INQUIRY RESPECTING THE TREATMENT, EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF INNU IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

English Transcript | Volume 8

Commissioners: Retired Judge James Igloliorte, Dr. Mike Devine and Anastasia Qupee

Wednesday | Natuashish | 19 April 2023

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: People from the community here. We're very happy to see everyone.

We're very pleased that so many people have decided to participate and we've already heard from a number of people who told us about their experiences and their thoughts not only about the child protection system and Social Services but also about their community.

We were very happy to be reminded that we should start each day with a prayer and a smudge and we should end each day with a prayer so we will be doing that each time we come here.

As Commissioners, we're very grateful for the support of the community, but also all of the leadership of the Innu – Mushuau Innu who are attending our sessions.

Sometimes you will see three Commissioners here and sometimes maybe just two because people in the community have asked to have a session privately with a Commissioner.

Do not be afraid to speak your mind when you come before the Commission, and if we're in the community and you want to do a second or a third presentation, please feel free to do that.

We're beginning with our first presenter now this morning. Please tell us your name.

[redacted]**:** My name is [redacted].

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

Please feel free to continue with the information that you have been sharing with us.

[redacted]**:** [Mushuau-aimun spoken] – I'm gonna say it in my language 'cause I see some in – the Elders here – the Elders are here.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

I was just saying that I was talking about this already with – about Social Services, when I was working with them for ten years, and what really affected me the last time I talked about was the – the Elder that – that was crying for her – for her grandkids that were taken away from [read: by] Social Services.

And it was so hard to see her coming in, every time; she's crying and wanting her grandkids. I don't know how many times I have called Social Services about – about this situation and that they wanted their grandkids, but they always said no.

I – I – every time they come in sometimes they'll be a little bit drink – they've been drinking, but not drunk. But I know when these things are happening to – to some – some person and that's why sometimes they took a drink; and a white person would not understand that, especially a social worker, because they – they only see them as drunk people. You know, that's what I – I was saying, like (inaudible).

And –

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible) say it?

[redacted]**:** – that's what it affected me. Like, I thought about it, you know, like what – what I said, and – and every time I – I think about it I started to get teary – teary-eyed, eh?

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

I – I had just said that, you know, in the past – the things that happen in the past is affecting so many people in their lives and the Social Services doesn't see that. They don't – they don't – they don't see that, they don't look at that, they don't even think about it. You know, where do we come from? Things happened in the past with – with our families and – and everyone else.

Recently, not too long ago, I saw a child that Social Services were gonna take – to take that – I don't know if it's him or her, but she – he was crying so hard, don't wanna get on the plane, and crying for her parents. And that really affected me, too, when I saw that happen.

They make me so mad sometimes, you know, the Social Services, when I see things, what they're doing to the people. I don't care about their books. It's their – it's their books. I – I – you know – we're a very – we're not a – we're a simple people, we don't use books, like somebody said. I was listening to a guy talking about that, 'cause the – you know – you know, when I saw a child kicking and crying it was very heartbreaking for me.

And – 'cause they had wanted me to come back to work with them, but I'm glad I'm never went back and – and work with them again, 'cause I see what's happening to our people.

I don't have any university, you know, I don't go to university. I know those social workers, they come out and – and they came out of the university, and they go by their books but to us, I think that a lot of times I know and I see that we do things from our heart. We don't just be like – like, you know – like, yeah I'm gonna take them and this – and the – and the cops will come in and help me.

I had a call from my sister, my older sister, and she said: The Social Services are gonna take my kids. They've been coming – my grandkids, she said, they're coming to pick them up. And she said: I'm gonna fight them.

And – and – 'cause I know Social Services, they'll run to the – to the cops. And I know violence is wrong also, 'cause my sister said: I'm going to beat the – beat that – the social worker up, 'cause she's trying to take her kids – her grandkids away.

I don't want to say too much about my sister. I'd rather see her tell her story when she comes in some time. 'Cause she used to cry when she used to call me and talk to me about what the social workers are trying to do, take her kids away – her grandkids away from her.

