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

English Transcript | Volume 39

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

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come back.

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Recess

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Good afternoon and welcome back.

I see we have a presenter for today.

Mr. Ralph, please.

P. RALPH: Yes, Commissioners, the first person to present this afternoon is Mary Jane Edmonds.

And, Mary Jane, could you start off with telling the Commissioners where you were born and raised and who your family is. And then share what you'd like to share with us.

M. EDMONDS: My name is Mary Jane Edmonds; my maiden name is Piwas. I'm from Davis Inlet, Natuashish. I was born in Davis Inlet.

And I work for the Innu Round Table since 2017 and I'm a senior rep – Innu rep with the IRT prevention services in Natuashish. I'm a team leader for two social workers and two Innu reps and two prevention services workers.

I'm here to talk about what I've observed and what I've listened to with the Department of CSSD, and our roles as a prevention working with families. I want to share some of the examples of family trauma that I've witnessed and tried to work with CSSD, and what the results were.

Since my work with IRT there have been protocols sanctioned by the government and between the Innu leadership for the CSSD to work with the Innu groups such as the IRT; you know, ways of working with the Innu, the Innu families, the Innu workers such as the prevention.

It's been a few years now, maybe two to three years, since the protocol came out. And in those years that we've worked closely with the CSSD staff, I feel that the protocol is not being followed.

In one example with a client, we've struggled a lot with the CSSD trying to get help and support for a young client. And when we tried to make our Innu suggestions – our Innu help from the prevention staff; we tried to help – we suggested and we advised, and we poured all our energy in trying to help this child.

And they sit with us and they are very intent. They look like they're listening. They're nodding, they're saying, yeah, okay and when they're going to explore. And it's like they're already agreed to help the child. And then they say oh, we'll come back again. We'll come back again and discuss more. So they come back and they have their own suggestions. They did things their own way instead of following our suggestions.

And just recently, you know in the last couple of months, we've dealt in this certain case with this child, and nothing was happening to help the child. They were doing everything opposite that we suggested. They did everything opposite.

It's like they didn't hear us, they didn't listen to us and now the child have suffered more consequences because of their decisions. And the prevention staff – us, we felt very frustrated. And we felt that the CSSD are only making it worse and more damage to the child.

And because the frustration – the frustration leads us to getting legal advice: like, how we should proceed trying to get help for this child. But the CSSD are not doing what they're supposed to be doing and what more can we do as prevention for the child.

My point in that story is what happened in those years, with years of stories of CSSD damaging the families, damaging the children when they first approached the Innu in their settlements up to – before the IRT, it's still happening. The Innu, even though we are professionals in our work, we're trying to prevent removals and trying to prevent damage to families and children.

That is still happening, even though also there's a protocol in place recognized by the government and recognized by the Innu Leadership, signed by the Innu Leadership and the government. It's not being utilized. It's not being followed by the CSSD and these departments.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

[Dialogue between Mary Jane Edmonds and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

M. EDMONDS: I was going to speak Innu.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: I told her to go ahead and speak English. I'll do this.

M. EDMONDS: Yeah.

That's one example that I just told you. I have another example that I wanted to just show you, what happened in the past that hurt the Innu and their families, is still happening today. I have another example that I'm going to share with you.

On May 10, my grandchild was removed by the CSSD – removed from her parents. I am not her biological grandma. She came into our lives when she was two years old and became my granddaughter. She's a healthy little girl but she loves to be out with her

friends and she loves to be outside, and she does not like rules.

She told her parents that one night she took some pills. She took some pills and her mom took her to the clinic. And when she got to the clinic, the nurse asked her why did you take pills? She said: I took pills because my parents were beating me up. My dad was beating me with a belt. She said my dad beat me with the belt 30 times.

A week before that she was asking her mom how many pills does it take to get me to Goose Bay for a trip to Goose Bay? She also asked her friends: What does it take to go for a trip to Goose Bay? And this is what she got from her friends: Take some pills.

So she was medevaced out. You know, because she didn't know how many she took, what kind of pills she took and she was medecaved out. When she was in Goose Bay, they did blood work on her. They took her blood and there was no evidence of pills ever taken.

