



**PROMISING PRACTICES IN  
FIRST NATIONS CHILD WELFARE MANAGEMENT AND  
GOVERNANCE**

**Weechi-it-te-win Family Services:  
Utilizing a Decentralized Model in the Provision of  
Bi-Cultural Services**

Prepared by:

Peter Ferris  
Estelle Simard  
George Simard  
&  
Jacqueline Ramdatt

September 2005

## **Contributors**

### **Weechi-it-te-win Family Services:**

Judy Morrison, Community Liaison Worker  
Kathy Kishequeb, WFS Resource Manager  
Lawrence Kelly, WFS Resource Manager  
George Potson, Cultural Coordinator  
Peter Ferris, Director of Services  
Dave Spencer, Family services Worker, Seine River First Nation  
Jocelyn Johnson, Resource Manager  
Dylan Simard, WFS Investigation and Assessment Worker  
Katie Jack, WFS Training and Learning Centre Manager  
Ron McKinnon, WFS Finance Manager  
Lauris Werenki, WFS Children's Mental Health Worker  
Charmaine Hebert, Family Services Worker, Big Grassy First Nation  
Estelle Simard, Family Violence Project Coordinator  
Rupert Hunter, Seine River First Nation Manager  
Laurie Rose, WFS Investigation and Assessment Unit Supervisor  
Beatrice McMillan, WFS Investigation and Assessment Worker  
Priscilla Jourdain, Child Care Worker, Lac La Croix First Nation  
Sharon Adams, Lac La Croix First Nation  
George Simard, WFS Executive Director

## **Abstract**

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services is a community oriented, community based, Native staffed child and family service agency. Weechi-it-te-win serves 10 area First Nations communities located in the Rainy Lake District of Ontario. The agency was created out of the collective wisdom of the 10 Chiefs of the Rainy Lake Tribal Council. Its purpose was to combat the destructive practices of mainstream child welfare agencies within the 10 First Nations communities. Weechi-it-te-win's fundamental purpose is to revitalize the *Pimatziwin* of the communities served. Operating under the mandate of the Chiefs, Weechi-it-te-win provides bi-cultural child protection and family support services. Utilizing a decentralized model of governance and management, Weechi-it-te-win Family Services places an emphasis on personal and family healing as well as community capacity building.

## **Introduction**

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services (WFS) is a community oriented, community based, Native staffed child welfare and family services agency serving 10 First Nations communities. The agency offers a full range of child protection, family support and community development services with its fundamental purpose and vision the revitalization of *Pimatiziwin* - the mandate given by the Creator to seek and live a good life in all aspects. Central to WFS is the determination to restore community systems and cease the erosion of the family. The vision to revitalize the Anishinabe way, those inherent ways of knowing and being that were there from the beginning, is the driving force behind agency operations.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of WFS is an example of First Nations communities reclaiming jurisdiction for their children and safeguarding a cultural heritage shaken by the impacts colonization, the legacy of the residential schools and intervention by the mainstream child welfare system. Approximately 40% of the 76, 000 children and youth placed in out of home care in Canada are Aboriginal (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). As a number of children still experience placement outside of their community in non-Aboriginal homes, cultural displacement remains a pressing concern. Weechi-it-te-win Family Services is a community-based response to keeping children within their communities and culture. It is a dynamic agency with many promising practices. However, it is the agency's use of a decentralized model of management and governance in the provision of bi-cultural services which will be the primary focus of this article.

## **Procedure**

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services responded to the Call for Promising Practices in First Nations Child Welfare Management and Governance put forth by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada. The data for this article was gathered through a series of meetings. The first meeting hosted by WFS was attended by 17 Weechi-it-te-win staff and community members who graciously shared their experience and knowledge regarding the agency's creation, philosophy, services, challenges and successes. The second meeting was attended by WFS management staff who provided insight into the development, implementation and evolution of the agency's decentralized model.

