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

English Transcript | Volume 23

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

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COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Stand for prayer.

Thank you.

ELDER PENASHUE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Can you get Ruth to turn down that fan?

P. RALPH: No.

R. STEELE: There's a switch outside to turn it off.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

R. STEELE: I'm impressed (inaudible).

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay.

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome.

Before we get started now, just a couple of housekeeping items once again. For those who've been here for all the sessions, it's – it must get tiring and probably you might be able to come up and do it yourselves.

So – but anyway we – it's important to go through, especially the healing services. And that's some of the – what we hear from those who speak, and if you're listening, it may be difficult to hear and it might trigger some emotions in you, yourself. So it's important to think about family, friends or other supports that you might have at home or elsewhere.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: And we have healing support services for the Inquiry and we always have people here who are on site in the building and/or in the room. So this afternoon, I wanted to mention those who are here. So that's Edward Nuna, Edward may be somewhere else in the building; Helen Andrew, up here; Tiffany Nuna; and, of course, Louise Bradley and Elizabeth Sheppard.

I – okay, I'll just stop, I suppose.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I also wanted to mention that – just to introduce a couple of people this afternoon. We have a number of people who are always here at the Inquiry, but then we have a lot of support behind the scenes, people that you don't necessarily see and that who are not in attendance here.

But we thought as a team for the Inquiry, it's important for people to come to see and experience the community and to listen to some of the truths and stories that people have to say and to tell. And so I wanted to introduce Kayla Burry, who's our researcher, who is down here in the corner; and also Bernadette Duke. Bernadette is involved in file reviews for the child death investigations that we're doing, and there are six of those.

In addition, I also wanted to apologize first. I forgot to introduce somebody on Monday morning who's been here all week and that's Justin Thompson. Justin is a law student with OKT and that's the law firm that represents the Innu Nation. So my apologies, and thank you for being here.

I think we'll –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Anne gotta translate that.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Oh, sorry.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: And just two other small points of course, again, is that there's coffee, tea and water available here, as well as some food. And that the tent is outside and heated, and that people can go out there to have some quiet time, anytime that they wish, so that's available.

Thank you very much.

P. RALPH: Yes, Commissioners, I just wanted to point out a mistake I made. The – before someone speaks, we usually get them to speak to Louise and Paula to identify if there are any supports that they would like to have with them before they start speaking. And in my haste to get Penote up, I didn't do that. I just wanted to make sure that he is okay and if there are any supports that are here that he'd like or to bring someone in to provide support, we can do that.

ELDER ANTUAN: It's up to you.

P. RALPH: Pardon?

ELDER ANTUAN: It's up to you. Whatever –

P. RALPH: Okay, it's up to you. Would you like to have someone sit with you here?

ELDER ANTUAN: I don't mind.

P. RALPH: Okay.

ELDER ANTUAN: I'm strong enough.

P. RALPH: Hmm?

ELDER ANTUAN: I'm strong enough.

P. RALPH: He said he's strong enough.

ELDER ANTUAN: You want me start now?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yup, go ahead, Penote.

ELDER ANTUAN: Okay – okay.

I'm – my name is Penote Antuan. I live in Sheshatshiu all my life. I was born just outside of Sheshatshiu, just – Grand Lake – up in Grand Lake, about 45 miles from here. I only had – well, the only parent that I had was my mother. And my father passed away when I was two years old. During that time, my past years, I used to like different places where I can have my own grand – grandfathers, grandmom to look after me, and all my aunts, my uncles. That's where I was raised by those people, different relatives.

During my entire life, our – well, the way I said I was raised by different people, my uncles, my aunts, my grandfathers and all the grandmothers. Ever since, when the – when Social Services came, I wasn't married yet. I was just – I wasn't married yet. I was only about 16 or 17, I think, around there somewhere.