So at the hospital in Goose Bay she was happy and she kept asking her parents: When are we going swimming? When are we going to the restaurant? She says: We're going to Jungle Jims, when are we going there? He says: Hospital is so boring. This is the conversation she was having with her parents.

So she was interviewed again by the doctor and her story was the same: that her father was abusing her. And the RCMP were called. CSSD were called to the hospital in Goose Bay, and she was removed from her parents from the hospital.

Not only they moved her, they also removed a child that was already fostering – fostered by my daughter, because they couldn't place the foster child in a home that was abusing the daughter. So both of them were placed in my care.

My family, we know her history. We know her history and she fabricates stories. We know that part. She set fire to the forest behind the house on Nui Street. She set a fire and the fire flared up. And she was with other kids. The other kids said it was her that made the fire but she denied it so long until finally she admitted, she says: I started the fire.

And one time my husband and I – Mike – these girls were running into our house, and we didn't know that they were grounded and they ran away. They jumped out of the window and they ran to our house. And we said, what happened? They said that their mom was locking them up in a room so they ran out.

And my husband, now he got really upset. You know, why is my daughter doing this? My husband's name is Mike; my daughter's boyfriend is Mike, so there's the other Mike, you know the child's dad. We got really upset. We went over to that house and said: What are you doing with the kids? And they say what kids – you know, they say, what kids? I said: The kids came running to our house. You're barring them up in the room. And they said: The kids are in the room, they're not barred.

And she went and check the bedroom. There was no kids in there, but there was a line of bed linen where they climbed out of the window. And they didn't know that the kids have ran away out of their rooms.

And these kids weren't barred. The parents didn't know they were gone. They were grounded, not barred. They were grounded because they did things that they weren't supposed to. But they told us this story that their parents were barring them and they were being beaten, and there was no evidence of that.

And that's when my husband and I decided, the parents are trying to protect their children by installing rules and grounding them when they do wrong. And whenever she comes over to say something, now we question it. We go back and we question her story which is not always the truth.

Fast forward to how the CSSD handled it. So the children were in care – the child was in care, went into my care, and there was a

safety plan for 30 days. In those 30 days they were going to interview the parents, they were going to interview the siblings and they were going to do a report. Whether the report is going to be laying charges on the parents for assault – and we were going to wait and see what happens after 30 days, after the interviews.

So the interviews did happen but there was no report. And the safety plan was so vague. It was only a one-sentence safety plan and it was not detailed or anything. We didn't want to traumatize the girls – you know, you cannot ever see your parent or anything like that. I didn't do that as a caregiver and as a grandmother.

We, my husband and I, encouraged the parents to be still a part of the kids' lives. We encouraged the girls to still go to their mom's to have sleepovers or whatever, because the safety plan was not detailed and there were no restrictions. And I said, go to your mom. Go visit your mom and they went willingly.

If those stories of abuse were the truth, they would be afraid of their parents. They would be afraid to go there. They would hesitate to go there. But there was none of that behaviour that I was observing and I questioned those girls.

I said: Do you love your mom? Yeah. Do you want to go to your mom? Do you want to sleep over to your mom? Do you want to have – you should have supper over there. You should watch movies over there at your mom's.

And there was always that, you know, warmth, welcoming behaviour that I saw every time. And every time she sees her dad, he gives her a big hug and kiss. And I tell my daughter, I said: What's going on here? I said: Here is her hugging her dad and they love each other. I say, what's going on? And she says: Mom, she's getting what she wants.

She wants to do whatever she want and she can get away with everything with you. Because you're the grandma, she thinks she can do whatever and get away with whatever wants with you. Telling us, she says, you spoil the grandkids, that's why they want to be there, and that's why she was telling this lies about us, because we got rules.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Okay.

Let's give Nympha a little break. She's been going pretty hard.

Ten minutes, please.

Recess

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much, again, ladies and gentlemen.

Manishan, you can pick up where you left off.

M. EDMONDS: So the interviews were done with the parents, and there was two older kids there too that were interviewed. I was informed by a social worker that the interviews went well and that the kids will be returned home. They were just waiting for an official document, the report, that will say it's okay for them to go home.

And then that document hasn't been provided, which was a couple – three weeks ago now, because there was an accident with the reporter and he didn't do the report. So that's what I keep pushing with the CSSD. I say: Let's get the report done so the kids can go home.

