
Métis Nation of Ontario



OFIFC



A Collaborative Submission Regarding A Provincial Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy

**Jointly Submitted to: Minister of Children and Youth Services, Government of Ontario
By: Métis Nation of Ontario, Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, and
Ontario Native Women's Association**

September 2014

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Introduction

This document is a joint submission of the Métis Nation of Ontario (“MNO”), the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (“OFIFC”), and the Ontario Native Women’s Association (“ONWA”) to the Minister of Children and Youth Services, stating the position of our organizations with respect to an Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy for Ontario. It is an integral part of our respective organizations’ engagement in the Ministry of Children and Youth Service’s (“MCYS” or “the Ministry”) processes related to the development of a new provincial Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy (“ACYS”).

This submission is compatible with Aboriginal ways of knowing and a wholistic approach. First we begin with a vision of what our children and youth will be, then articulate the principles that must guide the new Strategy and its implementation, and state our goals and desired outcomes that will develop strong, resilient, educated children and youth able to take their place as adults in our communities. We speak next to culturally specific matters, including the importance of a pro-active prevention-based approach, transitioning to Aboriginal control, effecting systems change, and Aboriginal-specific evaluation. To ensure policies, programs, and services are planned and implemented effectively and accountably for off-reserve Aboriginal children and youth, the new Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy will have to reflect, fully and accurately, the elements we outline here.

Background

According to the 2011 National Housing Survey, 253,400 people identifying as First Nation, Métis, and Inuit lived off-reserve in Ontario,¹ while 48,025 lived on-reserve.² This means an overwhelming majority of the total 301,430 constitutionally recognized Aboriginal people in Ontario,³ or 84.1%,⁴ live off-reserve. In spite of its significant population, the off-reserve demographic has nonetheless frequently been overlooked and underfunded, and often generally excluded or inadequately included in policy

¹ Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey: Data tables – [Aboriginal Identity, selected for Ontario, Off-Reserve Population](#).

² Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey: Data tables – [Aboriginal Identity, selected for Ontario, On-Reserve Population](#).

³ Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey: Data tables – [Aboriginal Identity, selected for Ontario, Total On- and Off-Reserve Population](#).

⁴ Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011 National Household Survey Highlights: [Factsheet 3 Aboriginal Peoples of Ontario](#).

making, legislation and regulation, and in the funding of culturally relevant programs and services.

In the context of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services' current effort to collaborate with Aboriginal organizations to develop a provincial strategy for children and youth that is specific to Aboriginal people, the authors of this collaborative submission look forward to positive changes and more detailed attention to the rights and interests, needs and aspirations of our children and youth. We welcome the development of an Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy, in part because it presents the opportunity for recognition and respect of our cultures and worldviews as well as our approaches to raising children. In this regard, our vision is to raise healthy, happy, secure children, who are grounded in their culture, free from the effects of poverty, and thrive as individuals, members of their families and in our communities.

Any strategy must strive to achieve this vision and the current process is a step in this direction. However, it must be noted that any strategy must also acknowledge significant structural, legal and other differences between the off-reserve and on-reserve contexts. As Aboriginal organizations operating off-reserve it is clear that the landscape in which we work differs greatly from that of First Nations organizations and their people living and working on-reserve. To begin with, with respect to the provision of social services, there clearly are benefits from the *1965 Indian Welfare Agreement* according to which the federal government reimburses the province 93 cents for every dollar spent on reserve for a range of items.⁵ No such arrangement exists for the province with respect to Aboriginal people living off-reserve and as such, off-reserve Aboriginal organizations and communities historically have experienced significant challenges in engaging government in constructive discussions about adequate resourcing of social services, exceptions notwithstanding. Aboriginal organizations also operate in a cultural environment which is in many ways hostile to Aboriginal ways of life, histories and experiences. Asserting Aboriginal cultural identities in overwhelmingly non-Aboriginal communities is a critical challenge for us, the practical implications of which are not acknowledged by government.

In relation to raising our children, Aboriginal people share many goals with non-Aboriginal people. However, as Aboriginal people, our cultures, worldviews, and circumstances vary significantly from those of non-Aboriginal people. A strategy designed for Ontario's Aboriginal children and youth must therefore also vary significant-

⁵ Kozlowski, Anna, Vandna Sinha & Kenn Richard, Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, Information Sheets, First Nations Child Welfare in Ontario (2011), <http://cwrp.ca/info sheets/first-nations-child-welfare-ontario>, obtained 26 June, 2014.

ly in content from that of a strategy designed generally for the children and youth of the province. The reality is, Aboriginal cultural norms and philosophies in relation to child rearing are specific to Aboriginal peoples' cultures and ways of being.

For instance, Aboriginal cultures have diverse expressions of roles and responsibilities within a family and community that are consistent with our worldviews. In all, children are the centre of the family and the community. All ages from early infancy through to independent adulthood play a significant role and these roles have specific cultural implications for Aboriginal people, and the creation of safe, secure and healthy homes. Parents, guardians, families and communities are responsible for their children's well-being. As caretakers of children, it is imperative that Aboriginal families be enabled to fully articulate challenges and solutions, based on our lived experiences and traditional knowledge.

Traditional gender roles create spaces of equal worth for both men and women to contribute to family and community life, including as these relate to infants, children, youth, and the elderly. An understanding of traditional gender roles and the equal value of both men's and women's contributions to our communities, economies, societies, and political life will facilitate equitable balance. A culturally relevant gender-based analysis must be employed in the development, implementation, and evaluation of policy and programs stemming from the Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy, in order to ensure equitable gender participation and outcomes.