I was not a social worker. I was, like I said, I was just a translator. I don't have the education, but you know I ended up working as a social worker. Like, I was doing their work. They left and I was left by myself in the office to do the work. But I never said – I said: I'm not gonna go to social – to a child – you know to take a child away from their family.

That was in Davis Inlet that happened.

Only when I was trained to do some checks, making checks – social assistance checks, I – that's what I do. That was – that was the – that was supposed to be my job and not to go to child – take a child away from their community. I was never trained, I wouldn't even want to take any children away from their families.

And – and, you know, sometimes they ask you for your advice, but they don't take your advice. It's no good to advice, to give – to give advice. [Mushuau-aimun spoken.] Waste – I waste my time on that one.

I took a training again – we took train – there was a whole bunch of us that took training with the Nechi Institute from Alberta in Edmonton. There was one called community addictions training and there was another one called ACT but I forgot – it's a community training also.

But we did take those courses. There was a whole bunch of us that did that before, and it was, like, we had to deal with our issues first. We had to look at our stuff that's happening. You know, the training that we have is mostly addictions, also, and then we do also grief. You know, we have to, 'cause there is a lot of grief, there's still a lot of grief

in our community today and – and it's – it's very hard to deal with sometimes when you – when you work with people, but it's good to – to – to let that go. To – to talk about it instead of sitting on it.

I already talked about the – the social – the suicide that happen in our community, too. And, you know, for the longest time it's just like – we're just sitting on that grief, we're not working on it. Because it took me 17 years to let my father go, when he passed away. He died from drinking, from alcohol.

There's a lot of grief here, like I just said, it's still here today.

In 1990, I gave up my drinking, because I have four children. I didn't – I didn't – I didn't wanna – to be the – like, you know – I know I was on my way to – to the alcoholism. I would have been an alcoholic or really addicted to the – to that – drinking. I gave it up 'cause I have four children that I need to – that they need me – they'll – I need to look after my children.

I have a really low self-esteem with the work I'm doing, and like, you know, I – I didn't believe I can do it. So in the year 2000, I went back to Nechi. I went to Alberta, I went back to school. And I took all the courses and I got my diploma, and it was very hard for me because I had to stay there for two years, leaving my family in Goose Bay. We were already in Goose Bay when I went there and I – I really have a – I used to not – think like, I – I can't do it. I was really, really putting myself down, like, I – I didn't feel confident in doing stuff, but I did it.

I – you know, like, I've been working, like, you know, when – when I worked with Charles J. – I was hired to do work there – and then I have a problem with a white lady, that was giving me a very hard time. And that's when I really put my self-esteem down because it's just like: I can't do this. Like, I won't be able to do it, because this lady must be right, 'cause she's saying it, I'm stupid. Like, I feel like I'm stupid person. And – and this is happening at – you know, I was thinking about it now – that's what's been happening with me. It's always the white people, always giving me a hard time, everywhere I work. You know, I worked with Health Canada, I went through Hell in there. Because I was always – it's just like they – they really always push me down, like, I – that I was a – a very bad person. You – that's how – how I felt, I felt like a really bad person.

And I'm just saying, like, how would anybody feel good? Could – would you feel good if anybody was doing that to you? Like, I don't think so. If you're always put down – and I think a lot of us are still feeling that way. 'Cause I'm feeling – I'm angry right now because I'm just – piss – pissing me off 'cause what I went through, and nobody heards – heard what happening.

I ended up calling somebody from Halifax to come in and sit with me, so he can listen to my story. I've asked so many times: Who do I ask? Who – who could come and listen to me?

So anyway, I had somebody to listen to me and he – when he looked at me: Oh, I heard – I heard so much about you. This is what he said, eh? You're not a bad person like everybody was saying. And I said: Oh, okay. Thank you. 'Cause that's what he said to me.

Because they were afraid of people, they couldn't really come up here, in the community and that's what I went through.

I have a lot of things that came to me when I was – when I was – as I was – when I was talking the other day, I was – a lot of things came up to me; because I remember working with Social Services – I wanna go back there a little bit, 'cause I went through trauma.

I had an anxiety; I also kept things inside of me and also not to talk about anything. That's – that's what it – that's what I was

like back then. And my hair started to fall off, because of all the stress that I go through.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Like me.

