 2012	59
6. Grande Prairie	September 2012	60
7. Red Deer	October 2012	63
8. Fort McMurray	November 2012	50
9. Edmonton	January 2013	88
10. St. Paul	May 2013	62
Total participation in conversations		782
Conversations with a focused topic		
1. Lateral Violence	March 2012	128
2. An Overview of Complexity	May 2012	101
3. Indigenous Scholars	May 2012	80
4. Social Policy Framework	June 2012	80
5. The History and Impact of Colonization and Intergenerational Trauma with Dr. Mike DeGagné	October 2012	140
6. The Role of Men and Fathers – A Circle Conversation	January 2013	22
Total participants in focused conversations		551
Total participants in all conversations		1,333

What we heard

The conversations started with open-ended questions about what was happening in the field of child intervention especially as it pertained to supporting Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities. The next questions invited people to talk about the type of changes they would like to see, and asked about steps we could all take to make those changes happen. The discussion at each conversation was captured by people at each table who wrote down the comments made by the participants. Each of the comments was then entered into a database and sorted into primary and secondary themes.

7,385 distinct comments were recorded throughout the conversations, and sorted into five primary themes. This chart depicts the percentage of the total comments that comprise each theme.

Chart 3 – Primary Theme by Percentage



The comments from the conversations created a base of information that will be used in a variety of ways throughout the division, ministry and Government of Alberta. This data however is only one of the valuable outcomes of the conversations. Many stories were shared, connections made, and hearts were moved in ways that cannot be captured through a summary of charts and themes. The following story is but one example of the unplanned benefits of the conversation process.



“In Alberta, everyone contributes to making our communities inclusive and welcoming. Everyone has opportunities to fulfill their potential and to benefit from our thriving social, economic and cultural life”.



Come have tea

At one community conversation, a foster parent mentioned that she does not always feel comfortable going on to the First Nation community, as she does not know the protocols and the way around the community. An Elder responded by saying “Here’s my phone number, the next time you come out, phone me, we’ll have tea and I will show you around. By the way, when I come into town, I feel uncomfortable, because I don’t know my way around.” The foster parent responded “Here’s my phone number. The next time you come into town, call me. We’ll have tea, and I will show you around.”

In February 2013, the Social Policy Framework was announced with the following vision—

“In Alberta, everyone contributes to making our communities inclusive and welcoming. Everyone has opportunities to fulfill their potential and to benefit from our thriving social, economic and cultural life”.

The goals listed in the Social Policy Framework are to:

- > Reduce inequality;
- > Protect vulnerable people;
- > Create a person-centered system of high-quality services; and
- > Enable collaboration and partnerships.

By integrating the information gathered through the community conversations into the work of government and community practices and policies, the vision of the Social Policy Framework will be enhanced.

The Social Policy Framework includes a set of principles that articulate the fundamental beliefs of government and Albertans that were expressed during the engagement process. The following principles represent a set of equally important and mutually reinforcing statements about what Albertans want to be the basis of social policy decisions that affect them. **The principles of the Social Policy Framework are: Dignity, People First, Healthy and Strong Relationships, Mutual Responsibility, Inclusion, Proactive, Accountability, Collaborative.**⁴

⁴ Alberta’s Social Policy Framework – February 2013, Page 12

There are strong connections between the goals and principles of the Social Policy Framework, and the information derived from the community conversations. In order to show this alignment, the framework's goals and principles are identified under each of the following themes.

1. Relationship based practice

Participants stated that it is important to focus on the family as a whole, and not separate the needs of the child from the capacity of the parents. Several comments highlighted the need to be intentional about including fathers in plans, agreements and visits in a way that recognizes their important role in the lives of their children, and supports them to fulfill that caring role. Aboriginal children and youth need to know that they belong to a caring community that has a rich culture, language, history and tradition of which they can be proud.

Another strong secondary theme that came out of the conversations is the need for collaborative decision making. Parents and youth need to be involved in the decisions that affect them. This can include formal processes such as Family Group Conferencing as well as decisions that are made during each interaction between families and service providers.