## **Agency Background: The Roots of Decentralization**

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services acquired status as a family services and child welfare provider, fully mandated under the Ontario *Child and Family Services Act*, in 1987. The agency's beginnings, however, can be traced back to the mid 1970's when concerned First Nations community members, including Elders, parents and political leaders of the Rainy Lake Tribal Area (R.L.T.A) decided that something had to be done about the number of children being taken from their communities by the local child welfare

---

<sup>1</sup>“Anishinaabe or more properly Anishinabek (which is the plural form of the word) is a self-description often used by the people belonging to the indigenous Odawa, Ojibwe, and Algonkin peoples of North America, who share closely related Algonkian languages. There are many variant spellings of this name, depending on the transcription scheme and also whether the name is singular or plural.”  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anishinable>

authority. Community leaders knew that systems and knowledge were in place within the community to look after their children and in 1977, a commitment was made between one of the First Nations [in the area] and the local child welfare authority to stop removing the children.

The period between 1978 – 1983, was a critical time in the development of WFS as communities worked to take back the authority to make decisions and reassert the right to take care of their children – a right that had never been surrendered. It is during this time that the decentralized model currently employed at WFS began to take form. In 1982, the Rainy Lake Tribal Area Chiefs resolved to create an “Indian Alternative” to mainstream child welfare. The Chiefs established the Native Child Welfare Planning Committee to assess the child welfare system of the day as it applied to First Nations children and to propose an alternate plan and concept of child and family services based on Anishinabe values and customs. The Committee developed a concept for community care for the 10 First Nations communities of the Rainy Lake Tribal Area which was accepted by the Chiefs in 1983.

In a report submitted to the Chiefs, the Committee articulated the vision of a Native model of child welfare called the *Rainy Lake Community Care Program*. The program was based on goals adopted by the Council of Chiefs, namely:

- To preserve Aboriginal culture and identity among the people;
- To strengthen and maintain Aboriginal families and communities; and
- To assure the growth, support and development of children within Aboriginal families and communities (WFS, 1987).

The central theme and character of community care is conveyed in the Ojibway word *weechi-it-te-win* which means helping, supporting and supporting appropriately; this word describes the nature of the Indian Alternative conceived by the planning committee and endorsed by the Chiefs (WFS, 1987). *Weechi-it-te-win* was adopted by the Chiefs in the name of the new corporation, *Weechi-it-te-win Family Services Inc.* that would function as the vehicle for the establishment, development and delivery of the Community Care Program with its full range of community services. The model of community care services is based on six essential principles which are consistent with the community customs, standards and values of the 10 First Nations which are: family-focused, respectful, community oriented, community based, Native staffed and community directed.

Under the direction of the Rainy Lake Region Tribal Chiefs, WFS was officially incorporated on November 14, 1983 and assumed Agency status with the Ministry of Community and Social Services in 1987. However, while agency status gave WFS jurisdiction over the provision of prevention services, without society designation, the responsibility for child abuse investigations and children in care remained the responsibility of the local provincial child welfare authority. Thus, even as WFS was preparing to assume Agency status and to administer prevention services with the ten first Nations, it was discussing with the Council of Chiefs the possibility of assuming the

jurisdiction and resources of the local child welfare authority for all child welfare services (WFS, 2004). That same year, the Council of Chiefs directed Weechi-it-te-win to apply for Society status under the Ontario Child and Family Services Act as an interim measure.

While Weechi-it-te-win did acquire Society status whereby it gained jurisdiction over the provision of the full range of child protection services, it is important to note that it has always been the intention of the Chiefs that WFS would ultimately be governed under First Nations law with recognition of the self-governing rights of First Nations peoples under the Canadian Constitution.

Today, Weechi-it-te-win, the Indian Alternative, is a community based, community oriented, community staffed, non-profit corporation governed by a Board of Directors appointed by the 10 member First Nations. The agency has developed an integrated continuum of services designed to meet the needs and expectations of the communities served. WFS provides bi-cultural, family-centered services which promote and protect the right of the Aboriginal child through a number of community healing and capacity building services which are outlined below:

- Child protection services (primarily through customary care practice)
- Alternative care for children who require out of home placement
- Residential assessment and treatment services
- Child and family intervention services (mental health)
- Children's Mental Health (0-6 yrs)
- Community-based counseling services
- Child Protection Training
- Cultural Healing Services
- R.L.T.A. Community Care Services: child care, family support, prevention, access, outreach, repatriation

The vision of First Nations communities claiming and caring for their children is kept alive by empowering and finding strength within the community and using the strength of Anishinabe family systems, cultural values and language. Ceremonies and various cultural practices are vital elements integrated into daily administration and service delivery. The practice of blending the elements of two distinct world views, the contemporary with the customary, in a manner which acknowledges the value and utility of both is a form of administrative harmonization which Weechi-it-te-win embraces.

