

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

English Transcript | Volume 9

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

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Welcome, [redacted]. Thank you very much for your attendance today and your continued interest in the work of the Commission.

[redacted]: Tshenashkumitin, thank you.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

Hello, my name is [redacted]. I work with [redacted] today and I work closely with – with [redacted] and I – I – I work with [redacted] on the issues like CSSD. And I'm also a former [redacted]; [redacted]. I want – I want – I want – I want to start off by sharing you some of the experiences I – I encountered, [redacted], with CSSD. And, first of all, I wanted to share you my story; a little bit of my story.

[redacted]

I can only remember little bit – little bits of [redacted], because I was out drinking that night with – with – with members in – in – in a community. And one of the person that helped me through this – that night was Chief John Nui. John Nui, now Chief John Nui in Natuashish. And – and I – and a – the following day [Mushuau-aimun spoken].

You know, after the fire, I – I woke up in a hospital with – with my wife still sleeping on the hospital bed in the local clinic in Davis, and the first thing that come to – in my mind is my children.

And – and we were – we stayed in the hospital for several hours and they were giving us pills, antidepressant pills or – antidepressant pills so I guess – so they – we won't feel – I don't know. I don't know how – how – how antidepressants work but I heard they – they numb the pain.

You know, when I was in the clinic in – in Davis, we were – we stayed there for several – several hours with my – with my wife, and – and they were – RCMP came in there while we were – while we were in the clinic. And they – they – they – they questioned us, and we – we answered them as much as we can.

But one thing that really bothered me while I was talking to them is – is they ask us a question: if we set our house on fire. That really bothered me. And I immediately said: No, I never do that. And – and I told my wife what was said to me by the police. They were unable to speak to my wife because my wife – my wife is still crying a lot. And – and we – we went to my father's house, my parents – my late parents' house, and that's where we stayed.

And, you know, after we were at the clinic, we went to my late parents' house, that's where we stayed. And we were – we were still shaken and – and crying that – that morning. And we were – we were – we didn't have anything with us. The only – the only thing we had was the clothes we were wearing. We lost everything in the house fire.

You know, while I was at my late parents' house, I – I – there were a lot of people, there were a lot of community people – members coming into our – to my parents' home and they were showing – giving their support and – and talking to us. We were crying every day. We were crying all the time. So while I – while I was there with my wife, I told my wife: I cannot go on like this. I cannot survive this. And I told my wife: I'm gonna end my life, because I don't want to live like this, because it's too traumatic for me. It's too big loss for me. And my wife also told me he's gonna do the same. And that was the following day after – after our house – after our kids die in the house fire.

Then – and – and during – during while we were there, we were – my wife and I were – sometimes we're sleeping and woke up yelling, screaming, while we were sleeping. And this went on for – at – at – the following day, during the night. And – and that's when I decided I'm gonna end my life. Now I told my wife: I'm gonna go. And my wife said the same thing: I'm gonna go, too.

While – while we were thinking about ending our lives, an – an Elder came in – into our – into our room while we – where we were sleeping, and his – his name was late John Poker. His Innu name was Kaniuekutat. And he sat – he sat on the bed with us. He told us: I know what you guys are trying to do. You're trying to hurt yourself, I know that. That's the exact – exact words.

Yeah. When an Elder came to our – to the – my parents' house and walked into the room where we were staying, he – he said he knows that we're going to – we're going to hurt – we were planning to hurt ourselves and – and he said: Before you do that, I wanna tell you something.

And he said – he said: Before you hurt yourselves, I wanna tell you something. And he told us: Your kids have gone to the other side, and there's a reason why you two are still here, and you have work to do here. You have work to do here.

And he also told us: You will see your kids someday and – and if you hurt – if you hurt yourself, you will not see your kids for a long time. That's his exact word, that late John Poker told me. And after he talked to us, we were thinking about it. And we – my wife and I talked about it in – in a very – we talked about what John was saying to us.

Then, you know, after a couple of days we – we were still in – in crying and shouting during our sleeps. Then another Elder came in, another. My wife's grandmother, [redacted] – late [redacted]. He said exactly what John had told me. Exactly what he told me; what John told us. His words very similar to John, and that really – that really kept us more thinking, of – of why – why didn't – why didn't the Creator take us, you know?