In addition to sharing a common worldview regarding the centrality of children and youth, and a common identity as constitutionally recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada, we are nevertheless a diverse population. This extends to matters such as where we live, what languages we speak, our respective communities' systems of governance, our cultural traditions and practices, and how we access and deliver various services.

These facts are worthy of an explicit reminder in this background to the substantive content of our submission; however, it is presumed common knowledge in relation to the rest of the content of this paper that these are facts known and agreed, and have considerable importance in relation to our collaborative policy development.

Many of the challenges experienced by Aboriginal children and youth in Ontario will not be erased by the mere fact that the Government of Ontario pens a new strategy. For example, our families have a greater chance of living in poverty,⁶ and our children

⁶ Ontario has recognized the facts of Aboriginal poverty in its [Breaking The Cycle: The Fifth Progress Report, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2013 Annual Report](#): "Aboriginal communities are disproportionately impacted by

and youth do not at present attain comparable educational achievement as non-Aboriginal children and youth.⁷ Addressing the challenges experienced by Aboriginal children and youth in Ontario requires recognition of the critical role of multi-service, culture-based Aboriginal organizations, including those located in communities and their representative provincial organizations.

These organizations have specific roles. At the community level, these organizations serve to deliver high quality, timely, culture-based services to the majority of Aboriginal children and youth who are living off-reserve, in keeping with the vision and principles set out in this document. Provincially, our organizations are responsible for creating the landscape that allows community-based organizations to best serve the Aboriginal children and youth in their localities. This is carried out in keeping with the direction provided by communities.

To successfully raise our children, and see them transition from infancy through childhood and youth to adulthood – and to achieve our vision – the Strategy must form the basis for meaningful social change that is implemented with real commitment on the part of all those involved. If outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth are to be equal to those of non-Aboriginal children and youth, a new era of Aboriginal control will have to be facilitated. To achieve this, government cooperation and collaboration are required in relation to our vision and goals for our children and youth.

poverty. A range of historical, geographical, and cultural challenges present continued barriers for Aboriginal communities seeking to overcome poverty.” (p. 19) And, “In 2010, according to the National Household Survey, 23.5 per cent of Ontario’s Aboriginal people lived in low-income households, which is much higher than the segment of non-Aboriginal people at 13.7 per cent. We recognize that further interventions are essential in Aboriginal communities and that the supports need to be holistic, integrated, and community-driven (i.e., focused on the entire family/community). Further steps are needed to broaden the impact of poverty reduction efforts in the province’s Aboriginal communities.” (p. 67)

⁷ According to the [Auditor General of Ontario in 2012](#), the lack of proper data for Aboriginal identity of students continues to pose challenges to measuring achievement gaps in high school graduation rates between the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit population and non-Aboriginal population in the province. However, the Auditor General notes of the data that was available, “only 45% of the self-identified Aboriginal Grade 10 students were on track to graduate from high school, compared to 74% for all students in the Grade 10 population.” (p. 131)

Vision

Our children and youth are healthy, happy, secure, grounded in their culture, free from the effects of poverty, and thrive as individuals, members of their families and in our communities.

The Four Elements of Our Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy

Overview

This Strategy is built on four elements drawn from our organizations' current discussions, and decades of research, relationship building and knowledge transfer shared by Aboriginal communities and families. We have concluded that all policies, programs and services with the potential for, or express impact on Aboriginal people, must be constructed using the four elements: Prevention, Aboriginal Control, Systems Change, and Evaluation and Measurement.

Prevention

Aboriginal organizations position themselves with success clearly recognized as the desirable outcome, where success is identified as well-being, whereas state systems situate themselves at the deficit end of the spectrum. We do so by seeking, as much as possible, a strengths-based approach in our program and service delivery, one that supports and enhances resiliency, positive self-identity, constructive relationships and healthy choices. In so doing, the activities we undertake, the behaviours we encourage and the outcomes we seek are preventive.

Aboriginal culture is the critical piece of prevention, and the culture-based, culture-driven models, which each of our organizations uses, are uniquely placed to act as inhibitors to negative behaviours and choices. Culture has been demonstrated to be fundamental to Aboriginal children's and youth's ability to generate a positive self-identity and to nurture healthy relationships and enhance well-being, including health status and educational attainment.⁸

Culture-based programs and services that are designed, developed, delivered, and evaluated by Aboriginal organizations generate outcomes that reduce the social and economic burden of Aboriginal histories of oppression and exploitation. Socially, they create momentum for conversion of vicious into virtuous cycles of expanding individual, family and community well-being, thereby improving the results of subsequent in-

⁸ Jessica Ball. 2005. [Hook and Hub: Coordinating Programs to Support Aboriginal Children's Early Learning and Development](#). Hamilton, New Zealand: World Aboriginal Peoples' Conference on Education.

teractions and for following generations. They are therefore inherently more sustainable. Economically, Aboriginal children and youth who are empowered to make healthy choices necessarily reduce child welfare and justice system costs, are more highly educated, and healthier, leading to increased employment opportunity and reduced health care costs. Further, investing in culture-based programs that promote stability, health and educational attainment leads to significant economic benefit, potentially including cumulative output gains estimated at 401 billion dollars between 2010 and 2026, and 3.5 billion dollars in increased tax revenues.⁹ In Ontario, investment in Aboriginal community infrastructure and programming between 1985 and 2007 has been shown to have created an urban Aboriginal middle class.¹⁰ Investment in culture-based programming has had two direct impacts: firstly, it created stable employment for Aboriginal people; secondly, the programming itself had an impact on program participants, leading to improved educational and employment attainment, improved health status and reduced justice system involvement.¹¹