When I noticed – my mother told me – when she told me that the son of Mary Rose Selma was taken away after he was born. Same way what they did with Louisa Rich, who take him – who take her away from her – after she was born. They didn't say – they didn't explain anything whatsoever, especially the Social Services, didn't explain nothing to the parents.

The other part, I was surprised by Social Services, last – two years ago, my grandchildren were taken of the parents and their stepfadder. They were removed to Newfoundland, somewhere's a place called Roddickton. I think that's what's they call it, Roddickton. And they are working with the Social Services there and the people here in Sheshatshiu, I want to find the reason why they were taken – the reason why they were taken.

The reason why I tried to find out is to – I wants the reason, the part of the reason. I want – just want to know it, why would – the reason why. Or just because they're hungry, or just because they're not well looked after by the parents, or they don't have any other family to go with, like us, my wife and me. We could've – we could take them care, as long as they were here – if they were here. But those days, you – they just took the children away from us.

I went to Roddickton after they were placed in the home in Newfoundland. And there I met a lot of Social Services and I said what I want to say to her. I said: We don't know for sure what's going on with this family. They don't have any – to back you up as the people to take their children of the community. I don't see any anything.

I was there for two – or one week and two days in Roddickton. When I talked to the Social Services – a person who was working at Social Services in Roddickton, I said: I want to know the reason why. But I didn't go back yet. After I got the word from Social Services, they said they don't know either. They don't know why.

So there's some communication is not there between the Social Services in Newfoundland and Social Services in Labrador. So that's the reason – that's the thing I – I've always say to myself: Why there's no communication between themselves, if they want to take the children away from our community, why? They have – there gotta be a reason why you want to take those kids away from their parents. There gotta be. If there is no reason, there's no such thing you can take them. You can't take them if there's no reason.

After a while, after I – they, and the people who were looking after my grandchildren, came where I was staying at hotel and I was talking to them. And I said the same thing what I say to the Social Services worker there. I did say the same thing. I said: I don't – I can't – I just can't find a reason why they were taken away from us.

I, myself, took all – just about every grandchildren that I have in Sheshatshiu, take care for a while, until their mom's okay with them. I've always did it, with my wife, with – my wife would help me.

After we had the meeting with this group, those people who are looking after my grandchildren, so I return back to my community, Sheshatshiu. After a week or two – a week and a half I think, they came back. And I still couldn't find why they send them back. That's another thing. Why they did send those kids back in our community? Why? Is it just because I was saying something or broke – I broke something in between.

So I was glad when they came back home in my community because I was worried about them. They're gonna lose their language, which I thought – because I couldn't speak to – well, my wife, she will pass – she already pass away. I couldn't speak to her, so I just said: I – we need those children back in the community. Because if we don't, they're gonna lose their language, culture, everything. Same thing that I lose when I was a young boy when I was sent to St. John's, the same thing will happen to them.

So they're in care of their mother and I was saying to the Social Services here that they're good for now. They're good. They know their parents and who their stepfadder, too, and they're well looked after by their stepfadder and their mother. They're well looked after now. Which they're gonna have a good – a place where to stay. Because, at the moment, I'm getting old. I can't take care the grandchildren that I usually have. I'm all by myself.

That's the thing, I can't. Unless some of my daughters will help, I'll probably do the same thing again, grab my children and take care of them. But that's – I don't think it's not so because I'm getting old. I'm not that far to go, to go to be – I'm 75 – 74, so I'm probably dead next year.

What I'm gonna close – closing to say now, I'm hoping Social Services do understand what they're doing the children in the community. That when they send those kids outside of community, I don't know if they're well look after by the guardians who are in Newfoundland or anywhere else, if they were well look after.

Because one of the thing that I was told just – I don't know if it's true or not – that two of younger people were taken away from the parents. I believe – I don't know what community they were staying; they were staying in Ontario somewhere – that they were lost just for a day and they found them next day.

And that matter – that matters, they never told the parents. That's what I heard. If it's true – that'd be – that's true. They didn't tell their parents what's wrong with them. That's one thing I did hear on people talking, like, telling me the story, what happened when

they're get out – when they are taken away from our community.