### **Governance and Management**

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services has the distinction of being the only one among the 52 Ontario based child and family service agencies/children's aid societies – six of which are First Nations, to operate with a decentralized model. In centralized governance models, administration, management and service delivery are generated from one central location. Social service staff based at a central office, for example, travel to various communities in order to deliver services. While WFS initially had to adopt a centralized model of operation, this is viewed strictly as a transformational measure. For Weechi-it-

te-win, decentralization is the way of being envisioned by the Native Planning Committee during the period of the agency's conceptualization. The Committee in its second report to the Chiefs suggested that services under the Community Care Program be provided through Family Service Workers and Family Services Committees operating in each First Nation as opposed to the central configuration of one social service team responsible for service delivery and management in all communities. Decentralization - community based control and operation, is the form of management reflective of the world view and systems of governance as understood by the 10 First Nations of the Rainy Lake Tribal Area.

WFS decentralized model is a developmental one which is continuously evolving. Since the agency gained full delegation in 1987, the process of shedding the centralized form and basing service delivery at the community level began. A strategic plan was instituted for the development of community capacity involving child welfare training and information technology. At the end of the developmental period, it is expected that required services are instituted and operational in each of the ten First Nations communities. During the early stages of development, the tribal head office carried the majority of the child and family service delegated mandate while working to build capacity in each community and transferring services as community capacity grew. This is a continuous process of devolution as community systems are revitalized thereby empowering them to care for their own children. This five to ten year developmental process respects the varying paces of development in each community and is to be followed by a period of integration in which systems in each community, for example, health services, education, policing, will work together as opposed to operating as discrete units of service.

In the decentralized model as adapted by WFS, the Rainy Lake Tribal Area Family Services System links the ten member communities together in one service network for the purpose of providing community care to children and their families (WFS, 1987). In this system, local services on each reserve are managed by each First Nation while common services such as training, information technology development and the coordination of all services in the network are collectively managed at the tribal level, formally known as Weechi-it-te-win Family Services Inc., by all ten First Nations.

To fully appreciate the nature of the WFS decentralized model, the organizational components of the model as well as the some of the key services provided must be understood. In terms of the organizational and management perspective, Weechi-it-te-win's decentralized model consists of several components: WFS Tribal Level Management, Community Service teams in each community which provide direct services at the community level, Family Services Committees in each community, a WFS Elder's Council, Resource Managers and a Board of Directors. The entire system operates under the mandate of the Rainy Lake Region Tribal Chiefs and Council. From a service perspective, the provision of Bi-cultural services, customary care and community development are key aspects.

## **Organizational Components of the Decentralized Model**

### ***i. WFS Tribal Level Management***

Weechi-it-te-win purchases services under the terms of a service agreement negotiated with each of the 10 area First Nations. Under the terms of the service agreement, financial resources and service delivery responsibilities are transferred to the First Nations. Child protection and family support services are delivered by service teams which belong to each community. These teams are managed at the community level by the respective First Nations while community development services are managed at the tribal level on behalf of all the First Nations. Weechi-it-te-win operates as a foundation of support for the First Nation community based teams. The functions of the tribal level administration are as follows:

- a. The license holder having ultimate accountability in terms of service delivery and case management.
- b. Resource bank with specializations to support community efforts – provides training and capacity development for communities as a key aspect of the devolution process.
- c. Directly accountable to the Ministry of Community and Social Services and is the main point of contact and administration for ministry auditors. This role will eventually be directly assumed by each community. Master files for some communities are still held at the tribal office, but eventually all communities will house their own master files.
- d. Financial management and funding is administered from the Tribal Level. The agency works within the framework of a double bilateral agreement – two distinct agreements one with the province and one with the First Nations. Each agreement has requisites and WFS is responsible for both.