Participants identified relationship based practice principles and activities more frequently than any other topic. The elements of relationship based practice as determined through the conversations include:

- a. Developing strong relationships with families and community partners;
- b. Treating people with respect and dignity in every interaction;
- c. Truly understanding each person's and each family's unique strengths, needs and circumstances;
- d. Building on existing strengths within the individual, family and community; and
- e. Recognizing that the best place for a child is with a healthy, loving family – a family that may include more than biological parents and siblings. In extreme cases where a child must be removed from the family, relationship based practice would see this done with the least disruption to both the child and family.



“It is about humanness, the importance of relationships and preventing those relationships from breaking down or you can't build trust.”



“I want to see people who work from their heart, you can’t go wrong; nothing bad can come from that.”

Some of the related ideas in this category include ensuring that a sense of caring is present in all interactions, and that the priorities of the family are given high regard. Participants emphasized that individuals need to feel that they have been heard and understood, and that their strengths, not their mistakes are focused upon.

Some quotes from the conversations that emphasized these themes were:

“Go into families with the intent of listening—with our hearts!”

“Build relationships with the family.”

“It is about humanness, the importance of relationships and preventing those relationships from breaking down or you can’t build trust.”

“I want to see people who work from their heart, you can’t go wrong; nothing bad can come from that.”

“To make a difference you have to start small.”

Social Policy Framework Goals:

- > Create a person-centered system of high-quality services;
- > Protect vulnerable people; and
- > Reduce inequality.

Social Policy Framework Principles: Dignity, People First, Healthy and Strong Relationships, Mutual Responsibility.

2. Prevention and community support

Prevention and community support refers to the need identified by participants to increase the skills, knowledge and resources of communities to provide a wide variety of services at a local level.

Suggestions to achieve these tasks include building up informal supports within the community, such as mentors and positive role models. Participants told us that by providing preventive supports locally, early and in a flexible and timely fashion, it is less likely that families will fall into crisis.

Some related ideas discussed during the conversations included the need to connect a variety of formal and informal support services so that families have access to the help they need when they need it. This can include involving community resources as well as extended family and significant others in planning, mentoring, guidance and practical support. Participants mentioned that it is important to recognize that parents, youth and children have a variety of needs, and that it is most effective to support these needs in a holistic, rather than disjointed manner. We also heard from participants that professionals need to collaborate and coordinate support services so that families are not overwhelmed by the system, but benefit from the array of services that are available to them.

“It would be better if someone came and helped to teach the parents from the start.”

“Communities have the solutions when you bring them together in decision making.”

“Work with the community to find out who the key people are and support them to help the community.”

Social Policy Framework Goals:

- > Create a person-centered system of high-quality services; and
- > Enable collaboration and partnerships.

Social Policy Framework Principles: Collaborative, Proactive, People First.

“Work with the community to find out who the key people are and support them to help the community.”





“Child welfare system is set up based on values— independence, individual responsibility, do things quickly and according to the rules. Need to shift the values of the system.”

3. Shared decision making at all levels of systems

This theme represents a collection of comments that refer to the need to involve individuals in the decisions that affect them, in meaningful ways. The importance of including all stakeholders in the decision making processes in ways that balance power, accountability and responsibility was highlighted by the participants. Topics such as jurisdictional issues, inequality of services on and off reserve, and rules that are perceived to be arbitrary or inflexible were identified as crucial aspects to address in order to truly support Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities.

Also included in this theme was the idea of incorporating complexity into the process of change. Several comments focused on the fact that change needs to occur at all levels of government systems, and that meaningful change will take time. Participants shared their view that this change will involve government and community transforming not only the way things are done, but also the way long-standing and complex issues are thought about and addressed. It will require a process that involves personal reflection, continually assessing progress and adapting plans at all levels of government and community systems.

“Child welfare system is set up based on values— independence, individual responsibility, do things quickly and according to the rules. Need to shift the values of the system.”

“We need to have different conversations and different measures to understand the current situation.”

“The idea of complexity is different.”

“The system took a long time to make, will take time to change. Will not happen overnight.”

Social Policy Framework Goals:

- > Create a person-centered system of high-quality services; and
- > Enable collaboration and partnerships.