[redacted]**:** Yeah.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

I was just – just talking about that trauma I went through. What I've seen in Social Services, and when my hair was falling off 'cause there was nobody to turn to, there was nobody here for us. As a caregivers we need help. We need help, for somebody to be there, like, you know, to help us out. We're just, like, we're always left alone – left – we can break too, you know, we can break too.

And that's what I see, a lot of stuff like – like a lot of people goes through that, a lot of women especially. I see mostly women working – like, a lot of women at work, and then men also but, you know, like I said, we don't talk about these things that are hurting us.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken] – Then they had to send Health Canada. [Mushuau-aimun spoken]. You exhaust and – [Mushuau-aimun spoken] – exhaust and – [Mushuau-aimun spoken] – your – your leave – your sick leave – [Mushuau-aimun spoken].

When I was working with Social Service – not – ah, Health Canada they told me – 'cause I went through a very hard time – and they – they – like I said, my hair start to fall off. My heart – my hair – my hair started to fall off and I had to cut it short, and – and then when – when the – the head guy told me, you know, like, you exhaust your – your – your sick leaves. Like, you know, he said: It's gone. You don't have any more.

So, like – like, they don't care. They don't care about their workers and that's what I saw. It just – it's just not me, there's an Inuit ladies that were working there, and they go through a hard time, too. They went through what we went through 'cause there was – there're ladies in there that were always fighting with us and saying stuff and they'll be calling Halifax, calling Debra Keays-White, telling them that we're – we are – we're this 'n' that.

Like – and then we get in trouble all the time. And – and I think working in there for 16 years, I've wasted my time and I didn't have time to really do my work. And they'll train the people – their people with the – the – it was supposed to be for the Innu in Sheshatshiu and Natuashish, they – they did the training with their own people, but I didn't get any training from them.

But there was so many things that – that happened in, like, all these – all these years. I've – I spoke to some leaders about it but they couldn't do anything about it. And, like, I learned things – you know – I – I was taught a lot, there was a lot of challenges in work – working with them.

And I – I also want to talk a little bit about when I first had my – when I first knew I was pregnant, that was in 1980, '81. I had my first child. There was a – a woman who used to be in the – a Sister, who was working in the – in the – in that – in that – in that clinic. I didn't understand what he was say – she was saying to me. She said: You should go – you should think about abortion.

I haven't got a clue what abortion means. If I had said yes, maybe she had have sent me right away. And – and there was a – a woman there and I – I went to her and I said: What does abortion mean? What is that? And she looked at me and she just like – like – couldn't believe – like, I said the – that nun is telling me to take an abortion. I should – that I should think about it.

But I'm glad she was there, I had somebody to translate, to tell me what it is. I really want to thank that lady today because otherwise, if I had said yes, they would have sent – sent me out. 'Cause – 'cause when people

don't understand what – what – what it means in English, you know, the English is our second language, and they'll say yes right away.

And that's – that's what happened – that's what would have happened to me, and I – and I believe that's what happened to many of our people. Because if they go to the – to the RCMP and they'll say yes to things, too, without even knowing, and sometimes I know they don't have translators to translate for that person.

You know, sometimes you think we know – we know the – all the English words. I – I don't know all the English words, myself.

'Cause – [Mushuau-aimun spoken] – and it frightened me like, you know, like, when I think about it, what the – what I get – it still affects me, you know, whenever I think about it. I'm looking at my daughter. Now she have two kids, she have two children; and it – sometimes when it – it's – what do you call it – traumatized? You know, you feel that feeling inside you. What if I had said yes, you know, like – but I'm happy that I – I have that lady to help me out.

I was always afraid of the – the – the – the school, also, that – that – what the – the nuns were doing to us and also what the – what the priest was doing. Like, you knows, banging on our chair and banging on the blackboard and when we don't know, he will be punishing us.

'Cause I remember one time when the – the teacher was hitting me with the ruler and my hands were all – were bruised and when I went home I told my mother about it.

I was also having a hard time in school, I was – I was afraid. I was afraid of the teachers, I was afraid of the nuns, I was afraid of the priest and it was – it was very hard when – when that happened to us in that church – in that school.