### ***ii. Community Service Teams***

Child protection and family support services are delivered by staff and service teams which belong to each community. While the composition of community teams vary in terms of community needs, they usually consist of a child in care worker, alternate care worker, family counselor, program secretary, supervisor and family service worker who works directly with parents. Funding is based on developing a quality community based infrastructure and the needs of each community. Community based teams carry out the following functions:

- Provision of direct services to children in care
- Recruitment and maintenance of alternative care homes – provision of support and liaise with care givers
- Completion of home studies
- Maintain ministry requirements



- family counseling – prevention
- counseling for everyone – not just child in care – part of prevention work

In the provision of direct services, community service teams enlist Elders from their communities to coordinate culturally based healing tools for the clients being served.

### *iii. Family Services Committee*

Within each community, there is a Family Services Committee (or equivalent body) appointed by the Chief and Council. The Family Services Committee provides direction, consultation and support to staff members of the community service teams through monthly meetings to review cases and address any issues pertaining to the delivery or management of services. The Committee is a part of the case management process and provides direction and guidance regarding the identification and implementation of needed services. The Family Services Committee is also a part of the decision making process as it pertains to child and family services in each community and consists of community members and/or community based staff as well as an Elder. It is important to note that even in the agency's earliest stages of operation, each community had its very own family service worker and a Family Services Committee to provide direction and support to the workers. As decisions are made based on community systems, the Family Service committee is an important source of guidance in terms of identifying and utilizing the traditional systems and knowledge base within each community.

### *iv. WFS Elder's Council*

An Elder's Council consisting of an Elder from each band is also an important feature of the management system. The Elder's Council convenes on a regular basis to provide information and direction on cultural practices, play a lead role in clarification of practices related to parenting and provide spiritual guidance to the organization overall. The Council is a source of support and an invaluable resource.

WFS operates under two sets of expectations - mainstream and First Nations. As such, the Family Services Committees and Elders Council are critical mechanisms which keep agency practice in line with First Nations expectations.

### *v. Resource Managers*

Another key component of the decentralized model is the function of the four Resource Managers which actively monitor compliance and accountability in regards to statutory services under the *Child and Family Services Act*. Based at the tribal level, Resource Managers function to maintain integrity of the Aboriginal way while ensuring that mainstream obligations are met. Resource Managers are a critical source of guidance and support to the community teams. They play a vital role in monitoring and provide direction and advice on policy orientation and training to ensure each community understands the full meaning of its child welfare agreement. Resource Managers provide guidance and support on any number of issues including integration of services, case consultations, documentation requirements, file audits, service reviews, mentoring, mediation and alternative dispute resolution, bi-cultural practice promotion, quality assurance and training. The Resource Manager also co-signs on all documents to ensure

that plans of care and risk assessments are completed, services are delivered and that the needs of each community are being met.

Resource Managers provide assistance with developmental concerns such as the creation and refining of job descriptions and function to help the communities strengthen their capacity to take on more services. The manager provides orientation to the teams in terms of what is needed for licensing, audits and ensures compliance. It is the Resource Manager that is accountable for ensuring that community teams have the knowledge they need and are functioning. The manager has to be sensitive to variations in practice for each community and assist with the empowerment of those natural systems.

Resource Managers based at the tribal level work hand-in-hand with the managers and staff of each Community Service Team. Through the transfer of knowledge and training which takes place in this relationship, community capacity to operate all aspects of service increases while the role of tribal level management gradually decreases.

#### *vi. Board of Directors*

The Board of Directors, mandated and created by the Chiefs, is a 30 member corporation to which each First Nation has the right to designate three appointees. Members are chosen through a traditional selection process which is open and does not involve a secret ballot.<sup>2</sup> The board is the governing body for WFS subcommittees on personnel, finance and services and effectively oversees the operation of agency. Guided by corporation policy grounded in Pimatziwin which stipulates that operations be culturally based, the board is shifting from a more mainstream configuration towards a model of governance which is culturally based and reflective of the way WFS operates in its totality. Members also have administratively harmonized the laws of Canada and Ontario with Anishinabe customary laws. The board is the place where the ten communities come together to collectively manage the overall governance of Weechi-it-te-win. Policy development, program planning, organizational development and the review of child and family services are some the board's main functions.