So, now after – after – there was still support coming in, people coming in to our home, into my parents' home with – with – with – with – community support was overwhelming and it was a big support. A lot of my (inaudible) remember.

Then a third time, a third Elder asked me to come over. He was in the – in the community at the time, she was. And she was my Aunt [redacted], [redacted], from Sheshatshiu, that's was my father's sister. And, again, she told me the same thing, what John –

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: She's right there?

[redacted]: No, no.

And she said the same thing as John Poker and [redacted] said, [redacted] Then that – that really helped me to be where I am today. That helped me. And also the community support.

Yeah, all three Elders said the same thing to us and that – and that kept me alive, from the – from the advice and the wisdom words from them.

So I only – I'm only sharing you what I – how I – how much I can handle, on – on – on – on – on the experience I – I – I – I experienced in February 14, 1992. I can only share you how much I can, because this is very overwhelming and very horrific loss for us. I wish parents never experience that again, never. Because it's very hard, very hard.

Today – today I – I prepare a special feast for the Elders. I – I – a special feast that's been with us for many, many years, and that's how I respect the Elders and try to feed them, preparing this meal for them. I do that every year in the community.

And – and I also – I – I – I – I wanna – I wanna share of my experiences with CSSD, or Social Services, when I was the [redacted] and a [redacted]. I – I've been at the table with these departments for many years and I – I stress out to them what's happening. What's

happening to the children removed in our community, and what's happened to the family members that are left behind in the community.

When a child is removed from family – I have seen it in Davis Inlet and I have seen it in Natuashish – I share my thoughts with the department at the – at the government-level meetings when I was the leader and I stressed out – I stressed out the damage effects of what the department is doing to the child and also to the family members.

Excuse me for a minute. I wanna (inaudible).

And, you know, when a child is removed from the community, from – from – from its family, they're – that's the process it starts of damaging the child – and also the family, to family members. Why? Because there's a loss of culture, there's a loss of identity, there's a loss of language. Once that child is removed out from the community and into – and placed in – in non-Native home, outside Natuashish and outside Davis. And those effects of – are long term. Those damaging effects are long term.

I have – I have seen youth coming into the community completely different people. Believe me; I've seen it. And that's how the damaging – damaging it is when a child is removed. Some of these kids are – are incarcerated, and some of these kids are – have mental illness, and some of these kids are committing suicide. That's how bad it is.

And I stressed out to – to the departments of what are you doing to a child, and I kind of feel they – they want to brush it off, when I speak to them. They change the subject; they – they talk to – they talk about a different issue. I – I – I know that because I – I seen it happen many times.

And I think not only child is damaged, also the parents and the siblings. They continue drinking after the child – their child is removed and the other siblings continue to use drugs and drinking as well. That's how – that's – not only child is affected – affected, it's also the parents and the family around.

When – when the department says it's protecting a child when they remove from the family, they're not protecting the child. They're creating more damage to the child. And once that child is to be adult, they are – they are having problems at the early – early adulthood. Some are incarcerated, like I said before. Some are – have mental illness, some have – some have ended their lives.

I want to share you a story – a story that I thought about when I was at – at my office yesterday. My wife – my wife's nephew was one of those child that was removed, and my wife used to kid around, joke around with this nephew, while – while – before he was removed. There were a lot of laughs and there was a lot of joking around between this – between her nephew.

So after that – that – his nephew was removed and came back in the community, my wife approaches nephew – her nephew, and he [read: she] wanted – he wanted to have a chat with him and so on. But he did not respond. He – he was – he was completely different person when he was in the community. His interaction with us was – was not there, that he – that he used to. And – and not – not – not long after that, we – he was not to be found in the community, and he was found on the ice, froze to death.

This is only one of the stories I'm sharing with you because there are more stories like that and I wish to – I wish the people that have experience can come forward and speak to you guys. And this is a story I – I – I talked to my wife this morning: I'm going to share that story. He said: Okay, share that story.

And also, you know, when – when kids are removing from our community, they are placed in – in non-Native homes. And I

heard stories before that those kids in that care have – have an – the caregivers are given a certain amount of money to look after these children and the – the – I've heard stories like, they have car payments, loan payments, because of this youth staying in their homes.

