



# WAABISHKODA BIZHIKI

## White Buffalo Report

### PHASE 1: PRE-OPERATIONALIZATION

The Act comes into force on January 21, 2022

Year 1 (2022-2023)



#### PHASE 1

Pre-Operationalization  
Year 1 (2022-2023)

#### PHASE 2

Operationalization  
Year 2 (2023-2024)

#### PHASE 3

Baseline Services  
Year 3 (2024-2025)

#### PHASE 4

Capital Projects  
Year 4 (2025-2026)

#### PHASE 5

Evaluation  
Year 5 (2026-2027)



## PEGUIS CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

### PEGUIS MAIN OFFICE

P.O. Box 610  
Peguis First Nation, MB  
R0C 3J0  
Phone: (204) 645-2049  
Toll Free 1-877-777-2049  
Fax: (204) 645-2558

### WINNIPEG OFFICE

500 Madison St.  
Winnipeg, MB R3H 0L4  
Phone: (204) 632-5404  
Toll Free 1-877-632-5404  
Fax: (204) 632-7226

[www.peguiscfs.ca](http://www.peguiscfs.ca)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3** Executive Summary
- 4** Purpose of the Internal Review
- 5** Indigenous Program Evaluation
- 5** Evaluation Methodology
- 8** Peguis Child & Family Services - Who We Are

## EAST

- 10** The Rights of Indigenous Children

## SOUTH

- 12** Findings
- 14** Elder Wisdom
- 17** Challenges
- 21** Child Protection is Community Protection

## WEST

- 26** The CSA Settlement Case
- 27** Spotlight: Aspects of the Peguis Framework
- 28** Youth Services

## NORTH

- 34** Recommendation #1
- 36** Recommendation #2
- 37** Recommendation #3

Conclusion  
References

# WAABISHKODA BIZHIKI

## WHITE BUFFALO REPORT

The Journey of Peguis Child & Family Services  
Toward Decolonizing Child Welfare

### PHASE ONE

Reported Submitted by: Leona Huntinghawk, MSW, RSW

Internal Reviewer, Peguis Child & Family Services





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OBJECTIVE FOR PHASE ONE

The purpose of this internal review was to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, community responsiveness and overall service quality of Peguis Child & Family Services. The internal review aimed to provide insights into performance, stakeholder satisfaction, resource utilization, and alignment with organizational goals related to the roll out of the new legislation, the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*.

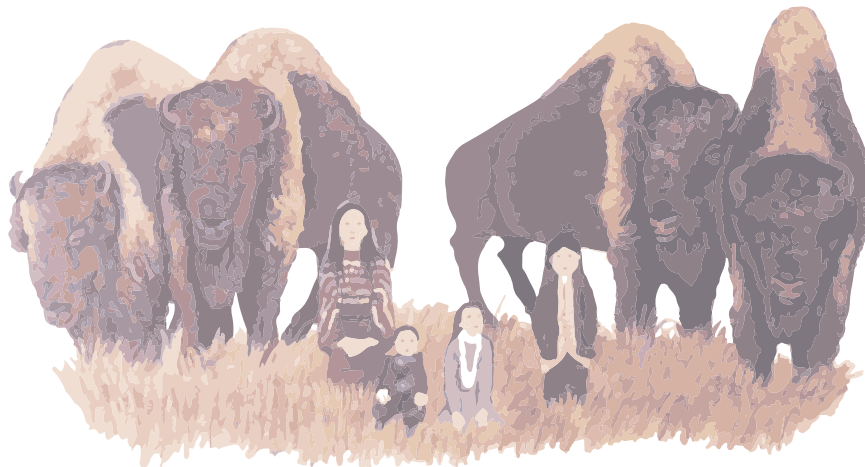
## WHAT WAS DONE DURING PHASE ONE

Information collection included interviews and reviewing agency reports. Phase One of this internal review covered the period of the Agency going Live with the new child welfare legislation, the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act* to Winter 2025.

## WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

The operation of the Agency is done with insight, careful planning and the best interests of families.