### **Key Service Elements of the Decentralized Model**

While there is a broad range of programming provided through the decentralized framework, the provision of bi-cultural services, customary care and community development are essential services in all communities. Honoring the Spirit of Weechi-it-te-win in administration and practice is also a key aspect.

#### ***Bi-Cultural Practice***

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services provides child protection and family support services in ways that promote the preservation of Aboriginal culture and identity, strengthen Aboriginal families and communities and foster the growth and development of Aboriginal children within Aboriginal families and communities. There is a keen understanding of the destructive impacts of decades of assimilationist education and child

---

<sup>2</sup> The traditional practice involves publicly presenting tobacco to the candidate and asking them to stand up.

welfare practices on First Nations children, families and communities. Aboriginal culture constitutes the foundation and acts as a fortification against the continuing threat of assimilation and as a mechanism for promoting healing and empowerment. An appreciation of the social and cultural contexts of First Nations peoples in contemporary Canadian society, reflected in client's varying degrees of acculturation, forms the basis of Weechi-it-te-win's commitment to providing bi-cultural services. Under this model of service delivery, clients can access both contemporary clinical interventions and traditional cultural practices which include access to support and assistance through gatherings, ceremonies, Elders and Native healers. Bi-cultural practice is identified as one of the central features of the agency's operational mandate and is illustrated in the figure below.

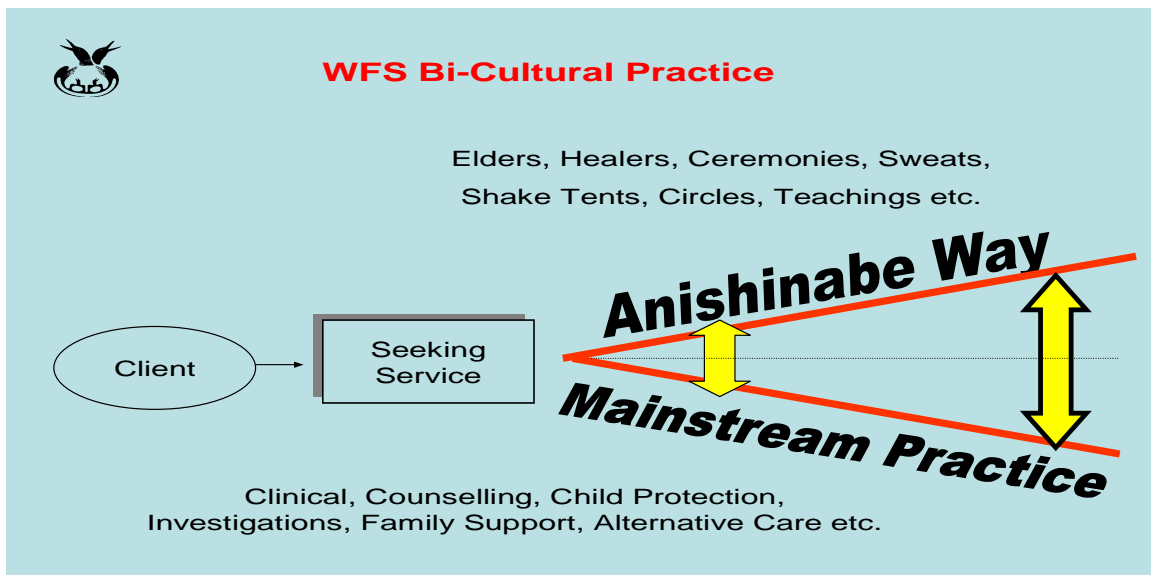


Figure 1

### *Customary Care*

As part of the duty to provide culturally relevant services, Weechi-it-te-win Family Services utilizes customary care as the primary means of meeting the needs of children who require alternative care. Customary care is an important strategy for avoiding the cultural displacement experienced by First Nations children separated from their families, extended families and communities. While customary care can be generally understood as a traditional approach to caring for children through extended family members in ways that are grounded in the traditions, values and customs of the community, WFS staff indicated that this concept is more comprehensive in nature in the sense that it is care that extends throughout the life-cycle from birth to death. Customary care is not merely about alternative care arrangements; it is a way of life that ensures natural cultural resiliency and promotes positive cultural identity by way of language, clan and family.

