

Contextual Factors Involving Practice Audits with respect to Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Service Agencies

The main objective of the delegated Aboriginal and First Nations Child and Family Services (AFNCFS) is to provide access to culturally sensitive child and family services and programs in their communities. The development of delegated AFNCFS agencies has taken place in a relatively recent timeframe ranging from slightly over twenty years ago, to those agencies that are about to take on delegated child welfare responsibilities in the very near future. As of January 2008, twenty-three AFNCFS agencies deliver delegated services to their community members.

Delegation Agreements are negotiated between Aboriginal agency board of directors, or First Nations and Indian & Northern Affairs Canada BC and the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) to delineate a wide range of practice and operational functions carried out by AFNCFS. In accordance with the terms and conditions of Delegation Agreements a director designated by the Minister of the Ministry of Children and Family Development is responsible to conduct periodic practice audits with respect to the director's duties and functions. The Provincial Director of Child Welfare receives authority to conduct practice audits under *section 93 (3) CFCSA*. Ministerial quality assurance activities provide oversight of these functions based on established standards and procedures.

For AFNCFS the established quality assurance framework is outlined in the *Aboriginal Operational and Practice Standards and Indicators (AOPSI)*. The AOPSI standards were developed in close consultation with AFNCFS. The AOPSI standards establish both operational, as well as case practice benchmarks. The development and implementation of AOPSI standards was intended to either meet or exceed MCFD practice standards.

AOPSI includes operational standards that MCFD district offices do not experience. As such, AOPSI standards for operational factors accommodate: a federal government funding model that in April 2007, started to fund to provincial social policy priorities;

impacts of funding on available resources; and the level of service that an Agency can provide according to the terms of its Delegation Agreement.

Many AFNCFS agencies serve numerous sparsely populated Aboriginal communities over wide geographic distances. These communities can be small and isolated which impacts service delivery. This may impact caseload sampling size during the conduct of a practice audit. Therefore, audit results with respect to compliance may in some situations be skewed either negatively or positively.

The length of time that a delegated agency has had conduct of case file is an important factor to take into consideration when reviewing these audit results. In many instances, files being reviewed for audit purpose were in the conduct of MCFD offices for a significant period during the audit review period (3 year period in total). Therefore, in some instances audit results are a culmination of both MCFD and delegated agency involvement. In addition, when reviewing the practice audits, one should be aware that these practice audits are often the first audit in the history of the agency.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration when one reviews the practice audits of AFNCFS is that of cultural competency. Many First Nations and Aboriginal community members have opted to receive services from an Aboriginal agency under the terms of Delegation Agreement precisely because they believe that the quality of culturally competent practice is better able to meet their children and family's needs. The concomitant level of monitoring of the cultural appropriateness of delegated agency staff by community members and elders significantly impacts the practice of delegated agency staff. With oversight from these community members and the office of the Provincial Director of Child Welfare, AFNCFS agencies aim to not only meet or exceed practice standards, but to do so while practicing in a culturally diverse manner.