Social Policy Framework Principles: Collaborative, Dignity, People First, Inclusion, Mutual Responsibility, Accountable.

4. Acknowledgment of Aboriginal history

There were a number of comments that emphasized the need for greater acknowledgement, understanding and awareness among all members of society about the unique history of Aboriginal people in Canada, and how this history continues to affect today's generation. Comments focused on the need to educate all Canadians on the true history and impact of colonization, the *Indian Act* and Indian Residential Schools. Participants believed that this increased understanding would lead to stronger relationships, more effective personal healing, less prejudice and a more cohesive community and society.

Participants in the conversations identified the need to work closely with the ministry of Education and the ministry of Enterprise and Advanced Education in order to raise awareness and increase understanding of the impact of historical events on decisions made today. Many people recognized that excellent curriculum and resource material have already been developed and opportunities exist to increase the ways this material can get “off the shelf” and into the heads and hearts of educators and students.

“The past is always in the present. Whenever I want to move forward, my past is always with me.”

“It all starts from residential school system; fear was instilled, love wasn't shown, weren't shown how to parent. It's a sad chapter, but it needs acknowledgment.”

*“True history of Canada will shape relationships to go forward—but **MUST** allow time for reflection and creation of space to contribute voices of all – answers are in all of us.”*

A number of comments heard throughout the conversations identified the importance of addressing the source of the issues, not just the symptoms. These comments aligned with research that agrees that intergenerational trauma, which can be traced to experiences in residential schools⁵, is one of the root causes of many of the social conditions experienced by Aboriginal people today. This alignment between what was heard in the conversations and information gathered through reviewing the literature confirms the importance of focusing resources on the root issues that continue to affect the lives of Aboriginal people today. Many of the comments from the participants identified the need for healing using traditional wisdom and ceremony.



“The past is always in the present. Whenever I want to move forward, my past is always with me.”

⁵ Chansonneuve, D. (2005). *Reclaiming Connections—Understanding Residential School Trauma among Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

“We need a family-based model that addresses some of the root cause issues, the source of the issue and options for healing.”



“Over-representation of Aboriginal children in care a symptom—need to address root issues.”

“We need a family-based model that addresses some of the root cause issues, the source of the issue and options for healing.”

Social Policy Framework Goals:

- > Reduce inequality; and
- > Enable collaboration and partnerships.

Social Policy Framework Principles:

Dignity, Inclusion, Healthy and Strong Relationships.

5. Honouring Aboriginal ways of being

Participants spoke about the importance of Aboriginal culture, language, ceremony, spirituality and traditions to their overall wellbeing. We were reminded that there are distinct differences between western and Aboriginal worldviews. A lack of understanding of these unique perspectives can sometimes create conflict or diminish the effectiveness of programs and services delivered to Aboriginal people. The need for more intensive and effective cultural competency training for all staff throughout the Government of Alberta was raised by participants in the conversation.

Participants emphasized that there are many Aboriginal worldviews, depending on the history, language and traditions of each First Nation, Métis and Inuit community. Many stories were shared that identified the powerful healing that occurred when individuals were connected to their traditions, culture, language and ceremony through Elders. Participants acknowledged that without these connections, negative consequences resulted for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Additionally, participants said it was important for service providers to make room for indigenous traditions, wisdom and ceremony in the programs, policies and interventions that support Aboriginal people.

“Value of Aboriginal and traditional knowledge is meant to be shared. Sharing is part of the solution.”

“Naming Ceremony- so engaging, attaining a sense of belonging- part of something. The baby is passed around the circle of elders, their message we are all responsible to raise this child.”

“I need to practice my own traditional cultural way of healing. Use ceremony, talk to Elders.”

Social Policy Framework Goals:

- > Reduce inequality;
- > Enable collaboration and partnerships; and
- > Create a person-centered system of high-quality services.

Social Policy Framework Principles: Dignity, Inclusion, People First, Healthy and Strong Relationships.



“I need to practice my own traditional cultural way of healing. Use ceremony, talk to Elders.”