Most communities working with Weechi-it-te-win do not take the route of statutory care preferring instead to use customary care. Where children have been brought into care through statutory means, efforts are made to help change their legal status to customary

care. The majority of children with Weechi-it-te-win Family Services are in customary care arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Community Development***

Empowering communities through development, healing and capacity building is another substantial function of Weechi-it-te-win Family Services. This is enacted through a contingent of services which are managed at the tribal level. Some of the resource staff and programs that provide these services include:

- a Trainer who delivers mandatory child protection training and other non-mandatory training;
- a Family Violence Coordinator who works with the communities to run prevention, education and intervention programs for community workers and child and adult victims of violence;
- a Treatment Foster Coordinator who is in the process of consulting with the First Nations about the development of a Treatment Foster Care Program;
- a Children's Mental Health Worker who partners with other service providers to deliver programs that support the healthy development of children;
- a Cultural Coordinator who assists clients to access cultural healing services and who also coordinates spring and fall ceremonies, the annual pow wow and meetings with the Elders Council;
- the Training and Learning Centre- a 10 bed residential treatment centre for Aboriginal youth who are experience substance abuse problems and related emotional, social and spiritual difficulties;
- an Independent Living Program – a 4 bed facility that provides life skills and other supports to help young people prepare for independent living;
- a Community Liaison Worker who works with the First Nations to build capacity and to promote integration and accountability in child welfare and other service areas funded by Weechi-it-te-win. Capacity building efforts are guided by a work plan and are tailored to the unique needs of each First Nation; and
- a Support Services Coordinator who coordinates access to specialized assessments, manages the Agency's On Call system, and coordinates access to the Agency's telepsychiatry system.

### ***Honoring the Spirit in Practice***

Unlike mainstream systems where there is a separation of the spiritual and temporal, there is a strong spiritual component and context to WFS existence and practice. Weechi-it-te-win possesses a vibrant, living spiritual core. Honoring the Spirit in practice is a feature that pervades all service areas as well as agency management; it is something which distinguishes WFS from its mainstream counterparts. Spiritual teachings, language and guidance are critical elements of the agency's operation.

---

<sup>3</sup> Although the Ministry of Children and Youth Services of Ontario is currently developing a transformational agenda which includes customary care, it is the expressed position of Weechi-it-te-win Family Services that the ministry model, in its current form, is not reflective of customary care as practiced by WFS.

Through a process of harmonization, traditional practices are integrated into administrative functions such as weekly staff meetings in which there is smudging and smoking of the pipe.<sup>4</sup> There is also an Elder present at staff meetings who prays for staff as they begin each new week of services. In service delivery, Family Service Workers can access the sweat lodge for family healing. Honoring the Spirit also includes ceremonies and respecting the spirit of sacred items including pipes, sacred medicines and drums.<sup>5</sup> The spirit of the drum is mindful of children and has songs which are specifically for them. Within the drum are songs which honor and spiritually watch over children-in-care and all children within the community.

### **Why Decentralization**

Although it can be argued that centralized models are much easier to operationalize, this is not a viable option to be considered for WFS. The agency embraces and continues to develop its decentralized model in governing the delivery of bi-cultural services as a vital means of removing imposed Western based theories of child welfare management and practice from the communities and mitigating the forces of assimilation still in operation. A founding principle of this approach is the understanding that Aboriginal people are in the best position to make decisions regarding Aboriginal children. A decentralized approach ensures respect for each community and honors the differences in each family and community. Within this framework, each community makes a contribution. While there is collective effort to ensure the agency's legal mandate is met, decentralization recognizes that there are many ways of achieving this and accommodates the fact that communities advance at different paces.