Noteworthy achievements include: the contentment of staff members, even with the additional workload responsibilities, the prevention of 60+ children coming into foster care in the past 12 months and the overall positive impact of Peguis Child & Family Services on the community of Peguis First Nation





## INTRODUCTION

Peguis Child and Family Services (the “Agency”) and Peguis First Nation celebrated a historic moment on January 21, 2022, when the *Honouring our Children, Families and Nation Act* (the “Act”) became Manitoba’s first Indigenous child protection legislation to become enacted as federal law. But how did this occur? What has been the journey of Peguis Child and Family Services to get to this point?

This report will outline the experiences of Peguis staff members and community members that were shared with an internal reviewer.

## PURPOSE OF THE INTERNAL REVIEW - ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY

The internal review for Peguis Child & Family Services was commissioned by the Board of Directors of the Agency. It remains important to the Board that the Agency is fulfilling its mandate, as expected. An internal review will allow for any gaps in services to be identified and addressed. The Board of Directors is focused on transparency, professionalism and responsible accounting. And lastly, the Board of Directors wishes to break the cycles of harm that CFS has caused Peguis First Nation in the past. Moving forward, the Board is keeping the well-being of children, youth and families at the forefront. This internal review is a tool that will assist the Agency to be accountable to the community of Peguis First Nation.

The *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act* refers to the ongoing need for review in Section 14.2, Review and Amendment of the Act:

*“The Agency must prepare a report on the 5 year review that sets out their analysis, conclusions and recommendations on the provisions and operations of the Act.”*

The new piece of child welfare law at Peguis Child & Family Services has an internal review incorporated right into it. This is how seriously the Agency is taking its overall responsibility toward transparency and accountability.

An internal review serves the purpose of assessing and analyzing the effectiveness, efficiency, and overall quality of an organization. Here are some questions that were asked during this review:

- Is the Agency achieving its top performance goals? Every organization wants to meet its quality standards and adhere to regulations.
- How is Peguis Child & Family Services retaining staff during such a high-level stress period, i.e., roll out of new child welfare legislation. The results were quite stunning with PCFS staff with 98% of Peguis Child & Family Service staff members expressing contentment at their jobs.
- What are some areas for improvement? This internal review looked at areas of improvement within the Agency and provided recommendations aligned with those areas.
- How is the Agency allocating its budget? This internal review examined the evidence of how resources are being used, and planning is being done.

## INDIGENOUS PROGRAM EVALUATION

Further to the evaluation process, it is important to note that this internal review engaged in an Indigenous program evaluation approach.

### Cultural Sensitivity and Respect:

This internal review ensured that the cultural values, traditions, and perspectives of Peguis First Nation were respected.

### Culturally Appropriate Methods:

Indigenous research methodologies and storytelling were the main ways of 'knowing' throughout this evaluation.

### Wholistic Approach:

Recognizing and valuing the wholistic nature of Indigenous well-being, considering physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Spirit and traditional knowledge are valued and remained a mainstay during this internal review.

## LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to any kind of information gathering, no matter how much effort is shown. The limitations of this internal review included:

- Phase One information is limited to the experiences of those involved with Peguis Child & Family Services and community members of Peguis First Nation.
- The information collected from community members of Peguis First Nation is based on their lived experiences and is reflective of such. The information collected from employees of Peguis Child & Family Services is reflective of their own clinical assessment and professional background.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Here are the key components that helped guide this internal review:



## LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of existing child welfare literature was conducted to ensure that Peguis Child & Family Services is being evaluated against child welfare best practices. Social work literature, literature on Bill C-92, youth in care, Indigenous sovereignty, are a few areas that required a key focus. Indigenous Studies literature on oppression, colonialism, conquest, dispossession and traditional epistemologies was also utilized.

## FEEDBACK AND VALIDATION

This internal review took place under the teaching of *Relationship Building*, as opposed to Western style research. Relationships based on consent, reciprocity, respect and empathy are important to the Indigenous worldview. The people of Peguis First Nation do not need to be researched. There are, however, relationships to be built and important stories to be told. The building and sharing of knowledge remained important objectives to this internal review.

