

Métis debate kinship care

Toddler's death suggests policy may put some foster kids at risk

BY PAULA SIMONS, ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ELISE STOLTE, THE EDMONTON JOURNAL FEBRUARY 21, 2009

A four-year-old Métis girl in the care of children's services died of head injuries last month. Her 24-year-old aunt, who was acting as her foster parent, has been charged with murder, criminal negligence causing death, and failing to provide the necessities of life.

Neither can be identified under the terms of the province's Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. But their tragic story demands that we re-examine the province's fierce commitment to the policy of kinship care -- the practice of placing kids apprehended by the child welfare system with extended family members -- in some cases, whether those family members are equipped to deal with them or not.

In the last three years, the number of foster children in kinship care in this province has risen by 97 per cent -- with most of those placements in the aboriginal community.

The idea is to keep sibling groups together, to maintain family relations, and to keep native kids immersed in their own culture. It's a lovely idea on paper. The reality is not always so simple.

In August 2008, provincial child care workers from Métis Settlements Child and Family Services, also known as Alberta Children's Services Region 10, apprehended six siblings from their parents' home on a Métis settlement north of Edmonton.

Some of those close to the family say all six children, who ranged in age from infant to seven years, appeared to have serious medical and behavioural problems, possibly caused by pre-natal exposure to drugs and alcohol.

But instead of splitting the children up, instead of placing them with experienced foster parents trained to handle children with special needs, social workers kept all six together -- and placed them with a young aunt.

The rules for foster care and kinship care are quite different. A new foster parent can only care for a maximum of two children. A trained and experienced foster parent can accept a maximum of four. But Métis Settlements puts no limit on the number of children a kinship caregiver can foster at once -- in part, because rural Métis families tend to be large.

And so the six troubled children went to live with their aunt, then 23, and her 27-year-old boyfriend, both of whom were unemployed.

The couple apparently had no home of their own --they'd been living with the boyfriend's mother. Social workers put them and the six kids in a one-bedroom furnished apartment downtown for about a month. The couple eventually found a rental home in west Edmonton. Often, the aunt's stepfather, the children's "grandpa," stayed with them.

Under the rules of kinship care, children aren't to be placed in a relative's home until social workers have completed a home assessment, a criminal record and security clearance check, and a child welfare intervention history. But according to sources close to the case, no criminal background check was completed until after the four-year-old died.

Had such a check been performed, it might have revealed that both the boyfriend and the stepfather were known to police. The boyfriend, according to family members, had broken away from his former gang to go straight some time ago, and suffered a serious physical attack as a result. He was so badly injured, he found it difficult to find work. As for the stepfather, court records obtained by The Journal show he was convicted and jailed for cocaine possession in 2006. He was to appear in court on

another matter last month but, according to court documents, he failed to appear. There is currently a warrant outstanding for his arrest.

NO HOME, NO JOBS

So why were six apparently high-needs children placed in the care of a young couple with no home, no jobs and no parenting experience? Did the pair receive the government support and supervision they needed to cope with their sudden responsibility?

Shane Blyan is a Métis journalist and community activist who knew the young couple. He says the pair tried hard to cope with the medical and emotional needs of the six children.

"All they were doing was going to doctors and dentists," says Blyan. "They were trying to give these kids the only stable home they'd ever known. These children were very developmentally stunted in a lot of ways, especially the baby. They were emaciated, like they'd come from a Third World country -- they needed a lot nurturing."

Blyan says the couple did their best, but told him they received little or no help from the child welfare authority.

"Quite honestly, the only reason they were given these kids was because nobody else would take them," he says. "The entire idea was to keep those children together. That's an admirable idea, but where was the support?"

Melanie Omenihoe is a Métis community leader and the chair of the Edmonton Aboriginal Coalition for Children's Services.

"Those two young people, even in the best of circumstances, were set up for failure," she says. "The kids were very physically aggressive with each other, they had severe behavioural issues. I'm 50 years old, and if somebody put that responsibility on my doorstep, I'd be on my knees in 24 hours."

The Métis Settlements child welfare authority, she says, didn't have the staff or the resources to make sure the placement was working.

Over at the offices of the Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority, staff bristle at those allegations. But under the terms of the Child, Youth, and Family Enhancement Act, the authority's chief executive officer cannot comment on the case.

"We're restricted by what we can say, under the act," says Lillian Parenteau. "That means we can't defend ourselves -- we can only listen to all the speculation and rumours. Our community is rife with it. Do people actually believe that? That we would be part of that? It causes me horror that people would think that, but we're just not free to speak."

"Our staff are professional staff," says Janet Fizzell, the authority's senior program manager. "We would never knowingly place a child with people who we did not believe were good for the children. Our responsibility lies very heavy on our shoulders."