And I – and I kind of wonder, it – it seems like it's an industry. It's an industry for – for – for the kids that are removed and for the – for the outsiders. They got the car payments, they got loan payments. But – but when they're in the community – but when they are in the community, I – our – no, I'm – there was a kid came into our home there a couple weeks ago and – and they gave us food, $400 for a month.

And that amount doesn't last a month because we're living – we live in a northern part of the – Labrador, and the prices are very high than the – than the – than the southern retailers, no? So that's one thing I also want to stress out, is the difference – the difference between – different payments, I guess, for us and also for the people in the south.

Now, I think that – I think – no – we can – we can work – we've been trying to work with CSSD for many, many years. One of the things that which we – we – we give them advice, while I was the leader, I – we gave them – here, you need to do this. You need to do – you need to explore these options. But there was always something they say to us: policies, policies, policies. We couldn't do it because we have this policy and that policy and so many policies. And that's one thing that's – that we're – that's a stumbling block for us, is policies. Policy changes need to be done, need to be made.

So we've – we – we've tried to work with the department for many years and there's only a little bit of movement I see since I've been leader. A little bit of movement, not a – because the advice we give to them can work in this department. The advice we give can work, because I've seen it work.

And, also, one things that I see in this department, I see this department have lawyers. Have lawyer – have their own lawyers. When they apprehend a – when they apprehend a – a child – not – not apprehend, when they remove a child from – from the family, the – they take the parents to the court.

But the parents don't have money to pay for a lawyer. But they do. That's the advantage of – of the department, they use against family members. That's how – that's how they win cases, is they can afford it because – a $300-an-hour lawyer. But us Innu, we can't afford a $300-an-hour lawyer, and parents cannot afford that. That's how – that's how CSSD take advantage of these family members, when the child is been removed.

And, you know, I think – I think if there's going to be a effective department of CSSD, Innu people need to be involved, because we Innu experience these damaging effects. But the department doesn't experience it, the governments doesn't experience it, the court doesn't experience it, but we experience it – we – because we're live in the community. And for that – for – for – for it to work, Innu – they need to involve us: Elders, resources, local resources and so on. They need to be involved in order to work. If you don't involve us, it's not going to work. It's going to create more damage to our people.

So, in closing, I – I thank you for listening to me and – and I'm – I'm glad I – I shared my story with you and shared my – my thoughts on CSSD. And I want to stress out this again: If you want the department to work, get Innu involved from day one. Not after day two, from day one.

So I thank you for allowing me to speak.

So I thank you.

Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

[redacted]: Mm-hmm.

I'll give you a chance (inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Tshenashkumitin also from me. Thank you for your very thoughtful comments about what we should be considering in our report.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you for taking the advice of the Elders, so that you can continue to assist Innu, not only today, but many years from now in following their wisdom; the wisdom of the Elders.

Thank you for mentioning [redacted], John Poker and [redacted]. We also acknowledge other Elders shown here and others that you know about, that we do not know about.

Anastasia just reminded me that you – you mentioned [redacted] and I made the mistake. But we also thank you for recognizing her and her influence on you and other Innu people.

Thank you for asking other Innu in the community here and – and in Sheshatshiu to continue to tell their story to us. As Commissioners, we continue to say that there are many parts to the way we have to do our work, but one of the most valuable parts is the voice of ordinary people.

Tshenashkumitin.

Oh, I'm sorry. I – I did not mean – I forgot this guy. My twin brother.

Mike, I'm sorry, go ahead.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Twin brother in spirit, anyway.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: That's right.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: First of all, thank you for coming here today to speak to us. Thank you for sharing your own story. And I can't begin to feel what you felt as you told about the tremendous loss that you have – you and your wife have suffered and I'm so sorry that you had to go through that.

You have given us some very important points to consider and we will certainly – me, personally, it makes good sense, what you have said. And, indeed, having the Innu involved with CSSD or Child Protection, I think is essential.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Involved first, not second.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Involved first.

And, indeed, involvement in a way that is Innu-led, because it's Innu who know their own community and their own culture.

And, once again, thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Are we continuing on, Peter?

P. RALPH: No, that's it for lunch. Be back, I guess, at 1:30?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: 1:30.

Thank you very much.

Recess

[redacted]

[redacted]