

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

**WRITTEN CLOSING SUBMISSIONS OF
THE NUNATSIAVUT GOVERNMENT**

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A. Introduction

1. As a result of an application for General Standing at the Inquiry Respecting the Treatment, Experiences and Outcomes of Innu in the Child Protection System (the “**Inquiry**”) the Commissioners granted the Nunatsiavut Government (the “**NG**”) limited standing to participate in the Inquiry with respect to the following matters:
 - Formal hearings on the history of the Innu (observer status and access to relevant documents)
 - Formal hearings on the history of child protection in relation to the Innu (access to relevant documents)
 - Formal hearings on legislation, policies and practices of the child protection system in relation to the Innu (access to relevant documents)
 - The right to provide written and/or oral submissions at the conclusion of the Inquiry
2. The NG had no involvement or access to documents relevant to the death investigations or roundtables that were subject to the Inquiry.
3. In accordance with the scope of the NG’s limited standing, these submissions focus on broader systemic issues identified over the course of the Inquiry and will conclude with recommendations offered to the Commissioners for consideration. The NG offers these submissions from the perspective of an Indigenous government with recognized responsibilities in relation to child, youth and family well-being, and with an interest in the development of successful, culturally appropriate and sustainable systems of child welfare.
4. While the NG does not purport to speak to the specific experiences of Innu families and communities, it respectfully submits that the systemic themes emerging from the Inquiry raise issues of broader relevance to the design, governance and delivery of child welfare services affecting Indigenous peoples. It is in this context that the NG provides the following observations and recommendations for the Commissions consideration.

B. Background

5. The NG was established in 2005 upon the enactment of the *Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement*, S.N.L. 2004, c L-3 (the “**Agreement**”). The Agreement is a constitutionally protected modern treaty which concerns the lands, coast, sea ice and settlement areas known as Nunatsiavut. The NG is an Inuit regional government. Although Nunatsiavut remains part of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the NG has the distinct ability to exercise jurisdiction over many areas of governance, including health, education, culture, language, justice and community matters.
6. The NG submits that the delivery of child and family services in Canada engages a complex legal and jurisdictional framework involving federal, provincial, and Indigenous authorities. In Labrador, this framework is further informed by modern treaty arrangements, including the *Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement*. Chapter 17 of the Agreement grants the NG jurisdiction to enact laws in Labrador Inuit Lands and the Inuit Communities in matters respecting social, family, youth and children’s programs, services and facilities for Inuit, including with respect to children in need of protective intervention. While this jurisdiction has not yet been fully exercised, the NG is actively preparing to implement Inuit-specific child protection legislation. At present, child and youth Beneficiaries of the Agreement remain subject to provincial child protection laws.
7. More broadly, developments at the federal level recognizing Indigenous jurisdiction over child and family services reflect an evolving legal landscape in which Indigenous governments are increasingly central to the design and delivery of such services. In particular, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* affirm the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to exercise jurisdiction in this area and establishes a framework through which Indigenous laws may have the force of federal law. The Act further emphasizes the importance of culturally appropriate services, substantive equality, and the best interests of the child as primary considerations.
8. The NG submits that the systemic issues identified in this Inquiry underscore the importance of ensuring that governance structures, funding arrangements, and service models are not only aligned with, but actively support, the effective exercise of Indigenous authority in this area. This includes supporting the transition from provincially delivered systems to those designed and governed by Indigenous governments and ensuring that such transitions are accompanied by

sustained funding, intergovernmental coordination, and implementation mechanisms capable of giving full and practical effect to Indigenous jurisdiction.