Aboriginal community organizations have been significantly proactive in providing programs and services which place an emphasis on preventing involvement in the child welfare and youth justice systems, and enhancing children's and youth's abilities to succeed in the education system. In contrast, state systems such as child welfare and youth justice are almost exclusively reactive, seeking to remedy a situation that is frequently well beyond the point of crisis. More significantly, state systems inflict huge social costs that are borne primarily by Aboriginal people, but also by society as a whole. We see this expressed in the many statistics that show that Aboriginal people do not experience well-being in equal measure to the non-Aboriginal population. And we see it more starkly still in the brutal statistics related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Ontario and across the country.¹² These are all markers of systems failure.

There are three main areas of interaction between government and Aboriginal children: the education system, the child welfare system and the youth justice system. All three of these systems can be said to fail with respect to Aboriginal youth in terms of outcomes, and also in terms of Aboriginal children's and youth's experiences.

It has been established that Aboriginal child welfare involvement correlates with lower educational and employment attainment, increased justice system involvement,

⁹ Sharpe, Andrew, Jean-Francois Arsenault, and Centre for the Study of Living Standards. "Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective, CPRN Research Report." Dec. 2009.

¹⁰ Urban Aboriginal Task Force, Urban Aboriginal Task Force Final Report 2007, December 2007, p.172

¹¹ Urban Aboriginal Task Force, Urban Aboriginal Task Force Final Report 2007, December 2007, p. 181.

¹² Native Women's Association of Canada, *Fact Sheet: Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls*.

lower health status, increased risk for homelessness, and increased risk for exposure to violence and discrimination.¹³ In its Final Report, the Youth Leaving Care Working Group stated that 44% of all youth in or from care graduate from high school, compared to 82% of other youth.¹⁴ Meanwhile, an education system which successfully equips non-Aboriginal students to face the adult world does the opposite to many Aboriginal children. Aboriginal children and youth report feelings of deep alienation from the formal education system that routinely expects them to fail.¹⁵

It is notable that, with the exception of the education system, these failing systems are positioned at the end of a spectrum which catches children at their weakest. Children who enter these systems are experiencing broken relationships with their families, communities and themselves. They are frequently disconnected from their culture and the means to obtain or express it. They are caught in negative, destructive relationships and have few resources that would support them in making healthy choices. These children and youth are then taken into systems that do not provide them with any tools to mend or rebuild the elements necessary for life beyond survival.

It can easily be argued that these systems exist to perpetuate themselves, and although they are nominally intended to have an improving effect, they have simply served to entrench long-standing historic inequalities and oppression. As systems, they have yielded a lamentable lack of social change or positive impact on the lives of Aboriginal children and youth involved with them. Therefore an approach based squarely on prevention must be a key priority of any strategy for Aboriginal children and youth. This means that resources must be shifted away from costly, inefficient provincial systems designed for the general population and away from associated institutions and organizations. These resources must then be redirected towards Aboriginal community organizations which have successfully shown their ability to build resiliency and success, and thereby prevent the outcomes of child welfare and justice system involvement, low educational attainment, and poor health, among others.

Aboriginal Control

Non-Aboriginal approaches to programs and services for children and youth are not well-received in the Aboriginal community as they often fail to reflect Aboriginal val-

¹³ Youth Leaving Care Working Group, *Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System; Final Report* Youth Leaving Care Working Group, January 2013, p.3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* For related information, see Note 6 above, concerning the percentage of grade 10 Aboriginal students in Ontario on track to graduate from high school, as noted by the Auditor General of Ontario in 2012.

¹⁵ Urban Aboriginal Task Force, *Urban Aboriginal Task Force Final Report*, December 2007, p. 128.

ues, beliefs and traditions. This failure inhibits their uptake and their effectiveness in dealing with the significant challenges with which Aboriginal people contend. There is recognition that the poor socio-economic and psycho-social situations suffered by Aboriginal people are, in the main, impacts of colonization. Ongoing colonialism has embedded mistrust and anxiety over initiatives or structures that are dictated by external sources. Addressing these challenges with the same thinking that created them is a prescription for failure.

Aboriginal control over policies, programs and services for children and youth supports a wholistic approach across the life cycle as foundational, reflecting the relational interdependence of individuals, families and communities. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs are identified and responded to in a culturally-based approach that acknowledges and respects traditional knowledge, as well as the contributions of traditional healers, Elders, family, and community members.

Aboriginal control over programs and services for children and youth also focuses on Aboriginal strengths, resiliency, autonomy, and spirituality, nurturing cultural pride and strengthening cultural identity. With Aboriginal control, programs and services are proactive rather than reactive; responsive to local Aboriginal needs in a timely manner, and are more preventive than curative. Employment and community involvement opportunities are strengthened and cultural and community renewal are enhanced.

Even the physical environment designated for program and service delivery with Aboriginal control celebrates Aboriginal cultural traditions and practices. These spaces welcome Aboriginal people by displaying cultural symbols, colours, and artefacts that are familiar and validate Aboriginal identity. Increased cultural expression in service delivery renders visible the centrality of culture to Aboriginal life and invites participation and inclusion. In contrast to the oppressive forces that Aboriginal people have faced, and continue to experience, Aboriginal traditions and practices support cultural and community revitalization.