The kids want to go home. And it's been, now, seven weeks since that allegation were made by the child. And in that time, I keep asking the CSSD, you know, let's get this over and done with because we know – oh.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

M. EDMONDS: The safety plan was only for 30 days and it's been now almost 42 days. It's a long time for the kids to be separated from their parents, their family. Even though

it's just across the street, they still feel that trauma of separation from their family.

The parents are also afraid of the CSSD and the RCMP if the kids were home unsupervised. And they've sent their kids back – you know, they tell the girls, they say: Go to grandma's. Go to your grandma's. If the RCMP and the CSSD know that you're here unsupervised, we could get into more trouble just having you here. When you see the kids coming to my house, their faces are sad and they look like they have no interest. And I ask them what's wrong and they said: Mom and Dad tell us we got to go.

My point in that story is that there is still fear instilled into the parents. And the fear comes from the CSSD and the RCMP as the authority to take that action, because they are the servants of the government. They serve the government. They serve the law. And working with the IRT, I believe that the CSSD still has the power to do this to the Innu families and to the children.

And in both stories I just told you, the examples, the CSSD holds the power. And when they're not being listened to then the RCMP comes into play – comes to support the CSSD. And so the protocol that was enforced a few years ago, it's like they don't care about the Innu protocol. They still hold the power, the CSSD and the RCMP, in the Innu community.

And my point, again, is I've been with the IRT for seven years and this is what I have observed, and this is only the tip. I know there's other families. I'm only beginning to understand the real trauma and devastation, the damage the CSSD and the RCMP has done to the Innu families, children, in both communities.

It's not the Innu families that make the most damage. It is the white society, the CSSD, the system and the RCMP system and others that come in the Innu community that damage, that hurt the families.

That's it for now.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much.

Do you have any questions of the witness, Mr. Ralph?

P. RALPH: We've heard that from other people, and I've read it in other places where Innu children will sort of, threaten their parents with going to CSSD and maybe even other things like hurting themselves.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

Are you a lawyer?

P. RALPH: Yes.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: Okay.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

M. EDMONDS: Last week there was another incident that the girl, my granddaughter, they had a disagreement. And the girl told her mom: I'm going tell more lies about you. Yeah, I'm going tell more lies about you. I'm going to tell them that you're still beating me.

And she stopped right there and she said, go back to your grandma. So I told my husband; we talked about it. I've advised my daughter: record her. I said: Start recording her. And because this is going to keep going, we got to let people know what Emily is like – my granddaughter.

P. RALPH: So children, as Innu children, must believe that those kinds of threats will work.

M. EDMONDS: They work because you have to believe the child. You know, you want to protect the children so you have to take the allegations seriously.

I know of a 37-year-old, she know about the story and I told her, you know, what my granddaughter has done. She said to me: I

did the same thing to my parents. I lied so I can go out to Goose Bay. You know, she said she did the same thing.

She lied when she was a little girl. So she lied about her parents, that her parents were hitting her and she went to CSSD.

P. RALPH: Right.

I think I read about children wanting to go to the group home years ago in Sheshatshiu, and they would I guess do the same thing to try and –

M. EDMONDS: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Interpret.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

P. RALPH: So that's a challenge for the social worker with CSSD.

I guess on the one hand, like you say, if a child tells them they're being abused, what should they do with that? Do they accept that and not question it or do you think, you know, they need to do more?

M. EDMONDS: Well, CSSD is a child protection. And the IRT has the same mandate: It's to protect the children and to report any abusive allegation.

P. RALPH: So I guess, the question is: How do you deal with the situation where a child might be lying and saying things to IRT or CSSD?

M. EDMONDS: It hits so close to home because she's my grandchild –

P. RALPH: Yes, yes.

M. EDMONDS: – it hit close to home. And immediately my mind worked: there's no bruising, there's no signs of fear and there's no other bruises or hurts on her body or being afraid of her parents or being afraid of her mom or being afraid of the siblings or being afraid of us, you know, there was no signs of that.

But there was the history, her history of lying because she don't like rules. She wants to be with her friends, she wants to be up late, she wants to go group home, she wants to go to Goose Bay to go swimming, restaurants: all those things.