'Cause I remember when I went to school, the nun was giving – my friend came from the country and she doesn't know and I tried to explain to her what was – what we were taught, and when she was sitting next to me, and the nun came, saw me talking to her, and then she grab my paper and rip it up.

And then she also – they used to have scores on the board for us to see how – how high we go to our – our work; she erase everything. She erase all my work. And that time, my self-esteem went down. I didn't think I can do it.

And that's what's been happening, eh? Like, when somebody is doing that to you, you don't feel good about yourself and that's what happened with me. You know, I was afraid in school and also, you know, you work – you work hard. So all that stuff that we went through.

And the – the other thing was, I was gonna talk about this, 'cause I had the dream about my mother last night. 'Cause I wanted to talk about this. My mother was an – they were orphans. Their parents died when they were – when they were very young and she couldn't remember her mother. They used to live out in – here in Davis Inlet, at the – her – her parents, both of them, died over there.

And they were orphans, they were moved around, there was five of them. And then one time they were – they were left on the island by their aunt, was mad at them because there was so many of them. I – I don't know why these things were happen, but that's what she said. And sometimes I know it hurts my mom when she stops; she can't go on anymore to tell the story.

My – my – my mom were left on the island because I – I – she – 'cause, like I said, she didn't tell us right away what really happened. And she – she was only small when they were left on the island. And she said the people that they work with, they

would – they work hard, they make them work hard, 'cause I often hear my mother talking about that.

But as she got older, she was taken down to Sheshatshiu and there's a lady that looked after her. She said she was so happy that she was there with that family, 'cause they were very good to her. She learned how to do – how to make moccasins, she knows a lot of things the Elder was teaching her. And that was Anastasia's grandmother – Anastasia Qupee's grandmother.

And my mom said she was very happy when she was there, because she was taken so much care, and so much love from them. And after that grandmother died, Anastasia's mother – father took care of my – my – my – my mother; 'cause her mother told him: When she's ready to go, let her go. If she's married, you have to let her go. And she said she was really well looked after over there, and she was feeling peace all the time, she said.

Yeah, she was learning a lot from them. And then – [Mushuau-aimun spoken].

My mother was talking about, you know, like one night she was told to go out and get some water. She – so she went, and then she was going out to – she dipped the water in and ready to –you know, she was heading home, and there he met – she met the priest.

And the priest told her: you should go home 'cause there's boys there, they might go after you. And the priest turned around and start kissing my mom. Kissing my mom while – while, you know – while he was talking to her and saying to her: Go home. The boys will go after – and he was after her.

And how – you know – a lot of times I'm thinking: How was my mother feeling? You know, like what – what that priest was doing. How – how was she feeling about herself? You know, it makes me very mad when I think about that.

And here he is, the priest is saying: Oh, you know – you gotta be good to your – you know – to your – to your people – like, people. You have to be good to your neighbour, and here he was doing all these things.

There's so many things that I – that had come to me while I was – well – like, after I was talking.

She was – my mom was the one, also, who saw the priest when he cut the – the drum from the – from the Elder while the Elder was drumming. My mom was the one who saw him cut off the – ah – the – the rope that they – they have and she saw the priest taking the drum out, and said: You're worshing [read: worshipping] the Devil. You're doing Devil's work. That's what he was telling the – the Elder.

'Cause, like I said, today – like – I'm happy that I'm here to – to tell you about – about that happened; what happened to us – like, everything that happened. Like, I knew there was a racism in that – I knew it and I feel it with the – with Health Canada. I was told before if I had to say – use that word, racism, I'll be in so much trouble.

There was also a lot of bullying but the bullies are – get away with it because they were white people.

Racism is not my language. I don't have that – don't have that language. And when they told me, I'll be in so much trouble if I use that word: racism.

We also do treatment programs here and we have some Elders on those pictures. Some of those Elders over there, they were the ones that help us with our program. They were our teachers. They were teaching us a lot of – we got a lot of skills from those Elders.

And Joachim, the Elder was here earlier, she was a – he was another one that really, really helped us and really learned a lot from him and I just really wanna thank him, and I – and I – and I love that – the Elders.