Aboriginal control over programs and services for children and youth will require significant, sustainable financial and human resources. The government must provide assurances that the necessary resources will be there. As Aboriginal control increases, non-Aboriginal programs and services that were unable to respond effectively to the challenges in Aboriginal community will become redundant. Sustainable funding can then be reallocated to Aboriginal organizations and communities to train and recruit culturally-conscious service providers from within communities, increasing employment opportunities and improving the health and well-being of the broader community.

Finally with respect to Aboriginal control, we draw attention to the evidence and increasing recognition that control is an important determinant of health independent of poverty, physical environment, and other social determinants. This has already been demonstrated within the Canadian Aboriginal context: lower suicide rates are found in First Nations people in British Columbia who exhibit higher levels of cultural continuity, which is defined as a higher level of sustained control over the cultural and political processes in the community.¹⁶

Systems Change

Aboriginal control will only follow overarching change to the systems which have a long history of oppressing and subjugating Aboriginal people, and consequently prevent our children and youth from achieving their vision. Government policy and program changes over recent decades have continued to be largely ineffective in meeting the specific needs of Aboriginal people in our province, and arguably, have in fact extended and exacerbated many of the challenges and barriers faced by Aboriginal children, youth, families, and communities.

It is clear that modern, well-intentioned attempts were made to change the lives of Aboriginal children and youth; from making additions to the *Child and Family Services Act* to mandate inclusion of Aboriginal children's communities in certain child welfare matters to implementing Gladue principles in sentencing, and creating safe and effective self-identification policies in the education system. In practice however, changing policy is only a small portion of the whole system which needs to be addressed. Old system patterns will not be changed unless underlying systems' assumptions, policies, and services together with attitudes and behaviours are developed with an Aboriginal worldview and within the control of an Aboriginal framework.

Thus, while policy aiming to improve respect for, and respectfully include, Aboriginal people's communities and worldviews may have been envisioned, the required realignment of system elements to make effective on-the-ground change did not take place. Manifestly changing the corporate culture in children's aid societies (CAS), and transforming how CAS investigators and case workers, Crown Prosecutors and judges, teachers and principals, doctors and nurses work with Aboriginal children, youth, and families, and within the Aboriginal cultures and communities that are outside the vast majority of these workers' norm, might have been optimistically anticipated; the reality has been much less positive. And while these may be some of the most evident

¹⁶ M.J. Chandler and C. Lalonde, "Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations," *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (1998) p. 191-219.

and easily relatable areas where true systems change has not taken place, the illustrations here should be understood for what they are: important but not exclusive examples, as similar situations arise within policing, and in education and healthcare settings, among others.

The development of a province-wide Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy “raises the bar” for the province of Ontario as well as for every contributor within the systems which are involved in achieving the outcomes articulated in the Strategy, from the individual level through the largest organizational structure. In substantive terms, what is integral to, and required, is a shift in not only design and implementation of new and improved laws and policies developed with Aboriginal organizations, but a fundamental shift in how the existing and new mechanisms will be required to operate under Aboriginal self-determination. Building respectful and effective relationships between Aboriginal organizations and all orders of government will be one of the first and most important challenges as these relationships are foundational to successful systems change.¹⁷

In relation to the outcomes proposed in this document, the fundamental ways in which Aboriginal people see and make sense of the world will mean embracing a wholistic approach to policies, programs, and related delivery of services and supports for Aboriginal children and youth. This is unlike the premise of so many existing non-Aboriginal government policies, programs and services, which continue to exist or have in the past existed uniquely to “fix” an individual issue without a wholistic perspective. For example, to provide Aboriginal children and youth with access to culture-based services and supports, means much more than simply attempting to include some generic Aboriginal cultural considerations. Instead, a continuum of considerations that is specific to and respectful of the diversity of each Aboriginal community must be developed with input from children, youth, Elders, leaders, and other community members. In contrast to origins in legalistic individual rights and a curative focus which permeates non-Aboriginal policy and programs, and non-Aboriginal society generally, this continuum of considerations originates in the beliefs, values, and traditions of our collective Aboriginal way of life, including our preventative viewpoint and conceptions of family and community relationships.

In order for the Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy to succeed, Aboriginal control will need to be implemented as already described in this document. In other words,

¹⁷ Pennie G. Foster-Fishman, Branda Nowell, Huilan Yang, “[Putting the system back into systems change: a framework for understanding and changing organizational and community systems](#),” *Am J Community Psychol* (2007) 39:197–215, p. 208.

implementation of Aboriginal control must be facilitated and accompanied by appropriate institutional and organizational change by the various contributors in the targeted system – non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal alike – or the end result will be continued systems failure to the detriment of Aboriginal children and youth. This certainly corresponds not only to the reality of systems and organizational change theories and practices evaluated in a non-Aboriginal context,¹⁸ which have demonstrated the path to success in the non-Aboriginal context using approaches that clearly correspond in significant ways to wholistic Aboriginal worldviews and approaches.

At the same time, a most salient point must be emphasized: In the changing and changed system, instead of merely consulting with Aboriginal people, government will be faced with the challenge of respecting Aboriginal authority, and renegotiating, not at will, but as a matter of course, how to facilitate and support Aboriginal control. It is also important to note the leadership role which government has in changing the multiple systems affected by the new Strategy, since as already implied above, systems change requires the motivation and education of each and every system member. Change as noted cannot be optional for systems actors. Ontario must use a variety of tools, from legislation, regulations and ministerial directives to critical links between funding and change performance in order to incentivize system actors' education, and to promote and facilitate the required changes at organizational, management and individual worker levels.