C. Formal Hearings on the History of the Innu

9. The NG acknowledges that the experiences of Innu children and families within the child protection system cannot be understood in isolation from the broader historical and cultural context of the Innu people. The Inquiry heard evidence respecting the rich and enduring traditions, knowledge systems, and land-based practices of the Innu, as well as the lethal disruptions caused by colonization, including forced settlement, loss of language and culture, and the imposition of external governance structures. In the NG's submission, this context is essential to understanding both the root causes of current system involvement and the importance of advancing decolonized, community-led approaches to child and family wellbeing.
10. Evidence before the Inquiry demonstrates that, prior to sustained contact with external systems, Innu society was grounded in strong, interconnected systems of leadership, family life, and child-rearing. Children were raised within extended family networks, with knowledge passed down through oral tradition, storytelling, and lived experience on the land. Roles within families and communities were clearly understood, and the care of children was a shared responsibility. Health, education, and wellbeing were not delivered through discrete systems, they were integrated within daily life, cultural practices, and relationships to the land.
11. Central to this way of life was the land, or Nutshimit, which witnesses consistently described as foundational to identity, wellbeing, and the raising of children. The land provided food, medicine, and opportunities for learning, while also serving as the primary setting through which children developed skills, values, and a sense of belonging. Time spent on the land with parents, grandparents, and elders was integral to the development of healthy individuals and families. In this context, the removal or disruption of access to the land represents not only a physical displacement, it is a profound disruption to cultural continuity and child development.
12. The evidence heard reflects that the transition from land-based living to settled communities, alongside the introduction of external religious, educational, and governance systems, resulted in a rapid and destructive disruption to Innu life.

Traditional practices and spiritual systems were discouraged or prohibited, children were required to attend externally imposed schooling systems, and family structures were altered through policies and practices that undermined parental authority and community decision-making. These changes were accompanied by broader social and economic shifts, including increased dependency on external systems and exposure to widespread sexual and physical violence. In many cases, this abuse occurred within the very systems that purported to act in a child's "best interests." The result was devastating: families were fractured, children were separated from safe and stable relationships, and the integrity of the family unit was severely disrupted, with lasting consequences for cultural continuity.

13. Witnesses also described the lasting and intergenerational impacts of these disruptions. The erosion of language and cultural knowledge, the breakdown of traditional teaching and parenting practices, and the experiences of removal and institutionalization have contributed to ongoing challenges within families and communities. At the same time, the evidence reflects the resilience of the Innu people and ongoing efforts to reclaim language, culture, and governance. In the NG's respectful submission, these historical and ongoing impacts are directly relevant to understanding present-day involvement in the child protection system and reinforce the importance of supporting Indigenous led, culturally grounded approaches to child and family wellbeing.

D. Formal Hearings on the History of Child Protection in Relation to the Innu

14. The evidence before the Inquiry demonstrates that the development and implementation of child welfare legislation in Innu communities are inextricably linked to broader systems of colonial control and violence, including health, education, and religious institutions. Witnesses emphasized that state involvement in family life emerged alongside forced settlement, the imposition of external authority structures, and the increasing regulation of Indigenous families by government and church actors. In this context, child welfare was not experienced as a neutral protective system, but as part of a broader framework of control that displaced Innu decision-making and authority over children and families.
15. The hearings further revealed that early and ongoing child welfare interventions were often characterized by coercive and disruptive practices, including the removal of children from their families and communities. Witnesses described instances where children were apprehended or threatened with apprehension,

sometimes in circumstances where families were actively resisting intervention or attempting to care for their children. These removals frequently resulted in children being sent out of community, with destructive and lasting impacts on identity, belonging, and family relationships. The evidence suggests that such practices contributed to cycles of disconnection, with many children unable to reintegrate into their families or communities upon return.

16. A consistent theme arising from the evidence is the deep mistrust that developed between Innu families and child welfare authorities. Witnesses described a system that was perceived as adversarial, unresponsive, and at times actively working against families, including through limited communication, shifting requirements, and barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making. This mistrust has had enduring consequences, including reluctance among families to engage with services, even where support may be needed, and has undermined the effectiveness of child welfare interventions.
17. The structure and availability of services within Innu communities have been closely tied to external funding arrangements and jurisdictional frameworks. Witnesses described how key services and programs were often developed in response to specific funding opportunities or government initiatives, rather than through sustained, community-driven planning. At the same time, the involvement of multiple levels of government and service providers has contributed to fragmented service delivery, with overlapping responsibilities and limited coordination. These dynamics have had a direct impact on the consistency, accessibility, and cultural relevance of services available to children and families.
18. Importantly, the design and delivery of these services continue to orient Innu communities toward reliance on external systems, rather than supporting the development of community-based and self-sustaining supports. Witnesses described this as an ongoing form of colonization, in which externally driven service models perpetuate dependency and undermine local capacity. In doing so, these systems risk replicating the very harms they are intended to prevent or address, including the disruption of family structures, community cohesion, and cultural continuity.
19. The record further underscores the importance of approaches to child and family wellbeing that are grounded in Innu values, relationships, and ways of life. Witnesses emphasized the role of extended family, community involvement, and land-based knowledge in supporting children and families, as well as the