She wants those things because the kids were getting it, the kids that were OD'ing on pills, on other stuff that were being sent out as a group. And that's the history over here and that's what she wanted it. She wanted to be part of those groups that were taking pills and going out to Goose Bay.

P. RALPH: Yes.

So I guess you're looking at it as a grandmother and also as a professional. Are those perspectives the same or are they different?

M. EDMONDS: I would probably treat another client professionally. And because she's my granddaughter, I'm going to hug her, right? I'm going to hug her but I can't touch another kid. You know what I mean? There's a difference in that because you don't know what the other kid has been going through, but you know your own family, right?

P. RALPH: Yeah.

M. EDMONDS: But you don't know the other client – a different client. So there's going to be a difference. It's not going to be the same, how I treat my granddaughter and another client, because another client you don't know the history. You don't know they could be telling the truth. They might be full of trauma, assault and whatnot.

But I know my granddaughter. I know her history so there's going to be a difference. And I put two different hats: I put one hat here, the grandmother hat; and then my IRT hat.

P. RALPH: Yes.

E. EDMONDS: So I wear different hats.

P. RALPH: I guess the idea with the prevention workers and the IRT, generally, is that it'll provide a service which is more consistent with Innu values because the people doing the job understand the community better.

M. EDMONDS: With the IRT we work to prevent removals – prevention. And we do culture connections with children that are already in care outside the community and culture and family connections, while we also advocate and we support families whose children are in care.

That's a job we do at prevention services.

P. RALPH: Right.

And I guess right now, the Innu Round Table are, in a sense, carrying out the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador legislation and policies. And I guess the hope and, obviously, the goal is for the Innu in Davis Inlet and Sheshatshiu to have their own child, youth and family services system. Is that right?

M. EDMONDS: Yeah. That is the goal, is that the Innu to run their own services. They will run their own child welfare eventually.

And that's why I keep talking about the protocol. That's where it started with the government and the Innu leadership. You know, that protocol is very important document that the CSSD should be following, but they're not following it.

P. RALPH: Right.

M. EDMONDS: The Innu are getting ready to run their own service. They're starting to train Innu to be Innu social workers. And they only started in March and it's a four-year program to get their social worker certificate, so it's ongoing now. It's started.

That's for Natuashish and Sheshatshiu.

P. RALPH: Once there is Innu law about child and family services, then I would think that the protocol would look very different – if there was even a protocol.

M. EDMONDS: There will be no need for protocol when the Innu law is done.

P. RALPH: Right.

M. EDMONDS: Right now, the protocol is a working document.

P. RALPH: Yes.

M. EDMONDS: In progress.

P. RALPH: Right.

M. EDMONDS: Yeah.

P. RALPH: Okay.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Nastash?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I was just saying to Mary Jane, thank you for coming forward and speaking about the challenges with the protocol which we've had in place for a couple of years. And to look closely at that and the challenges that we're faced with in working with that protocol. And hopefully that we'll get an idea from Peter of getting a copy of it.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: The book?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: And also, the book that Mary Jane was telling me about today. A federal employee had written a book about the Mushuau Innu and the book is called *Bathtubs but No Water*. So I just want to make a note of that –

P. RALPH: Right.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: – that we get a copy.

P. RALPH: Okay. We'll get it added, yup. No problem.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Yeah.

Okay, thank you. Tshenashkumitin.

P. RALPH: I think the protocol has already been admitted as an exhibit.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Okay.

M. EDMONDS: Okay.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: I have one question: In the case where IRT want to complain to CSSD about the fact that it wasn't being followed, did IRT do that in writing? And did CSSD respond?

M. EDMONDS: Yes.

There were emails back and forth and there was conferences. And there's a timeline being written down from when the first complaint happened to where we're at now.

So there's a timeline now that's been written down, yeah.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

[Dialogue between Interpreter Byrne and M. Edmonds in Mushuau-aimun.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Manishan, when CSSD is interviewing the parents to prepare the report, do they provide an interpreter for Innu who don't understand English?

M. EDMONDS: Yeah. They usually do have an interpreter. yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you both very much.

M. EDMONDS: Mm-hmm.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: We probably should have a break, will we?

Recess