Systems change that works – and allows our stated goals to be achieved – will value children and youth for their individual selves. It will, however, not stop there as though it were the complete picture. Each Aboriginal child or youth in need of timely, high quality support services will not be divorced from the essential context of their families and communities as they routinely are under a non-Aboriginal worldview. This ultimately means Aboriginal people and organizations must design, deliver, and eval-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210. See also, for example in *ibid.*, “Table 2: Guiding questions for examining critical systems parts and interdependencies,” pp. 206-207, which includes systems assessment and planning for systems change by looking at the following system characteristics: Identifying System Norms; System Resources (Human Resources, Social Resources, Economic Resources and Opportunities); Identifying System Regulations; System Operations: Power and Decision-Making; and, System Interdependencies.

The cited article is not an exception, as a significant body of peer-reviewed research in the field of systems change documents similar findings. Examples in jurisdictions similar to Ontario's which address children and youth issues include in the U.S., in their [Ready by 21](#)[®] approach which “is a set of innovative strategies developed by the [Forum for Youth Investment](#) that helps communities improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life.”

uate services for our people, and this must be facilitated through mechanisms that are cooperative and collaborative.

While this transfer to Aboriginal control will not be achieved overnight, successful systems change on a provincial level will manifest this as the end result. Interim steps will require non-Aboriginal system actors being educated and re-educated to embrace systems change and uphold norms which respect and honour Aboriginal cultural relevance and resilience, led by Aboriginal organizations. Government next steps will need to be designed with meeting the objectives and outcomes that support Aboriginal control as described in the various goals of the Strategy, including the sustainable re-allocation of funding to serve Aboriginal people, which is currently being directed to non-Aboriginal organizations, to Aboriginal organizations and services. Once the primary systems change to Aboriginal control of programs, services, policies, and evaluation is achieved, the benefits to Aboriginal children and youth will be apparent and measurable.

Evaluation and Measurement

It is essential that initiatives implemented through this strategy make a real and positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal children and youth, their families and communities. Monitoring and evaluation plans will be collaboratively developed to provide evidence of the degree of social and economic impact of the strategy. The knowledge gained throughout implementation and evaluation will provide evidence from an Aboriginal perspective informing potential policy direction.

Aboriginal development and implementation of evaluation simultaneously eliminates the power inequities inherent in applying Western methods to an Aboriginal context and the potential misunderstandings that can consequentially result. Lack of knowledge, preconceived assumptions, and stereotypes compound the challenges of evaluation and measurement when the lived experience of those determining performance measures is far removed from the lived experience of those who will be impacted.

The Aboriginal-specific evaluation plan will seek to determine if critical milestones are being achieved and are leading to outcomes anticipated by the Aboriginal community. In this way, evaluation supports accountability to both the populations served and to funding sources, and informs subsequent decision making on further renewal and resource requirements. Evaluations hold significant potential for recognizing economies of scale. As evaluations are shared among Aboriginal organizations and communities, lessons learned in one location may inform initiatives and activities in another.

Considering Aboriginal diversity, we will undoubtedly have differing interpretations of what is working in our communities, and what indicates success or lack of impact. Therefore, Aboriginal-specific indicators must be developed in consultation with the specific Aboriginal community concerned, in order to measure and report on impacts from the Strategy and progress towards our vision for Aboriginal children and youth.

Evaluation is about creating knowledge and the knowledge created by culture-based initiatives must also be evaluated in a culture-based manner. Aboriginal evaluation will be informed by a thorough understanding of the community, of Aboriginal ways of knowing, with a focus on the needs and activities within Aboriginal community, and a participatory approach. Rather than judging merit as Western evaluation tends to do, Aboriginal culture-based evaluation builds capacity, increases engagement, and produces the type of information needed by Aboriginal communities to improve programming and address the changes recommended by the community. In addition, government and other public stakeholders will have access to evidence when formulating future policies and reviewing existing ones.

All performance measurements, indicators, and evaluations must be collaboratively developed and implemented by Aboriginal communities and organizations. Data collected and results analyzed will respect the ethical research principles established by MNO, OFIFC, and ONWA.

Guiding Principles

Strengths-Based Approach

Resiliency, competencies and contributions of Aboriginal children and youth are valued and recognized.

Youth Engagement and Leadership

Aboriginal children and youth are experts in their own experience; they will be substantively involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of research, policy, programs and services.

Role of Culture

Aboriginal culture(s) is (are) the foundation of the well-being of Aboriginal children and youth.

Child- and Youth-Centered Approach

Aboriginal child and youth well-being is based on intergenerational relationships, a broad view of well-being, and invests in family and in community.

Wholism

Aboriginal child and youth well-being addresses physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of the child or youth, family and community in an integrated manner.

Rights of Aboriginal Children and Youth

Aboriginal children and youth benefit from the rights and protections of Canada's Constitution, including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and their constitutionally protected Aboriginal Rights, as well as the rights and protections of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Aboriginal Diversity

People and communities have diverse needs; flexible approaches are in place throughout policies, programs and services to respect this diversity.

Aboriginal Control

Governments respect the governance structures and protocols of the Aboriginal partners to the Strategy and respect the right to our self-determination and authority in: Research; Policy development, implementation and review; Needs assessments, Planning, design, development, delivery, and evaluation of programs and services.

