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

English Transcript | Volume 11

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

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

We're very happy to have our next presenter, Elizabeth Tshaukuesh Penashue. She has spoken on previous occasions. She has led us on many days of prayer and guidance, and we welcome her to speak her mind about what she knows, what she has heard, what she would like to tell the Inquiry.

ELDER PENASHUE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA (providing English translation): I am very proud to be here again to speak and I am glad to participate in this Inquiry. I look forward to and I hope to see the outcomes of this Inquiry in the future. It is in our saying as Innu, that Inuit and Innu are the strongest people. When they want something done, it's done, and that's what I'd also want to inquire to the Commissioners.

In the past I have experienced what Social Services, the system, had done to us, the Innu. In the past the Innu did not speak – could not speak English. When it came to the police – the cops – they were afraid of them. They were afraid of akaneshau, the non-Innu, they couldn't speak the language.

Also in the past when Innu people met the non-Innu, they could not reply back when they were spoken to, because it was not their language. And I am sure they wanted to speak but they couldn't because it was not their language. The experiences that parents used to have – I am sure that they spoke to one another, the wife and the husband, talking about what to do, what they could not understand because of the language barrier.

I also remember there was this one Innu woman who Social Services took her child while she was in the hospital, and the Innu woman that she knew was wondering what was happening to her. What happened to her child? Why did this happen to her? And it was the social worker who came to the hospital to take her child away from her.

ELDER PENASHUE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: There were lots of children that were in their care and she's saying that she remembers there was one child who was sent to St. John's. And the mother was told that it is only a temporary care that the child will be in, but it – that never happened, and she wondered what happened to her child.

There was one lady in our community, (inaudible), I'll mention her name. She said that was one of the women who – whose child was taken away from her because – it's not because, but she could not speak English, she did not understand what was happening. And when her son was – came back to the community, the son could not speak the language, Innu-aimun. Nor did he know his culture, his values. He – that was taken away from him.

I am also pretty sure that when children are taken at an early age, maybe to St. John's, and when they come back and see their other young people still speaking the language, still with their families, I think they envy that. It saddens us when we know – when we hear – when children are taken away from our community. It still saddens today because it's still happening today in our community.

It hurts to know – it hurts to know that this happens also within my family, my grandkids, great-grandkids – wrongdoings by CSSD; and I also think: When will these mistreatments of the kids in our community stop?

I also learned that Newfoundland and Labrador government have their own policies within CSSD. But I tell you this: Innu people – there is no such thing as Innu policy, because they raised and loved and showed love to their children. It was within them how they will raise their children.

There is a lot of things that we see, that I see, what CSSD has done wrong to my – two of my great-grandchildren. I've seen it. One of my great-grandchild – children is not all there. Still not well into his wellbeing. Today I think: What was done to my great-grandchild? What happened when he was in care?

And I'd like to also mention that when CSSD takes a child they do not go to the home where the child will be placed. Like, to find out who is in that home; how many people are in that home? I guess they only see dollar signs and that's when I think they are not doing their job. Maybe also ask: Is there drinking in this home? Because that's where most children are placed, in homes like that.

I also think I am not the only mother or grandmother or great-grandmother who thinks of this way. Yeah, it saddens me and it hurts me. I also told this story I'm telling regarding my great-grandchild many – I don't remember how many years ago, but I did mention it – and I did not receive anything like the answers that I – that I had questions to. Nobody gave me answers and I am hurt of what had happened.

CSSD told me they would make a phone call regarding my great-grandchild; nothing happened. There – there was – they only called and said that everything is all right. Everything is good where he is placed. But I saw and heard about my great-grandchild. I thought: Only if I could feed, only if I could give him clothes. Give him the necessities of what I wanted to do about my great-grandchild. I cried on my way home thinking about my great-grandchild.

How many of us great-grandmother, grandmother, mothers are feeling this way? How many are out there still struggling of what had happened to their own children? To their own grandkids? To their own great-grandchildren? Yes, I question that how many are out there, who are hurt and saddened by CSSD taking our children away from their families?

I am sure the kid that are taken away from their families are hurting. I know they wanna go home. I am sure they're saying: I want to go back to my parents. And I bet there are sleepless nights. In their minds, some of them are calling for help to go back to their families. I am sure the ones that are sent out of our communities are more hurt than the ones that are in the communities, who are in the care in – in the community.

I told this to CSSD myself. To just not go in the homes and place the child in the home, because I feel that it was only for the money. When child goes in the homes, I'm pretty sure it was not out of respect and not show love to the kid. I don't know when to – for them to stop, and I wish this system will stop for taking the kids away from their families.

Everyone loves their own child, their children, and today for us it is an ongoing thing, like, losing – ongoing thing for the child who was taken, because they lose everything: the language, the culture, the value and the – the proudness of in – being Innu. And I bet in their minds when they come back to our community they miss that. They want to be part of who their parents were as Innu people.

And I'd like to end it there, by saying that: Yes, we love our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on.

I'd like to thank you all for listening to me and I hope that you understand what I am saying and what I am asking. It is for the children, our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren that I'm speaking of today.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: I'd like to thank my Aunt Elizabeth for – for speaking.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I just wanna thank Aunt Elizabeth for – for her speaking about being a great – great-grandmother. In our community, it's a young community, and we do have young great-grandparents. And so in the future we're gonna have more and more of great-grandparents who are young.

So I just wanna thank her for bringing – bringing that up, and making sure that we kind of, keep that in mind as to what the future, when we're talking about CSSD. And thanking her for sharing her experiences because that's what we're here for, to listen to what people's experiences are and have been.

Thank you. Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Elizabeth, Tshenashkumitin.

What you have said to us, we heard from Innu in Natuashish – very same thing. They said: Too long now, when a CSSD person has to take a child and they're speaking with the parents, they look too much at their book. And they say to the parents: Well this book, this law, tells me I cannot do what you're asking. I must do something else.

They said to us: This book says you only get one chance. We don't give you many chances if you don't follow the rules. And the parents are saying to us, like you are, you have to be more thoughtful about how Innu live. You have to be more thoughtful about how Innu take care of their children. And one mistake does not mean that the child should be removed without giving their – the parents another chance.

Innu families and parents in Natuashish said the same thing that you did. That the Innu language must govern what happens to Innu people in child protection. So your voice is not alone. There are others who think like you and there are others who are asking us to make the same recommendations that you did.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

ELDER PENASHUE: Mmm.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: She says she forgot to mention that there are Innu people who are working with the – some of the CSSD workers here in the community and I am pretty sure they try their best to have the child within their families. But, again, it's the policies. It's the policies that stop them from what they want for the children in our community.

[Dialogue between Interpreter Nuna and Elder Penashue in Sheshatshiu-aimun.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you for making us think about these things.

ELDER PENASHUE: Ehe. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

Ten minutes, please, and we'll move on to the next speaker.

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