There was a lot of – like, you know, we got a lot of experience from our Elders, 'cause there was – they're so wise and – and a lot of them passed away now, the ones that used to come here, and they gave us – they have another lot – knowledge.

And in the treatments that we're doing, sometimes Social Services will – will bring – will send people here and they'll tell them you're gonna – you're gonna be a – take – getting – get your kids back if you go to treatment. But later on they – they don't, they don't really give them their children. And they have to wait, they have to do another thing and another thing, another thing; and that's what I've seen happening. 'Cause sometimes they're not ready to be – to go in a treatment, 'cause they were told to do that.

But I believe myself, now, like I think the Social Services should have worked with the families in – in their homes. You know, like work with them. They are social workers, they have skills. If they say they have skills, they should be the ones helping them and work with them.

And we do, too. We – we – we have people come in here, in the – in the Healing Lodge, looking for – seeking help, and also when we have a treatment programs. And a lot of times, too, the court always also have to send them up here, you know, like, whatever trouble they're in. And – and a lot of times, too, when we – when we run our programs we – we really have to – we – we're still learning today, what – how we run our programs.

'Cause a lot of times we have to make sure we have – like – like – if somebody is – we have meals here for them. They're – if they – somebody had to have – if anybody have allergies, we have to make sure that we don't cook things here. And even somebody with a high blood pressure, we have to bring a public health nurse to come here and check, just to make sure that they're – that they're okay.

Emma is one of the – the ladies who used to come here and help us out.

And also diabetes. I don't know how many people that we got, like, you know, that they didn't even know that they're have a high blood pressure. Some of them who doesn't have a, you know – didn't know about diabetes and other stuff.

And, you know, in our – in our programs we do grief, addictions, family violence, relationship trauma, culture and – and all unresolved grief. A lot of that stuff, that's what we do when we work here.

But I said, like – like I said earlier, like, we need something as a caregivers to be – to do something – to be looked after also. That's what we need, 'cause a lot of times I think we get burned out, and you don't wanna see the – the – the workers burned out.

And I – I really wanna thank you for listening to me. I'm – I'm – I'm happy that I got a chance again to – to talk.

A lot of times on the cultural side, we – we – we have Elder come in to tell the stories, and also we do sewing and do stuff like that.

And, you know, it's not just the people in the community. We also had Inuit people coming into our program, because I know that we have a – the – the – the Innu – like, the Innu and the Inuit used to be together one time. They were always working together, and sharing food and stuff like that, and that's why we said we – we're not gonna push people away.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

And Emma, if you could help me out again, by interpreting.

So, it doesn't matter if you come here and speak for five minutes, or for an hour. We believe you, we respect what you have to say and we will pass on to the governments what we have heard.

We're here to listen.

We are here to learn about Innu way of life and the Innu thoughts about what they have experienced, what you have experienced.

You have told us that in the non-Innu world, in the white world, we rely on laws and people who work in the government to see how these laws can be used in the community.

Innu people are teaching us that these laws and these workers have not been here to help Innu.

Each speaker we have heard right from the beginning in Sheshatshiu and here in Natuashish are teaching us about Innu life.

We already have learned that Innu have experienced great hardship by coming in contact with white laws, non-Innu laws.

This Inquiry – this Commission will have many parts to it. One part is allowing people to come to a session like this and speak to us. Another part will allow families, with their lawyers, to hear the specific details about how they were affected and how their children were hurt under child protection.

Another part will allow us to hire educated scholars, who have learned about the history of Innu since contact with Europeans. Another part will allow us to examine more carefully what kind of laws have been written about child protection, and how they have impacted Innu people.

Even though we will do all that, it is hearing from you, the Innu people, which has a great value for this Inquiry. We thank [redacted] and every person who has come before us, and we continue to invite others to come and speak to the Inquiry.

Takes a lot of strength to speak in public and to talk about your private thoughts – private thoughts. And you continue to tell us that when you do that, it makes you feel better afterwards.

So we'll take a short break and figure out what it is we're gonna do between now and lunch.

Ten minutes, please.

Recess

[redacted]