The Way We Sleep

At one conversation, a discussion was taking place regarding the process of doing a home assessment for a kinship care placement. One participant stated that she was told that one of the standards that needed to be in place in her home was that each child was required to have his or her own room. The caregiver went on to say that in her family, children always shared rooms and they never considered it an advantage for each child to have his or her own room. In fact, her response to the requirement of one child per bedroom was—

“Who would do that to a child?”



These themes are currently being shared with a variety of people within the Government of Alberta to ensure that this valuable information is used as broadly as possible to benefit children, youth, families and communities throughout the province. Meetings have been held with the Child and Family Services Division, the Council for Quality Assurance and others who have found the information very valuable to their work. Government of Alberta staff have commented that this information both enhances and validates the development of current initiatives. This information is particularly helpful as it has emerged recently and directly from people who generously and eloquently shared their experiences, perspectives and wisdom.

Evaluating the conversations

Towards the end of each conversation, participants were asked to complete an evaluation to help the Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy division determine if the conversations were meaningful and provide any suggestions for improvement. Approximately 53 per cent of the participants (414/782) attending the community conversations completed the survey.

Of those who completed the survey, 97 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- > They felt the conversation was meaningful;
- > Their opinion was valued;
- > They were given the opportunity to voice their opinion; and
- > The environment in which the conversation took place was respectful.

When asked to indicate if the conversation contributed to the participant having a greater understanding of the issues, 94 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

In the evaluation form, participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions:

1. After today's conversation, what new questions emerge for you?
2. Was there anything in today's conversation that made you think or feel differently about something?
3. Looking forward, what actions will you personally undertake to create or influence the change you want to see?
4. The best part of the session was...
5. For future conversations, I would recommend...

30 per cent of the comments referred to the conversation process itself. A majority of participants said that the presence of Elders and the open-ended conversation format was respectful and allowed meaningful discussion to occur. One suggestion for improvement in the process was to expand the diversity of the people in attendance including Chiefs; more individuals who have been, or whose children have been in care; more youth; and more people who provide support and services in the community.

More than 10 per cent of the respondents stated that they wanted to know more about how we were going to move from “just talking” to taking action that makes a meaningful difference. This expectation was highly prevalent at every conversation.

In response to the question regarding the individual’s commitment to make change happen, many comments focused on enhancing relationships in their own personal and professional lives (15%). Other actions included taking a more active role in personal learning, reflection and growth, listening, educating, advocating and becoming more engaged with individuals and issues within their community (20%).

Another common theme was the importance of continuing the open, respectful engagement process (25%). Participants recognized that the community conversation is one step in a long journey, and that government and community need to continue to work together to bring about change that will truly make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal children, youth and adults.

What’s going to happen now?

Participants expressed a strong desire to have their input used to make positive change. The next step will be to return to the communities who hosted the community conversations in order to:

1. Share this information and validate that the primary and secondary themes are an accurate representation of what was said;
2. Share information about the many projects and initiatives that are currently underway in Human Services, and ways in which the themes are being incorporated to strengthen programs and improve outcomes; and
3. Find out more about the initiatives that are underway in each community and identify ways in which government and community can work better together to improve the effectiveness of our mutual efforts.



A majority of participants said that the presence of Elders and the open-ended conversation format was respectful and allowed meaningful discussion to occur.



The importance of this work was eloquently captured by Elder Morris Little Wolf, who closed off the conversation in Lethbridge with these profound words.

*We need to get ready.
We need to work together.
Our children are calling us.
They want to come home.*

We recognize that there are no quick fixes to the complex issues that contribute to the over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in care. As we heard throughout the conversations and in discussion with government colleagues, there is a high level of agreement that the solutions to these complex issues can only take place by having government and community work together.

The Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy division wishes to thank everyone who participated in the community conversations for generously sharing their insight and wisdom. We commit to keeping these themes alive and at the forefront of the ongoing work of the ministry including outcomes based service delivery, the child intervention practice framework, the review of the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* and the development of an action plan to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in care.

We look forward to continuing on this journey to make sure that your words are turned into actions that will result in everyone having the opportunity to fulfill their potential and benefit from a thriving social, economic and cultural life.

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