## SAMPLING STRATEGY

As an organization, Peguis Child & Family Services has grown a lot in recent years, moving from a staff number of approximately 70 to now approximately 206. For Phase One, managers were the main source of information but not every manager was interviewed as there was simply not enough time. Phase Two moving forward will seek to gather data about specific areas of the Agency including service delivery components. Staff at Peguis Child & Family Services will be invited to participate in further phases of the internal review. This internal review is designed to ensure that diverse perspectives are included.

Community Elders were also important contributors to the Phase One report. Community Elders provided feedback that was not necessarily directly connected to child welfare or the provision of services, but community wellness.

***Did not have a chance to be interviewed for the Phase One report?***

Please contact Leona Huntinghawk at (204) 632-5404 to set up an interview for Phase Two.

## INDICATORS - HOW DO WE KNOW THE AGENCY IS GROWING?

For Phase One of this internal review, the main performance indicator examined was the growth the Agency has experienced over the past two years since the new legislation, Growth was also measured by the following:

- How Peguis Child & Family Services decided to go on this journey of self-determination and sovereignty.
- How Peguis Child & Family Services retained and recruited qualified staff members throughout this process.
- How Peguis Child & Family Services plans to move the Agency forward, when they have no template to follow.



## SCOPE OF PHASE ONE - INTERNAL REVIEWS ARE NOT AUDITS

This internal review was commissioned by Peguis Child and Family Services' Board of Directors. The aim was to review and synthesize relevant information on the ongoing implementation of the new legislation the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*. Also, the journey of the Agency leading up to the Go Live date of January 21, 2022. Because the internal review was requested by the Board and written in accordance with the new Act, it is not an audit. Audits are often unwelcome investigations into an organization's daily practices. This internal review was welcomed and keenly anticipated. The internal reviewer reports directly to the Human Resources Manager at Peguis Child & Family Services, not to the senior Management team or the Executive Director.

This project involved two components: 1) a review of relevant literature and information; and 2) interviews with Agency staff members and community Elders. The main questions guiding the internal review include:

- How did this journey come to be and what was expected of Peguis CFS staff members to ensure this vision came to fruition?
- What are the key concepts surrounding child welfare and child protection at Peguis Child & Family Services? i.e., child well-being indicators
- What does the Indigenous worldview share about caring for children, using traditional teachings as a foundation at Peguis Child & Family Services?

## BACKGROUND OF CFS IN MANITOBA

The Division of the Department of Family Services oversees protection services to children under the *Child and Family Services Act* in Manitoba. Within the CFS Division, the Child Protection Branch provides programs and services. The Child and Family Services Authorities Act (2003) created four authorities: First Nations Authority of Northern Manitoba, First Nations Authority of Southern Manitoba or the Southern First Nations Network of Care, the Métis Authority and the General Authority. The Authorities are empowered by the Child and Families Services Authority Act to mandate CFS agencies to exercise the powers and duties of the Child and Family Services Act.





## **PEGUIS CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES - WHO WE ARE**

Peguis was integrated with Anishinaabe Child and Family Services from 1980 to 1987. In 1987 the communities of Fisher River, Jackhead, Dakota Tipi and Peguis became mandated as Intertribal Child and Family Services. After years of negotiations between Federal and Provincial governments and Chief and Council, Peguis Child and Family Services Board of Directors proceeded to become an autonomous Agency. On April 1, 1999 Peguis Child and Family Services was mandated as an Agency under the Child and Family Services Act of Manitoba.

Peguis First Nation and Peguis Child and Family Services have taken this opportunity to move forward and ensure better outcomes for their member families. This was no easy feat as child and family services within Canada is rooted in a colonial mindset including frameworks, practices, legislation, and funding sources.

## **AGENCY GOVERNANCE**

Peguis Child & Family Services practices its inherent and sacred right to provide care for children and families through Indigenous Legal Traditions, Customs and Governance in contemporary times. Peguis First Nation are led by Chief and Council which are directed by membership. Chief and Council initially appoint the Agency Board of Directors. The Board of Directors works closely to review and develop governance policies that provide direction on service delivery outcomes for children, youth and families.