Coordination and Collaboration

Program and service delivery is efficient and effective, including reduction of duplication through strengthened relationships within and between Aboriginal organizations, public institutions and governments, and prioritizing Aboriginal self-determination.

Goals

The goals set out below are in keeping with our stated vision for Aboriginal children and youth.

1. Aboriginal children and youth are grounded in their culture and have a positive self-identity.
2. Aboriginal children and youth are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, and are supported in making healthy choices.
3. Aboriginal children and youth have access to culture-based, timely, high-quality services and supports.
4. Aboriginal children and youth grow up in strong and stable families and communities in harmony and mutual respect with all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

5. Aboriginal children and youth play an important role in breaking the cycle of violence.
6. Aboriginal children and youth are informed, engaged, and empowered to choose healthy relationships and sexual health.
7. Aboriginal children's and youth's traditional learning is recognized; Aboriginal learners consistently succeed in school readiness, primary, secondary and post-secondary education.
8. Aboriginal youth participate meaningfully in the labour force and have improved socio-economic conditions.
9. Governments formally recognize Aboriginal organizations' and communities' authority with respect to Aboriginal children and youth.
10. Aboriginal children and youth have a strong voice, are leaders in influencing the decisions that affect them, and are included in, and responsible for, social, economic and civic change.

Outcomes

Our vision and goals for Aboriginal children and youth in Ontario will be achieved when the objectives and outcomes outlined below are met. Accordingly, and in recognition of the fact that progress will necessarily be incremental, as well as involving concurrent and sequential steps by various parties, we propose these outcomes will be accomplished within two time frames: the short-term, which we define as one to two years; and, the medium-term, which we define as three to five years. This corresponds broadly to the length of time at the end of which, firstly, the requisite skills and knowledge will have been developed, and secondly, attitudes and values will have demonstrably changed.

Goal 1: Aboriginal children and youth are grounded in their culture and have a positive self-identity.

A positive self-identity is directly dependent on being grounded in one's Aboriginal culture, and is needed to counter the impact of intergenerational trauma and its lifelong effects on the individual, family and community. Aboriginal children and youth must have opportunities in safe and welcoming Aboriginal environments to learn from Elders, cultural experiences and resources, and to express their culture. Aboriginal cultures and traditional knowledge must be celebrated in order for children and youth to develop a positive self-identity.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Government recognizes traditional knowledge as an essential element of positive Aboriginal child and youth self-identity;
- Aboriginal children and youth increase their knowledge of Aboriginal cultures;
- Elders and community leaders mentor young people to build confidence and self-identity; and,
- Government provides supports and resources to provide Aboriginal children and youth access to traditional knowledge, led by Aboriginal organizations.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Government makes meaningful investment in supporting Aboriginal children's and youth's cultural expression;
- Aboriginal children and youth have regular access to safe, knowledgeable Elders and traditional knowledge holders; and,
- Aboriginal children and youth are increasingly involved in cultural practices.

Goal 2: Aboriginal children and youth are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, and are supported in making healthy choices.

Non-Aboriginal ways of viewing the world are not the same as Aboriginal worldviews which are holistic. This has meant that Aboriginal people have had to live in ways that were and continue to be foreign, and therefore incompatible with their own cultures and experiences. In many cases, this has led to unhealthy choices in families and been compounded over generations. In order to address this, Aboriginal children need access to supports that recognize and are based on an Aboriginal holistic worldview.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth increase their knowledge about what constitutes healthy behaviour;
- Government supports and advances policy changes that increase food security and equitable access to healthy and traditional foods;
- Aboriginal women have access to culturally relevant services and supports during pregnancy and for childbirth;
- Government provides increased and sustained supports for Aboriginal children's and youth's recreational activities and infrastructure;
- All Aboriginal children and youth have access to mental health supports in Aboriginal organizations; and,
- Governments and Aboriginal organizations develop and implement an Aboriginal housing strategy that addresses Aboriginal children's and youth's housing needs.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth have access to healthy and traditional food;
- Aboriginal children and youth experience food security;
- Unhealthy, risky behaviour decreases and positive decision making around health practices increases;
- Aboriginal children and youth are routinely and regularly involved in recreational and physical activities in their communities;
- Aboriginal children and youth are adequately, safely, and affordably housed;
- The mental health of Aboriginal children and youth improves; and,
- Government mandates that Local Health Integration Networks and hospitals are responsible and accountable to Aboriginal communities and organizations.

Goal 3: Aboriginal children and youth have access to culture-based, timely, high-quality services and supports.

Aboriginal organizations have demonstrated their capacity to achieve superior outcomes through culture-based programs and services offered to their community. Currently, there are significant gaps in services for Aboriginal children and youth, and their parents and families, in communities across Ontario. Aboriginal organizations must be supported in order to adequately provide necessary, timely services. With these in place there will be opportunities for all community members, regardless of where they are in the life cycle, to benefit from culture-based programming that is designed, developed, delivered and evaluated by Aboriginal organizations and communities in order to effectively close existing gaps.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Governments recognize that Aboriginal communities and organizations are solely capable of delivering culture-based programming and services;
- Governments recognize that Aboriginal communities and organizations are experts in achieving measurable positive results in the lives of Aboriginal children and youth;
- Government reviews investments in non-Aboriginal organizations and infrastructure accessed by Aboriginal children and youth, in a transparent manner;
- Government recognizes that 84.1% of Aboriginal people in Ontario live off-reserve, and responds accordingly; and,
- Sustained investments in culture-based programs and services for Aboriginal children and youth that are designed, developed, delivered and evaluated by Aboriginal organizations are increased.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Government de-invests from non-Aboriginal organizations serving Aboriginal children and youth, and invests in Aboriginal organizations serving children and youth;
- Government directs publicly funded institutions to implement self-identification policies and procedures and to track and report these results in a reliable and accountable manner; and,
- Aboriginal children and youth routinely and regularly utilize culture-based, timely, and high quality programs and services designed, developed, delivered and evaluated by Aboriginal organizations.