importance of addressing broader social realities, including housing, poverty, and mental health, in a holistic manner. Programs and services developed within the community, or in close partnership with it, were described as more responsive to the needs of children and families. The NG submits that these perspectives are essential considerations in any effort to improve outcomes for Innu children.

E. Formal Hearings on Legislation, Policies and Practices of the Child Protection System in Relation to the Innu

20. The formal hearings respecting the legislation, policies, and practices of the child protection system in relation to the Innu provide important insight into the structure and operation of the current system and its historical legacy, as well as its interaction with Innu children, youth, and families. While the legislative framework is framed as promoting the safety and wellbeing of children, the evidence before the Inquiry demonstrates that its application within Innu communities has been shaped by broader historical, social, and institutional forces in ways that have often undermined those objectives.
21. The evidence heard through these proceedings demonstrates that the legislative and policy framework governing child protection does not reflect the realities, values, or priorities of Innu communities. In particular, the system is grounded in externally developed standards and approaches that are inconsistent with community-based understandings of family, caregiving, and child wellbeing. This has resulted in a persistent and systemic disconnect between the objectives of the legislation and the lived experiences of the families to whom it is applied.
22. The Inquiry also heard evidence relating to the practical implementation of child protection policies and procedures, including the exercise of discretion by service providers, decision-making processes, and the interaction between families and the system. Witnesses described persistent challenges in communication, consistency, and the ability of families to meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their children. These practices have, in many instances, resulted in the separation of families, disrupting family systems and, in turn, fracturing the broader community structures that support them. The resulting erosion of trust has undermined both the effectiveness of interventions and the legitimacy of the system within Innu communities.
23. Further, the evidence reflects the complexity of service delivery within a multi-jurisdictional framework involving provincial, federal, and Indigenous actors. This has, at times, resulted in overlapping roles, gaps in responsibility, and challenges

in coordination. The structure of service delivery, including reliance on external providers and varying levels of resourcing, has also influenced how legislation and policy are experienced on the ground.

24. The hearings underscore the importance of child protection approaches that are grounded in the cultural, social, and geographic realities of Innu communities. The evidence demonstrates that a child's cultural identity, encompassing their connection to community, language, and land, is not a peripheral consideration, but a central factor in their safety and wellbeing. The NG submits that this principle must be meaningfully reflected in the interpretation and application of the "best interests of the child" standard, which serves as the paramount consideration in child protection legislation. This requires that legislative provisions, as well as the policies and standards that guide front-line decision-making, treat cultural identity not as one factor among many, but as a determinative element in assessing a child's best interests, particularly for Innu children.
25. The record further demonstrates that where the statutory framework and associated policies are not implemented in a manner consistent with this principle, the consequences for Innu children are severe and enduring. In particular, placement and intervention decisions made without sufficient regard to cultural continuity, including placements outside of community or culture, have resulted in disconnection from family, language, and identity, and in some cases have exacerbated the harms the system is intended to address. These outcomes highlight a persistent gap between the intent of the legislative framework, the direction set by policy, and the realities of operational practice. They further point to systemic challenges, including service models that remain insufficiently adapted to Innu circumstances and that prioritize short-term risk mitigation over culturally grounded, long-term wellbeing.
26. The NG submits that the evidence arising from these hearings demonstrates the need for greater alignment between legislative purpose, policy direction, and front-line practice within the child protection system. While existing statutory frameworks recognize the centrality of the child's best interests, the record indicates that this standard has not been interpreted or applied in a manner that fully reflects the cultural realities and rights of Innu children. Addressing this disconnect will require a more integrated and coherent approach, in which cultural considerations are not only articulated at the legislative and policy level, but are consistently and meaningfully operationalized in decision-making processes. This alignment is critical to improving outcomes for Innu children and

families and to developing a system that is both credible and responsive to the communities it serves.