The Board of Directors consists of community members that are representatives of the community in which they serve. Their primary role is to develop a vision that is based on community values and beliefs to guide service.

## **AGENCY PHILOSOPHY**

The Agency acknowledges the intergenerational traumas faced by many parents today which have resulted in many challenges within families. Due to this, families have been left to re-learn and revitalize their traditional parenting. The Agency continues to support these efforts in healing so that children can be raised in healthy and supportive environments.

The Agency is guided by the 7 Sacred Teachings: Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Wisdom, Humility and Truth. These teachings are the Agency's guiding principles in the collaboration towards restoration of cultural values, beliefs, and practices. The teachings create the framework for the units within the Agency; 1) Love – Community Wellness Services; 2) Respect – Family Preservation; 3) Courage – Intake Services and After hours; 4) Honesty – Investigation Services;

5) Wisdom – Intervention; 6) Humility – Collaborative Family Engagement; 7) Truth – Protection Services.

Peguis Child and Family Services also has 5 pillars that create the foundation of the Agency. The 5 pillars include:

- Traditional and Cultural Services are formed on traditional ways of providing prevention services. This consists of the Elders Council and Sharing Circle Elders who assist in the alternatives to the court process to protect children and youth while balancing the unique needs and rights of our members.
- Enhancing the children's, youth, and family's right to make decisions that provide cultural continuity, connections to family and their community.
- Strengthening the Traditional Customs of supporting children, youth and families.
- Affirming our inherent right to the land, language, culture, traditions, heritage, and customs to continue to enhance our sacred relations to our children, youth and families.
- To ensure young adults have on-going access to their inherent right to the land, language, culture, traditional ceremonies and customs that strengthen their identity as Anishinaabe.

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

The Agency's mission is to provide Child and Family Services to Peguis community members that request services wherever they may live in Canada.

## **AGENCY GOAL**

The Agency's goal is to provide culturally appropriate services that strengthen the family unit, recognize the importance of the child's cultural heritage, identity and sense of belonging to their family and community as a whole.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The Agency's objective is to provide competent and supportive services to families and their children to prevent children from coming into care.

## **VISION STATEMENT**

The Agency's vision for success is a community where each and every person is strong, healthy, empowered, engaged and enjoys an enhanced quality of life.

## **AGENCY FUNDING**

As the *Honouring our Children, Families and Nation Act* came into force as federal law for Peguis First Nation, a three year \$319-million-dollar commitment via the Canada Fiscal Agreement between the Agency, Peguis and the Federal Government was signed to fund all aspects of Child and Family Services.

Further funding for the Agency is outlined in Section 5 of the Act – please review at your convenience at [peguiscfs.ca](http://peguiscfs.ca).

The Agency itself has ensured planning and communication throughout its Strategic Service Plan effective April 2023 to March 2026.

# LOOKING TO THE EAST

## COLONIALISM & CHILD WELFARE

One of the most powerful ways that white society has perpetuated colonialism is through the myth that Native people need to be 'protected'. Colonial governments have gotten away with suppressing any Indigenous governance and moving in with their own abusive and exploitative methods. Colonizers require a system of thought and representation to mask oppressive behaviors and in Manitoba, the CFS system has served this purpose. Attempts at assimilating Peguis children into mainstream society have left deep scars on the community.

As Indigenous people, we have known that these ways are not our ways. Indigenous people lived in the territory now known as Manitoba for thousands of years with diverse and complex societies that embraced different linguistic, cultural, political, and spiritual systems.

## THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

All Indigenous children have the following rights:

- **The right to identity:** birth registration, the right to a name (in accordance with Indigenous customs), and the right to nationality/citizenship;
- **Family environment:** culturally sensitive family support in the upbringing of children and when separation from parents is necessary in the best interest of the child
- **Health care:** health programs should involve Indigenous children, parents and communities to ensure respect for the cultural identity and potentials of Indigenous peoples;
- **Education:** educational materials should be developed and used to promote respect among all children for Indigenous cultural identity, history, language and values. Increase the number of teachers from Indigenous communities and provide them with appropriate training, equal pay and equal opportunities;
- **Special protection:** includes measures that take into account the Indigenous identity and values;

*(First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, 2006).*

## A WORD ON DECOLONIZATION

Indigenous people are persistent and resilient - we are Nations that existed long before Canada was formed. And many Indigenous people believe that we will outlast the demise of Western society. Unlike artificial provincial or federal power, which arises from force and coercion, Indigenous power arises from responsibility and relationship. As Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird (2012) report, only Indigenous laws can flourish on Indigenous homelands.