Goal 4: Aboriginal children and youth grow up in strong and stable families and communities in harmony and mutual respect with all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

There are examples of positive, constructive community relationships in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal settings. However, colonialism, systemic racism and sexism, and intergenerational trauma have undermined many families and communities. This has led to unhealthy, destabilized relationships within many Aboriginal communities and between many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. People in Ontario must learn a new way to be together that reconciles the relationships that were damaged.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, histories and contributions increase for non-Aboriginal children and youth;
- Government and Aboriginal organizations support families and communities to become healthy and stable; and,
- Aboriginal youth model constructive behaviours that encourage respectful relationships in and outside of their communities.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth understand their role in healthy and stable families and communities;
- Understanding and experience of Aboriginal cultures and contributions increases among the non-Aboriginal population; and,
- Aboriginal cultures are integrated into Ontario's identity.

Goal 5: Aboriginal children and youth play an important role in breaking the cycle of violence.

As a group, Aboriginal women and girls have developed resiliency and are surviving the disproportionately high rate of violence directed toward them. However, experiencing and witnessing violence has a detrimental impact on children and youth, both boys and girls. Parents, families and community members must understand their cultural roles and responsibilities, including their reciprocal obligations to one another. This will provide a stable, respectful environment for children and youth to foster their ability to take action against violence.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth are able to identify different types of violence and discrimination;
- Aboriginal children and youth understand their right to live lives free from violence and discrimination;

- Aboriginal children and youth recognize the importance of ending sexual violence wherever it exists;
- Aboriginal children and youth model non-violent and inclusive behaviour;
- Aboriginal communities are knowledgeable about gender identity, sexual orientation and family violence, particularly violence against women and girls;
- *The Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women [and Girls]* is provincial government policy and is implemented;
- Government mandates that police services in Ontario are responsive and accountable to Aboriginal organizations and communities;
- Government in collaboration with the Aboriginal partner organizations to the Strategy have reviewed and amended existing and developing policies that exacerbate vulnerability to violence and discrimination; and,
- Government supports the development of sufficient infrastructure in Aboriginal organizations to create safe gathering spaces for youth.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth speak out against violence in their personal lives, relationships, families and communities;
- Bullying, violence and gang involvement against and by Aboriginal children and youth decreases;
- Supports are in place to assist Aboriginal children and youth, families and communities to allow children and youth to exercise their right to live free from violence and discrimination; and,
- Government supports the implementation of policies and strategies to address the vulnerability to exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth, including alter-abled children and youth.

Goal 6: Aboriginal children and youth are informed, engaged, and empowered to choose healthy relationships and sexual health.

Institutionalized racism and sexism have meant that Aboriginal women and girls are doubly disadvantaged and devalued in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal environments. As a result, Aboriginal girls and boys grow up in a society which has normalized unhealthy relationships and poor sexual health. In order to make their own healthy choices in all of their relationships, Aboriginal children and youth, boys and girls, must understand culture-based gender roles and responsibilities, including gender identity and sexual orientation.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Safe spaces exist for Aboriginal children, youth, and their families to access services and supports related to gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual health;

- Government supports province-wide access to timely, high-quality, accurate and relevant sexual health information;
- Aboriginal children and youth are knowledgeable about healthy sexual relationships; and,
- Aboriginal children and youth understand and model what constitutes safe and healthy behaviour in a relationship.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth practise healthy decision making with respect to health and sexual health; and,
- Risky behaviour by Aboriginal children and youth decreases, including unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and abusive relationships.

Goal 7: Aboriginal children's and youth's traditional learning is recognized; Aboriginal learners consistently succeed in school readiness, primary, secondary and post-secondary education.

The lived cultural experience of Aboriginal children and youth, and traditional knowledge acquired in Aboriginal settings, frequently form the foundation for success. Entering school systems that delegitimize and ignore these experiences, as well as the knowledge and contributions of Aboriginal people, is a damaging and alienating experience for children and youth. Seeing Aboriginal experiences, cultures and contributions respected and included in formal education will better prepare Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children for success.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth see themselves positively reflected in their formal education experience and environment;
- Government mandates that schools and school boards are responsive and accountable to Aboriginal organizations and communities;
- Government creates a Minister's Aboriginal Post-Secondary Council;
- Aboriginal families and communities engage in their children's education;
- Government recognizes and integrates traditional learning as equivalent to formal education for Aboriginal children and youth; and,
- Government recognizes that educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth are improved through involvement with Aboriginal organizations.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth routinely and regularly access wholistic lifelong learning opportunities and in doing so are supported by their schools and Aboriginal communities and organizations;

- Educators are responsive to Aboriginal learning styles; and,
- Teachers are mandated to be trained by Aboriginal organizations in Aboriginal cultural safety.

Goal 8: Aboriginal youth participate meaningfully in the labour force and have improved socio-economic conditions.