### **Indicators of Success**

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services is the manifestation of a tangible alternative to mainstream child welfare practices that are incompatible with First Nations values and traditions. Given the historic and present day socio-political contexts of First Nations child welfare in Canada, Weechi-it-te-win's development and use of an alternative model is a significant achievement. Clients are reported to be responsive to agency programming. As well, the number of children in care has decreased – this can partly be attributed to the fact that many children have returned to their own families. The decentralized provision of bi-cultural services is viewed as successful because it is organized around community needs and is a response to community demands. Peer critique and approval is a valid means of gauging success and it is a source of some pride that other child and family services agencies now look to Weechi-it-te-win for guidance regarding customary care and the use of the decentralized model. Agency personnel travel to the United States and other jurisdictions to present Weechi-it-te-win's approach and provide training on the community governance model. Still, the greatest indicators of success are that children can say who their family is and know how to access and see grandparents. Children have access to names, feasts and ceremonies and families and communities know where their children are.

---

<sup>4</sup> Smudging is a form of spiritual cleansing and purification in which sacred herbs such as sage, cedar, sweet-grass or tobacco may be used.

<sup>5</sup> Anishinabe recognize the life force of various animate and inanimate objects.

### **Conditions for Success**

This is a community driven model where committees at the community level determine the manner of operation. Community control and strategic planning are key aspects of this model as is the need for supportive leadership and the commitment of the Chiefs. The system reflects both the collective aspirations and individual wishes of the First Nations and is therefore interdependent, requiring mutual support, sharing and teaching amongst the communities. The need to be open-minded and able to support and empower systems in each community is essential. Interdependence also means that communities can have a notable impact on each other. As such, careful and consistent monitoring is required and the provision of quality training for community teams is crucial. At present, between 70 – 80 percent of community based staff have received the required child welfare competency based training developed by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario.<sup>6</sup> While Weechi-it-te-win community leaders knew that the systems and knowledge were in place within the communities to look after their children, it is understood that each band had to be able to claim its own culture and knowledge around how children were cared for prior to colonization.

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services exists because community members resisted the imposition of models of child welfare delivery, management and governance that are not in accordance with community values, philosophies and goals. Aboriginal people have never responded with passivity to the colonization process. There has always been resistance, from Cayuga Six Nations Chief Deskaheh's 1923 trip to Geneva to petition the League of Nations to children running away from residential schools and speaking their languages even though forbidden<sup>7</sup>. In a similar vein, communities must be willing to stand their ground against the mainstream child welfare regime. The knowledge of the Elders and ceremonial practices are essential elements which must not be overlooked and a strong clear vision is also required for success. Weechi-it-te-win is founded on a powerful vision which continues to sustain, inspire and ensure the agency maintains its course.

### **Challenges**

Although there are challenges in running an agency such as Weechi-it-te-win, they are not insurmountable and the benefits far outweigh them. One of the biggest challenges shared by staff was that of working with a provincial government that would prefer to

---

<sup>6</sup> The Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario (ANCFSAO) provides policy analysis, resource development, and research that inform the development and implementation of culturally competent services to Aboriginal children and families throughout the province of Ontario.  
<http://www.nativecfs.org>

<sup>7</sup> For an account of Chief Deskaheh see Lepage, P (2002), *Aboriginal Peoples Fact and Fiction*. Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse. Quebec. In reference to children and residential school see. Hanson, I. & Hampton, M (2000), *Being Indian: Strengths Sustaining First Nations Children in Saskatchewan Residential Schools*. Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health Vol. 19. No. 1 Spring 2000

deal with First Nations as though they were a single entity devoid of any distinctions thereby making communication with the government a continuous exercise in nation building. The narrow approach to child protection and the relegation of family preservation and community healing to secondary priorities is also a major difficulty. Furthermore, provincial policies of standardization do not allow for cultural diversity - within this context, Weechi-it-te-win must be vigilant in order to ensure that Anishinabe values and practices are not overwhelmed and displaced by conventional priorities and methods.