Peguis Child & Family Services are in the role of defenders of children and families by implementing their new legislation, the *Honouring Our Children, Families, and Nation Act*. Their integrity and their ways of deepening Indigenous values speaks volumes about how this Agency is working toward a model of decolonization.



At the heart of Indigenous Social Work is the relational approach. What are the relationships needed to assist an individual, family, community, or nation? Are those relationships with other humans, the four-legged, within a ceremonial context, etc.? Peguis Child & Family Services is taking this approach to working with families. Even if social work is a profession initially rooted in Western society, our societies always had ways of ensuring everyone was cared for. Especially our most vulnerable: the children.



# LOOKING TO THE SOUTH

## PEGUIS CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES CODE OF CONDUCT

Traditional teachings of respect, humility, love, wisdom, courage, truth and honesty guide the day-to-day dealings and communications at Peguis Child & Family Services. These teachings were heard during interviews with Peguis CFS staff members while they were accounting their experiences. In this next section, you will hear from the staff members about their journeys during the early implementation of the new legislation, the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*.

## FINDINGS

The quality of information collected during this evaluation (Phase I) was excellent. Interviews were conducted with several people who had a special interest in Peguis Child & Family Services. Also, the people interviewed were very knowledgeable about the process and procedures at Peguis CFS, which led to an empowerment approach where staff and other stakeholders could be honest about what they would like to see for the Agency. Community Elders also took part in providing valuable feedback.

During the interviews, this interviewer remained aware of the connection between the words being said and the feelings of the heart. The staff interviewees were talking about their careers that have led them to doing this work at Peguis Child & Family Services. They deserved uninterrupted time to speak and participate. Community Elders that took part in the interviewing and the Board of Directors also deserved the internal reviewer's full attention.

What did this evaluation produce in terms of information? What relevant information was collected? What themes emerged from the information? Let's hear from Peguis Child & Family Services staff members:

### **THEME: PEGUIS CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES IS AN ORGANIZATION WHERE STAFF ARE PROUD TO BE EMPLOYED.**

In order to set the tone for the interviews, staff members were asked their names and how long they have been employed with Peguis Child & Family Services. Then, staff members were asked about what they liked about being employed by this Agency. One employee responded that she likes Peguis CFS putting families first. She used to work at another Agency and did not necessarily see this same approach being used.

The interviewee shared that due to her background and upbringing, she believes it takes a village to raise a child. She sees this type of social work being done and being supported at Peguis CFS. It reminds her of home and the teachings she received growing up. Ultimately, she shared that in being a practicing social worker, she wants to make a difference in people's lives. The working environment that Peguis CFS provides is conducive to this goal.

## EVALUATOR'S OBSERVATION:

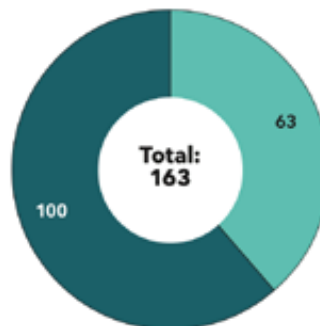
The employees at Peguis Child & Family Services are professional social work practitioners. They

have attended years of post-secondary education and professional development training to hone their skills. They could go anywhere in the social services field and find jobs. Their qualifications and years of work experience speak for themselves. But from what this evaluator was hearing, they choose to work at Peguis Child & Family Services because this Agency allows for them to practice the social work they envisioned practicing. This Agency provides the models and frameworks needed for effective social work to take place. These social workers are not interested in having power over other people. They want to do the hard work and earn the trust of families and individuals.