Aboriginal people have made and continue to make significant and meaningful contributions to community life, socially, economically and politically. The skills, knowledge and values of Aboriginal people must be recognized as assets and built upon to create or improve access to the labour market. Where labour market participation is not possible, appropriate supports must be in place to increase people's ability to live in dignity. Resulting improvement in socio-economic conditions will benefit Aboriginal children and youth by addressing basic needs such as housing, employment, health status, and food security. This will create and reinforce a cycle of positive economic, social and political community engagement.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Government expands support for employment experience programs for both secondary and post-secondary Aboriginal youth;
- Aboriginal organizations and communities identify skills gaps and inform youth accordingly; and,
- Traditional economic roles and practices are identified and recognized as valid work experience by and for Aboriginal youth.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal youth are aware of career opportunities and the educational requirements needed to pursue them;
- Aboriginal youth are provided optimal opportunities to learn and build the skills necessary to participate meaningfully in the labour force;
- Government supports employers in creating safe and inclusive work environments and opportunities for Aboriginal youth; and,
- Government policies to address Aboriginal children and youth poverty are developed with Aboriginal organizations and communities.

Goal 9: Government formally recognizes Aboriginal organizations' and communities' authority with respect to Aboriginal children and youth.

Off-reserve Aboriginal organizations spring from the will of our communities and are an embodiment of Indigenous self-determination. We came to be in order to represent our members' interests and protect their concerns in an environment that lacked any space for our voices. Historically, one of these interests has been the well-being of our children and youth, so poorly cared for by the state, particularly in child welfare and justice settings. Our ongoing success in addressing the needs and aspirations of our children and youth and their families serves to underline our authority in these matters: This is an authority which must be recognized by government.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Government immediately implements the Aboriginal-specific recommendations of the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare;
- Government mandates that publicly funded institutions be responsive and accountable to Aboriginal organizations and communities; and,
- Government formalizes processes for Aboriginal organizations' input to policy, programs and services and is accountable for implementation of this input.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal organizations and communities are fully engaged in government processes to ensure an Aboriginal child and youth lens is applied consistently to government work;
- Aboriginal communities and organizations increase their capacity to exercise their authority with respect to Aboriginal children and youth involved in state systems; and,
- All orders of government support Aboriginal communities and organizations to increase their capacity to exercise their authority with respect to Aboriginal children and youth involved in state systems.

Goal 10: Aboriginal children and youth have a strong voice, are leaders in influencing the decisions that affect them, and are included in, and responsible for, social, economic and civic change.

Aboriginal children and youth are an integral part of the life cycle and have important contributions to make. Aboriginal communities and organizations must support their journey by giving them opportunities to participate, and develop and exercise leadership skills in a safe environment. These culture-based leadership skills will allow children and youth to create sustained improvement in and for their communities.

IN THE SHORT-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth participate meaningfully in community life and community leaders emerge;
- Opportunities for interaction between Aboriginal children and youth, Elders and community leadership increase;
- Aboriginal children and youth are given the opportunities to show leadership and acknowledged for their successes; and,
- Aboriginal children and youth are more aware and able to assert their rights as Aboriginal people.

IN THE MEDIUM-TERM:

- Aboriginal children and youth are agents of social change and participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them and their communities; and,
- Aboriginal children and youth are actively involved in knowledge transmission about their needs and experiences.

Moving Forward

Our Strategy sets out a comprehensive, achievable, and community-driven approach to identifying ways to build on the significant strengths of our communities, as well as address challenges faced by Aboriginal children and youth and their families. We set out a clear path to achieving specific goals that are the result of decades of innovation, research, engagement and consultation, both formal and informal, with our communities.

In order for our vision to be realized, this will require substantive commitment on the part of Ontario to assume the Government's proper role and related responsibilities vis-à-vis our organizations and our communities. This will mean a change in government's approach to our organizations to one in which we are equal partners in an ongoing collaboration, which acknowledges our unique position as provincial Aboriginal organizations working in an off-reserve context. Achieving the vision we have articulated will require the development of sustained mechanisms for engagement with our organizations over the long-term, at both the leadership and technical levels. It will equally require the Ministry's consistent and sustained engagement of other ministries and government-wide development and endorsement of policies, such as the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women [and Girls]*. Therefore, a first step will be a meaningful and transparent review of government policies related to the Strategy, with our full involvement. Subsequently, the Government of Ontario will be required to commit to sufficient and sustained resources in order to implement the Strategy.

For any of this to be accomplished, a meaningful shift in corporate culture at the Ministry of Children and Youth Services is required. While it is commendable that the Ministry has engaged in the current process, it must be clearly understood that this is a first step of many which must alter the way the ministry plans, engages, communicates, develops programs and policy and more. Further, all parts of the Ministry, and indeed, all parts of government, must adhere to this change. Commitment to this new approach must be consistent through all levels of the government's hierarchy. In the case of MCYS, it will require ministry staff, from the regions through to the deputy, to understand the work of the Ministry in different terms than it currently does and to make considered, deliberate and sustainable investments in what may be perceived as unconventional approaches. The Ministry must also advance this approach in its dealings with other ministries and governments in order for change to have the broadest possible impact in communities.

Over the course of many years, our organizations and communities have demonstrated expertise and success in undertaking proven, sustainable, innovative and effective practices that serve the needs of our communities, and particularly our children and youth. We believe that true collaboration with the Government of Ontario that acknowledges our experience and expertise will result in positive change in the lived reality of children and youth in our communities. Ontario has a real opportunity to embrace change and to become a leader in constructive Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations by fully implementing this Strategy.