A further challenge lies in helping communities that are still mindful of past governmental deceptions feel comfortable with the paperwork required in the administration of mandated responsibilities. In addition to providing services, there is always the challenge of how to protect the tribal level structure. Operating as a foundation and balancing the interrelatedness of the whole system does pose some unique challenges. If one community falters, for instance, this can have an impact on the others. As such, monitoring is an essential part of ensuring the healthy operation of the system and is one of the primary reasons the work of the Resource Managers is so essential.

The provision of quality training for community teams is also critical and much support has to be provided in this regard. In order to accommodate some of the more delicate features of the model, Weechi-it-te-win has to remain flexible and always prepared for change; it must be able to reconfigure itself when and if necessary. In working with a multiple community based structure, efforts must always be made to avoid factionalism and identify ways to promote and protect the collective while respecting the individual ways of each community.

Finally, as with many First Nations child and family services agencies, funding is a major challenge. Under the provincial child welfare funding formula, the allocation of funds is determined by factors such as the number of completed investigations and home studies, the number of children in care and projected legal costs, for example.<sup>8</sup> No allowances are made for costs relating to cultural resources or the provision of cultural services that represent the core traditional values of Weechi-it-te-win Family Services. This situation does create ongoing budgetary pressures and the need for sustained efforts directed at seeking alternative sources of funding. A further challenge for Weechi-it-te-win is that obtained funding is configured for centralized models of child welfare provision and is insufficient for the needs of an agency which operates as a foundation for ten First Nations. As a result, communities need to be creative and pool funds to meet integrated needs and programming. The unequal level of compensation for comparable mainstream and cultural services is also a source of frustration.

---

<sup>8</sup> With the exception of the province of Ontario which operates under a different funding agreement, First Nations child and family service agencies in Canada are federally funded through the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Directive 20 – 1 Chapter 5.

## Conclusion

### The Story of the Elder

*A grandfather is asleep and is dreaming. In the dream his granddaughter comes into the bedroom; he senses her presence and he wakes up. His granddaughter's eyes are staring into his own eyes and each time he moves his body, her eyes remain focused on his. Finally he asks her "granddaughter what is it you want?"*

*She looks at him intently and asks this question: "Grand dad, during your life-time what did you do to make it a better world for me when I grow up?"*

*Upon hearing the question, the grandfather immediately awoke, his heart was palpitating, he was sweating, he was afraid because the thought came to his mind that what if all he could tell her was that all he ever did was maintain the status quo?*

*The insight from this experience is why it is so important to be doing something for the other generations to come and is the motivation that moves WFS and me in particular.*

George Simard, WFS Executive Director

It is an Anishinabe traditional practice that decision making must take into account the benefits for seven generations. In this regard, the grandfather thinks not only of his granddaughter, but also of her children and her children's children. Bringing the vision of Weechi-it-te-win to life has involved a process of rebuilding and revitalizing the core of Anishinabe society and structure. In responding to the needs of this generation of children and the generations to follow, Weechi-it-te-win Family Services continues to envision and advocate for a fully empowered model of Aboriginal child welfare that is rooted in the customs, traditions and values of the Anishinabe people. From a service perspective, the agency continues to advocate for a child welfare system that places much greater emphasis on family preservation, community healing and the revitalizing of traditional laws, structures and practices in order to restore balance and meaning to the lives of its people.

The decentralized model as developed and used by WFS is a developmental one, not without imperfections. It is in a constant state of evolution and growth, continually drawing power from the means through which it was created – a process of looking inward for healing and drawing upon the strengths of Anishinabe culture and traditions. Decentralization is a way of being – the way in which Weechi-it-te-win honors the values and customs of each community in the move forward toward *Pimatiziwin*.



## Works Cited

Farris-Manning, C. & Zandstra, M. (2003). *Children in Care in Canada A summary of current issues and trends with recommendations for future research*. Child Welfare League of Canada. Ottawa, ON.

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services Inc. (2004). *Proposal to Indian and Northern Affairs and the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario Ministry for Children's Services for Funding of Cultural Services*. Internal document.

Weechi-it-te-win Family Services Inc. (1987). *Community Care at Rainy Lake*. Times Printing. Fort Frances, ON.