From a human resources perspective, the Agency is hiring the right people. Professionals that are appropriately suited, trained, educated and experienced in this line of work. Here's a look at the staff workplace qualifications for Winnipeg based staff:

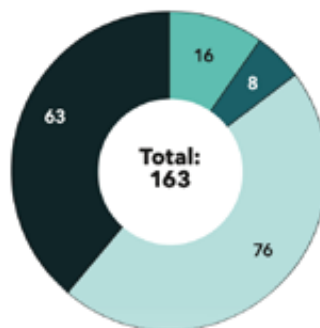
#### STAFF TYPE WINNIPEG OFFICE STAFF

Non-Status: 63  
First Nation Status: 100



#### WORKFORCE QUALIFICATIONS

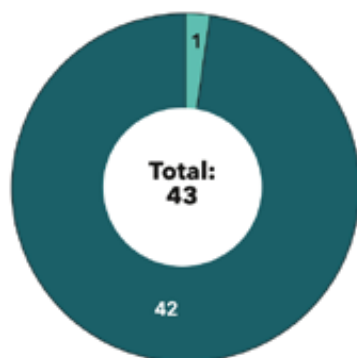
Administration: 16  
Finance: 8  
DLW-1: 76  
DLW-2: 63



The staff at the Peguis main office are also categorized appropriately, reflecting that Peguis CFS takes this matter seriously. The Peguis main office staff can be seen here:

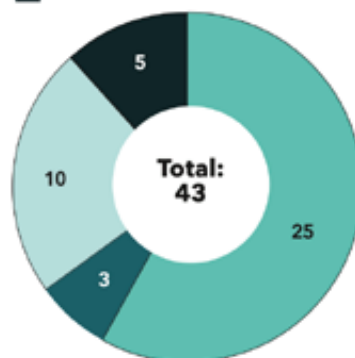
#### STAFF TYPE PEGUIS MAIN OFFICE STAFF

Non-Status: 1  
First Nation Status: 42



#### WORKFORCE QUALIFICATIONS

Administration: 25  
Finance: 3  
DLW-1: 10  
DLW-2: 5



## INTERVIEWS CONTINUED:

Employment research shows that people tend to change jobs frequently, for reasons like there is a perception that more exciting or more challenging, rewarding work exists elsewhere. Or that maybe another employer might better align with their values. This workplace phenomenon did not seem to exist at Peguis Child & Family Services for the most part. Most employees interviewed reported feeling satisfied with the work that they are able to do at Peguis CFS. In other words, there appeared to be common ideals shared by employer and employee(s).

One employee shared that Peguis Child & Family Services had been recommended to her as a place of employment. She has been with the Agency for over 10 years and reported that it allows her to have 'self-sustaining, gainful' employment in her professional life. She continued to share that years ago, Peguis Child & Family Services had been gaining a very negative reputation in the community. Upon the hiring of a new (current) Executive Director around 2009, things markedly improved at the Agency.

### *"I wouldn't go anywhere else." - Peguis CFS employee of 10+ years*

To provide a brief glance at how long the various staff members interviewed have been employed at the Agency, here are a few examples of what was reported to this evaluator:

Staff member: at Agency since 2018

Staff member: at Agency since 2010

Staff member: at Agency since 2017

Other employees provided their years in a numerical sequence:

One staff member: for 10+ years

One staff member: for 8+ years

One staff member: for 14+ years

One staff member: for 11+ years

(This list is not exhaustive).

When work anniversaries come up, an Agency wide email is sent out to congratulate the staff members for reaching their respective milestones. But also thanking them for their contributions and dedication to kids and families. This sign of acknowledgement was appreciated by staff members at Peguis CFS.

## THEME: PARTNERSHIP & COLLABORATION

### ELDER WISDOM

The Elders are being recognized as the important source of wisdom and experience that they are. They are invited to openly engage with families who may be struggling and foster kids who may require some guidance. The Elders bring with them years of maturity and practical lifelong learning.

Peguis Child & Family Services is working at creating and upholding knowledge systems, conceptual frameworks and pedagogy based in cultural teachings. This needs to continue. Through the passing down of traditions, Elders inspire thought and support those in need.