F. Systemic Issues

27. Taken together, the evidence before the Inquiry does not disclose a series of discrete or unrelated concerns, but rather a pattern of consistent outcomes across the three streams of formal hearings. The historical record, the experiences of Innu children and families, and the examination of the legislative, policy, and practice framework governing the child protection system all point to the same underlying dynamics. The NG submits that this convergence of evidence requires a systemic analysis. The issues identified are not attributable to individual circumstances or isolated decision-making, but are grounded in the structure, design, and operation of the system itself.
28. The evidence before the Inquiry demonstrates that the patterns identified across the hearings are rooted in broader structural conditions, including the enduring impacts of colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and longstanding inequities in the design and delivery of services to Indigenous communities. As reflected in Investigator's Report of Kenn Richard and Tara Petti, the harms experienced by Innu children arise from "entrenched systemic failures rooted in colonial legacy, structural inequity, chronic underinvestment, a lack of cultural safety, poor communication and weak accountability". These conditions are not unique to Innu communities and have produced comparable patterns of involvement with child protection systems, together with parallel experiences of profound and intergenerational harm affecting children, families, and community structures.
29. The record further establishes that, despite some improvement over the years, the system remains predominantly crisis-driven, with intervention occurring at the point of acute risk rather than through early, preventative, and culturally grounded supports. This is reinforced by a reliance on removal-based interventions, including out-of-community and out-of-province placements, which, while addressing immediate safety concerns, result in significant cultural dislocation. At the same time, gaps in community driven services, including mental health and family supports, limit viable alternatives to removal. These dynamics are reflected across both Innu and Inuit contexts.
30. The evidence also demonstrates that prevailing approaches to risk assessment insufficiently account for the collective, cultural, and structural realities of Indigenous communities. By focusing primarily on the individual child or family,

these approaches fail to capture the broader conditions shaping wellbeing, including intergenerational trauma, community context, and systemic inequities. This contributes to persistent overrepresentation and limits the effectiveness of interventions for both Innu and Inuit children.

31. These systemic concerns also engage fundamental rights-based considerations. The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care, the disruption of cultural continuity, and the failure to provide equitable and culturally appropriate services raise issues of substantive equality and the protection of Indigenous identity and self-determination. The evidence before the Inquiry reflects patterns that have been recognized in broader Canadian and international contexts, including the obligation to ensure that Indigenous children are able to maintain connections to their culture, language, and community. In this respect, the systemic issues identified are not only matters of service design but engage the realization of rights held by Innu and Inuit children and families.
32. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the issues identified are systemic in nature and embedded within the legislative, policy, and operational framework of the child protection system. In this respect, the evidence demonstrates that the system is operating as designed, but that the design itself is the source of the harm. The NG submits that these systemic conditions give rise to inequitable outcomes irrespective of individual intent. While front-line actors may act in good faith, they do so within structures that shape and constrain decision-making, and which can produce harmful outcomes even in the absence of individual fault. The resulting impacts, on cultural continuity, community connection, and long-term wellbeing, engage fundamental considerations of substantive equality and the rights of Innu and Inuit children to maintain their identity, language, and relationships. Addressing these issues requires a coherent and integrated approach that aligns legislation, policy, and practice, and is grounded in culturally informed, community-driven service delivery. It is to the consideration of such measures that this submission now turns.

G. Recommendations and Conclusion

33. The NG submits that the evidence before the Inquiry demonstrates that the issues identified are systemic in nature and require a coordinated and structural response. The recommendations set out below are grounded in the findings arising from the formal hearings and are directed toward aligning legislative, policy, and operational practices with the needs, priorities, and rights of Innu

children and families. These recommendations are intended to support the development of a child protection system that is culturally grounded, community-driven, and capable of delivering equitable and effective outcomes. As such, the NG offers the following recommendations for the Commissioners consideration:

(1) Support the Devolution of Child and Family Services to Innu Governance

The Commission should recommend that the Federal and Provincial Governments take coordinated and concrete steps to support the advancement of Innu jurisdiction over child and family services. This support should extend beyond policy recognition and, at a minimum, include the following measures:

- (i) Legislative alignment and recognition of Innu authority over child and family services, including the removal of barriers within existing provincial frameworks and the development of mechanisms to operationalize Innu laws;
- (ii) Stable, long-term, and needs-based funding arrangements that support not only service delivery, but also governance, prevention programming, and system design, moving away from crisis-driven funding models;
- (iii) Capacity building and transition planning, including investments in workforce development, institutional capacity, and a phased transfer of services from provincial systems to Innu-led models, with continuity of care for children and families; and
- (iv) Coordinated implementation mechanisms, including formal tripartite processes and data-sharing frameworks that respect Indigenous data sovereignty and support effective planning and service delivery.

(2) Recognize the Need for Interim Measures Pending the Full Exercise of Innu Jurisdiction

The Commission should recognize that the devolution of child and family services to Innu governance is a complex and multi-year process. In the interim, while provincial systems continue to exercise jurisdiction, immediate and concrete steps must be taken to improve outcomes for Innu children and families. This should include:

- (i) Ensuring mandatory cultural safety and relevance within existing services, including mandatory incorporation of Innu cultural knowledge, land-based prevention and education, language, and community involvement in decision-making processes;
- (ii) Mandatory, consistent and meaningful involvement of Innu in case management and service design;
- (iii) Coordinated and meaningful oversight and accountability to ensure policies are applied in a manner consistent with the rights and realities of Innu children, families and communities.

(3) Establish Clear and Coordinated Communication and Information-Sharing Frameworks

The evidence demonstrates that fragmented communication and information-sharing practices undermine continuity of care and effective decision-making. Improved coordination in this area is mandatory. Best practice should include, at a minimum:

- (i) Implementation of standardized, culturally relevant, protocols for information sharing across service providers and governments to ensure continuity of care;
- (ii) Ensure timely and transparent communication with families and communities in all stages of decision-making; and
- (iii) Develop data governance frameworks that support access to information by Innu authorities while respecting privacy and Indigenous data sovereignty.

(4) Reform Rotational (“Fly-In, Fly-Out”) Service Delivery Models

Continuity, stability, and institutional knowledge are critical to effective child protection services. Service delivery models must support consistent relationships and local understanding. Methods to achieve increased stability may include:

(i) Reduce reliance on rotational staffing and prioritize permanent, community-based positions;

(ii) Invest in the recruitment, training, and retention of local personnel; and

(iii) Ensure continuity of care and relationship-based practice as core service delivery requirements.

34. In closing, the NG submits that the evidence before the Inquiry presents a clear and consistent picture: the experiences of Innu children and families within the child protection system are not isolated, nor are they the result of individual decisions, but arise from structural conditions that have developed over time and continue to operate today. These conditions, rooted in colonial paternalism, cultural disruption, and systemic inequities in the design and delivery of services, have produced outcomes that are both harmful, persistent, and in some cases fatal. The evidence further demonstrates that these experiences are not unique to the Innu, they are also shared across Inuit communities, where similar patterns of displacement, disconnection, and service gaps have led to comparable devastation on children and families.
35. The NG also wishes to recognize the strength and courage of the Innu individuals, families, and communities who participated in this Inquiry. The willingness to share personal experiences of harm, including the loss of children to the child protection system in Newfoundland and Labrador, reflects a commitment to ensuring that these experiences are acknowledged and that meaningful change follows. These accounts are not only evidence; they are acts of resilience and leadership. They ground this Inquiry in lived reality and underscore the urgency of addressing the systemic issues that have been identified.
36. At its core, the evidence affirms a fundamental principle: the role of the state in protecting children cannot replicate the care, identity, and belonging provided by family, community, and culture. Systems that remove children from these foundations, even with protective intent, risk compounding harm rather than resolving it. The NG submits that meaningful reform requires a shift toward approaches that support families, strengthen communities, and recognize the authority of Indigenous governments to care for their own children. It is through such a shift, grounded in culture, relationship, and self-determination, that the child protection system can move toward outcomes that are not only safer, but

more just, more successful, and more reflective of the lived realities and rights of Innu and Inuit children and families

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED this 10th day of April, 2026

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