And I certainly feel strongly in my mind and in my heart that Social Services is not doing the job that he want to or what he want to do with the kids. I certainly don't believe it, if that's the right thing.

See, once you take a child of where he is or where she is, you can't control that child; you can't control unless there is a good relationship to their guardian and to the – or the parents that are taking care of them, unless they're a good relationship, then they will be okay.

But if the Social Service not – I mean, I don't know, Social Services, what's he thinking about it? What's he managed – why he want to manage to do that kind of a thing, to take the kids away from the parents, take away his kids from the community, I don't understand it.

See, most of us were never sent anywhere from our community – from outside our community. We've never been sent. But the only thing the people like the Social Services are willing to send those kids away from the community. And that's why – that's the reason why I was sent away when I was eight years old – eight years old. Remember that, eight years old, a kid to be outside his community, it's strange. It's strange. You can't cope it. You can't manage the way you want it to be. You're frightened, you're scared; you're scared of other people, that they will do wrong to you or hurt you.

I could sit here and tell you all the things that is not normal, especially a young kid to be taken away from a home, or from his community and put him or her in a strange – I say world – a strange world – a strange – another community. It's not right.

The other thing I find my – that when it happens, when they take away from the – a children from their community and place them in another world, that when the kids come back in our community, they don't – they're not following up what he or she was doing in – while they were – he was in care of somewhere else. They don't follow up.

That's the thing, what – that's the important thing I find myself, to know what they were doing and find out from the Social Services that they're gonna follow up what happened there; follow up the things that happening while they were there.

I don't think any person has a word from Social Services saying that: Yes, we're gonna follow up everything that your child was there when he came back into your community. That's – I never heard that because I have three grandchildren that were out in Roddickton, I said. And the parents, even though I asked the parents if – I said: Do they follow up the thing what happened? No.

So once you take those kids, you gotta follow up everything: what they're doing and how they're doing and how – and who they in care. You have to take care of them well and responsible.

And that's – straighten that out, I did want to tell you people and to try to understand it, why it happened to them, especially the kids. They don't understand why they are taken away from the parents, why they are taken away from their community. They don't understand.

When I was a kid, when I was eight years old, I remember taking off from here, Sheshatshiu, go on the truck, going to the airport, went on a plane. I didn't know what's going on. I didn't know. I couldn't see what's happening to me. The first thing I know – I did know was I thought I was taken away from my community, from my home. And do anybody knows what – why I'm here? I just think about those things.

Then after a while, after I got back here in my – back in my community, I just – I was – good job that I did, I was talking to my mother in Innu. Of course, I couldn't even talk to my own language when I got back here, okay. After a while, I learned my language and I said to my mom: Why did you send me to St. John's? Is it to learn

something? Or was I – I was a good child, to look after me? Or I was going – I was not going to school?

None of those things that I said to my mom, said no, wasn't – nothing of those were happening. All the priests were saying to my mom: You have to send your child to St. John's. And the other mission that were working with – alongside with the priest here in Sheshatshiu said to themself: We have to send this kid – two, was me one of them, and the other one was Elizabeth's husband, Francis Penashue.

And when I got in St. John's it was totally different place – totally different. It wasn't like my home. That's where abuse came out, outside that – St. John's. Sometimes was a horrible; sometimes you can't stand it; sometimes you couldn't even know what's going on; sometimes you didn't want to understand it because you don't know.

And here I am, I was alone in one part of the school and the other part was the older people – student. This is where we were separated by the Mount Cashel. This is how they separated us. They didn't want us to talk to each other in Innu because we didn't – they didn't want to. We got punished for it.

Same thing I'm gonna say, same thing, same thing over and over. We were punished for it, just to use our language. When we see each other together, we want to talk each other. No, punishment was there as soon as we speak.