The Métis Settlements Authority is unique in Alberta. In 1999, the eight Métis settlements were given responsibility for their own child welfare system. While the other child welfare regions serve specific geographic areas, Region 10 serves not just the 10,000 people who live in the eight scattered settlement communities, but also families who have moved to places such as Edmonton.

Region 10 employs a front-line staff of just 15 registered social workers and five other child-care workers. Seven work in Edmonton, while the others are based in offices in St. Paul, High Prairie and Paddle River. That's a lot of territory for 15 social workers to handle.

Right now, Region 10 is providing services to about 240 children. Of those, about 200 have been apprehended from their parents or placed in some kind of protective care.

Overall, Alberta Children's Services has about three times as many foster homes as kinship-care homes. But in Region 10, there are twice as many children in kinship care as in foster care.

"That has just been the way that aboriginal people look after their children. That has been the way aboriginal families have been for eons," says Parenteau. "Family will say to family, 'I need you to raise my child.' We do this because it's our way of ensuring that our children understand our culture."

Kinship care, she says, is about more than protecting Métis cultural values.

"Kids feel more comfortable with people who know them -- it means there's minimal disruption for the child. We've done very well. We know our community and we know our families."

Phil Goodman is Métis, and a senior policy adviser to Alberta Children's Services. For years, he argues, white social workers took native children out of their communities to be raised by white families, a policy that led to generations of cultural alienation and family estrangement. Kinship care, he insists, is better for the Métis and First Nations communities and for the kids themselves.

"Foster care has been a dismal generational failure in western Canada," says Goodman. "There are generations of kids out there who've never been raised by someone who wasn't being paid to be with them."

One death, he says, shouldn't undermine the overall success of the kinship care system.

"Our record of outcomes, in terms of serious injury and deaths, is less than in the general population. That's a miracle, considering how damaged and fragile these children are when they come to us."

It's true, the practice of removing aboriginal and Métis children from their communities to be raised in non-native foster homes and institutions hasn't exactly been a grand success. And in an ideal world, it would make sense to keep vulnerable children within an extended family, so they feel less alienated, and so struggling parents are more willing to ask for help when they need it.

Yet I fear that when kinship care becomes the entrenched orthodoxy, we put children at risk. When communities and families are riven by addiction and violence, it's not rational to expect there to be a capable relative standing by, ready to take on the burden of raising a troubled child -- much less a large sibling group.

It's easy to say that an unemployed girl who'd never completed high school was a poor choice to raise these six little high-needs kids. But if this young woman had been Mother Teresa, Mary Poppins and Dr. Spock all rolled into one, she might have been staggered by the responsibility of caring for six children with serious medical and behavioural problems. If, as friends and family allege, no proper background checks were done on all the people living in the home, if no proper supports were provided, how shocked can we be that something went horribly wrong?

A dogmatic insistence on kinship care placements at all costs, allied to a refusal to split up siblings, even temporarily, sets the stage for a system where the safety of individual children is sacrificed to cultural ideology.

Yet kinship care continues to be a provincial priority.

"It is the preferred model for our aboriginal and Métis families," says Janis Tarchuk, minister of children and youth services. "As much as possible, we want to get aboriginal and Métis kids into aboriginal homes."

Tarchuk insists her department does not compromise safety in the name of political ideology.

"There is some value in keeping siblings together, but it has to be with the supports that are needed," she says.

"You want to get a culturally appropriate placement, but not at all costs. Safety considerations cannot

come second."

It's an assurance that falls rather flat, in light of this most recent death on the minister's watch.

Tarchuk won't speak to the specifics of this murder charge, or to the issue of what supports the aunt received. She'll only say her department will conduct an internal review of the four-year-old's death. It will not be made public.

MAJOR REVIEW

However, she says her department was already planning a major review of its kinship care policy, which she hopes will be complete by this summer.

Will that review be public?

"I'll share what information I can," says Tarchuk. "There's nothing to hide here."

But while Tarchuk is reviewing, Melanie Omenihoe fears the kinship care system means too many aboriginal kids get second-class treatment.

"We never wanted substandard care for our children. We don't want a two-tiered system. I wish I could stand up and say, 'We should always keep our kids with their families.' But the truth is, ours is a community with a lot of social ills, and we can't put kids at risk."

"I don't want her death to be in vain. If nothing else, let us stop this craziness for any other kid in this situation."

Shane Blyan says many aboriginal communities are too damaged to care for their children, without more help.

"I think the settlements and reserves should be running their own child welfare systems -- that's the whole idea of self-government. But government support needs to be there. These are decimated communities, and they need support."

"Social work is tough, and social workers are overwhelmed by a system that's inadequately funded and managed. Who wants to be the chief of the fire department in a town where all the houses are on fire? The social workers are like guys trying to put out those fires with thimbles of water."

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