

Coordination and Sustained Support Needed to End Negative Cycles for Aboriginal Children

- *By Marc Storms, Director and Senior Advisor, Good Medicine Group (GMG Consulting)*

In January 2011, [Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, BC's Representative for Children and Youth](#), issued yet another report that highlights the sad and ongoing struggle for British Columbia's Aboriginal children and their families.

The report – [Fragile Lives, Fragmented Systems](#) – reveals that despite countless statements of good intentions, commitments of millions of dollars in targeted funding, cross-Province community tours and more Government studies, BC's Aboriginal children remain at a much greater risk of neglect, injury and death than do non-Aboriginal children.

As a group committed to supporting and promoting wellness within Aboriginal communities for almost two decades, we are saddened and frustrated (but unfortunately not surprised) by the continued over-representation of Aboriginal children in Ministry care, poor social, health and education statistics, and – most sadly – accidental and avoidable deaths.

One of Ms. Turpel-Lafond's key observations is that the services, supports, programs and funding intended to support wellness and strength among Aboriginal families are disjointed, disconnected and poorly coordinated. She decries "a patchwork of services and limited supports to vulnerable infants and their families in British Columbia," and suggests that "an integrated, collaborative and consistent system of services may [make] a significant difference in the lives" of BC's Aboriginal children.

This report – like so many that preceded it – highlights the urgent need for the Government, Aboriginal communities, delegated agencies, families and individuals to work together to develop meaningful and effective strategies for raising healthy, happy and culturally supported families.

Government has made sporadic investments towards building capacity, typically through short-term, proposal-driven funding opportunities that few communities are able to access. But these efforts are rarely sustained long enough for the results to emerge, and therefore are deemed to be "too costly" in our current economic climate (since they don't meet the "quick fix" mindset of the four-year election cycle).

As a result, communities and agencies still must scramble for badly needed dollars through unconnected, proposal-driven funding opportunities, and are left to cobble together piece-meal approaches to protecting children and building strength within their own families.

For nearly 15 years as a front-line social worker working in Aboriginal communities across BC, I witnessed first hand the negative impacts of the Province's disjointed and scatter-gun approach to addressing the roots of Aboriginal child welfare. This approach is ineffective, and will continue to result in the over-representation of Aboriginal children in Ministry or agency care, and suffering unnecessary injury and death.

Over the last decade we have worked with dozens of Aboriginal communities and agencies across Western Canada to build capacity and skills at the ground level. We see that the most effective approaches to supporting families are those that work to address many of the specific issues identified within the Representative's report, including:

1. Developing evidence-based strategies and creating circles of support for vulnerable families within Aboriginal communities;

2. Identifying local supports and resources, and creating meaningful and practical Family Wellness plans that include the use of these important resources;
3. Building capacity among local community members – especially non-professionals - to focus on prevention, nurturing and creating wellness within families, to reduce the risk of harm and prevent the need for interventions; and
4. Working closely with MCFD and delegated agencies to ensure that families are supported in their family wellness strategies, and have knowledge of and access to resources within their community and region.

Government and Aboriginal agencies have a responsibility to intervene to provide protection and support to Aboriginal children at risk of harm; but bureaucracies make poor parents, in any culture. The solution will not be found by creating another task force, or funding a short-term, proposal-driven pilot project.

Instead, there needs to be a shift in policy and a sustained financial commitment to ensure that communities are able to continue to build their strengths over the long term, and take ownership and control of their own training, support circles, and the development of family wellness strategies.

Investing in the skills, knowledge and capacities of Aboriginal families will reduce the need for government intervention, lessen strains on the child protection system, and help Aboriginal communities to have greater control and responsibility for their families. Ultimately this will benefit us all.

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Marc Storms is a co-founder and Director of the Good Medicine Group (GMG Consulting Services), which has provided capacity building services for Aboriginal communities and agencies across Western Canada since 2001. Marc spent more than 14 years on the front lines of child protection within the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, with a focus on Aboriginal child welfare.

Contact:

Marc Storms

Director and Senior Advisor

Good Medicine Group (GMG Consulting Services)

Phone: (778) 430-5464

Email: marc@gmqconsulting.ca

Web: www.gmqconsulting.ca