Now the other thing I was very surprised, I knew one teacher who resided here in Sheshatshiu back in those days when I went into school. His name was Mr. Nash. Well, he's not older. He's a young person, middle age, 40 I guess, 40 or 30. There I saw him, when he went back to St. John's and during his – her – his stay in St. John's, we all – he always ask us to come by to his parent's house.

During those weeks, during the weeks we were there, like every weekend we used to go to the parent's house. That's when I noticed those people are very kind person – people. They were kind people. They didn't even bother us, how we communicate each other. Like, we speak Innu-aimun when we play around and we – around our table, we speak Innu. That didn't bother them. They didn't tell us: Oh my, no way, you can't speak in Innu here. You have to speak English. They didn't say that.

So there was the times I was happy to be with them, even though they don't understand our language.

That's the things I know what happened back in my younger days, and I also want to stress to the Social Services that please, please don't take the kids outside the community. Put them in the community where they can be look – well look after.

We are losing our children here to drugs, cocaine, plus the liquor – hard liquor, booze, everything, just about lose every one of them. Just about every one of them. Every child has the symptoms, like drugs, like I said, beer, liquor, cocaine.

Everything that's – that wasn't there when I did grow up. That wasn't there. There were – there weren't even no booze in here. Only recently that the Innu people was – had a chance to taste it while they were with the friends of white people. I remember that because I remember my uncle was working at the base at that moment and he got it from his friends, liquor, beer, was always brought in our home to have a drink for themselves.

Only recently, that's not too long ago, that they were – we were allowed to drink in our community. That's why I said there were no drugs, there were no beer, there's no hard liquor. And the only things – that bad things – that are around here at – right at the moment, you can find marijuana in the community, you can find other drugs. And we're losing the kids – we're losing.

I can tell you one – I remember one day, suicide – there were two suicide that day. But I can't remember today what – which day it was but I can remember there was – I

got – a while back, two young men suicide themselves.

Is that the way Social Services want it? Or is it ours? No, it's not ours. Don't blame on us. It's not ours. It's the people. Social Services are doing this kind of foolishness, I find, foolishness. That they don't – they're not trying to help people if they come across them with drugs or liquor or beer. They don't want to. They just keep on – keep them going.

I want certainly try to help other people like my same generation I am. I usually walk by them. I will usually talk to them and say: Can you try to help yourself? Like when they're in the treatment centre, I – they always – people ask me to come in and talk to the people. And I said: Will you please try to understand why we are in this section together? We'll try to help you, to avoid the things that you do in the community and also help us to understand it.

Same way with the Social Services, they should have done the same thing with the people here in Sheshatshiu. Not to tear them apart. That's what they were doing. They're just tearing them apart, all the people. Because those people don't – they don't know – they don't even try to cope with what they're tear – tearing them – what they're – they're apart. They don't want to come to understand. They got difficulties to understand because they can't follow up what happen.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Penote, I'm gonna ask you to end up your session. We'll see who else is waiting next as well. So I'll give you another five or 10 minutes.

ELDER ANTUAN: My conclusion will be I like to see, especially while you're working at it – at this hearing – the other thing – I forgot one thing – one more thing.

Every time we sit around with the government officials, they just taking our words. They wrote down on their pads, and after a while, when we try to ask our leaders: What happened? No, nobody knows.

And I hope this hearing – I certainly want to see them, the strength that happening while we were – while we're here and explain to us, this is how it works and this how we explain to you people and this is will work in your community.

And I also want to thank all of you, especially for the – these three people who are sit here and the other people who are sit outside, just the lawyers who work with the people, and I'm grateful to be here today, too.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Tshenashkumitin also to you, Elder Antuan.

Thank you for reminding us that we have to come back to the community and prove that we listened and explain what it is we heard.

Also, this particular Inquiry, which will recommend changes to child welfare, will have someone returning after periods of time, six months and then two years, to see if there has been any progress. So we are mindful of what you are saying and we appreciate it.

Recess

[redacted]