Many outsiders get confused about Indigenous communities and reduce Elders to helpful characters that pepper our lives with laughter and light. This is very true, in a sense. But what Peguis Child & Family Services is doing is restoring Elders to their rightful place in *Community Governance*. In traditional communities, Elders had the final say on societal matters. They played an important role in parental influence, and they taught through example. With sensibility and a calm approach, Elders proved how far patience and acceptance can take us. Logistically, they held active, present roles in everyday family life. They demonstrated love, they resolved conflicts, they encouraged imagination and stood firmly next to us during moments of doubt or fear. Indigenous communities are reaffirming their worldviews and ways of knowing to locally recognized existing knowledge and cultural practices. Elder Knowledge is as valid for today's generations as it was for past generations. Here is one example of a story shared:

*Elder shared a personal story of how he was adopted at 3 years old by his grandma. His mom believed this was best for him over entering the legal system, reflecting back, this Elder also agrees with this course of action. He spoke of being with his grandma as the best next thing to his mom and dad. This allowed him to stay in his community while growing up and he identified how he benefited from this. He never felt like an outsider and knew who he was and understood his culture. Elder spoke of how the housing conditions were rough growing up, including no running water or electricity but there was love from relatives and the community as a whole. Elder discussed that is his interpretation of what Peguis CFS is trying to do - keep kids in the community for them to know who they are and where they come from. He wholeheartedly agreed with this approach, which is why he and his wife help out at the Elders' Gatherings as much as possible. They wish to be part of the solution.*

*To conclude, Elder also shared about the confusion he had growing up when kids would suddenly disappear from his class and the community. He spoke of how his grandma warned him that if a strange car with well-dressed people ever showed up, he was to run and hide until they leave again.*

To have Peguis Elders share their ideas, conclusions and recommendations related to the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act* was profoundly invaluable. Elders do not necessarily know the 'ins and outs' of CFS, nor do they need to. Elders are committed to ensuring the needs of the entire community are being addressed. They are responsible for righting wrongs and developing new paths of healing for everybody. Nothing can equate with their life experiences. When the Elder shared the story of his grandmother warning him to stay clear of 'strange cars with well-dressed people', we all know what and who were being referred to. The story was chilling, powerful and effective; it got his point across. Children are better off with their families and there has never been any need for Outsiders to enter our communities.

## THEME: WORKLOAD

With the new legislation comes high expectations that things are going to be different. This type of social work; engaging with families, having regular communication circles, meeting with youth, etc. takes time and effort. Preventing children from encountering CFS and preventing families from times of crisis is much more work than apprehending kids. Prevention work takes dedication and many hours of painstaking work.

Planning for the roll out of the new legislation laid mostly with the management team. Employees at Peguis Child & Family Services' Management team were asked: *"What has the new legislation brought to your overall workload?"* The feedback was candid:

- One employee shared that the job requires a lot of sitting. She lives with a chronic illness and has undergone surgery in the past. Recently, as a result of the new journey that the Agency is on, there were meetings for 18 consecutive days in a row. The intensity of the workload can be arduous.
- In this same vein, the employee shared that she was up for the challenge. She thrives in situations like this.
- Another employee spoke about how case redistribution was well underway. Over 500 files were reviewed, assessed, and completed (file reviews and file transfers). An inordinate amount of work for any service delivery team.
- File maintenance and file management at any organization can be a full-time job. But to ensure that the most appropriate service was being rendered, Peguis CFS had to go through each file with a 'fine tooth comb' (especially during the file transfer process).
- One senior manager spoke of various reviews or inquiries the Agency has undergone over the past years. As hard as these inquiries can be on a service delivery team and a senior management team, this employee stressed that she was glad they went through them. The process compounded the need for accountability, responsibility and learning through mistakes, or even tragedy. The inquiry process can be difficult emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually but ironically, the Agency was more prepared than ever for the implementation of the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*.
- There was a lesson in her statement for any Agency/community who wishes to enact their own child welfare legislation: learn from your mistakes. Take in the information provided during difficult times because it will improve your overall effectiveness.
- There was also a 'Full Circle Effect' when speaking to one employee who shared that personally, she had experienced living within her own family of origin and her parents took in a baby to care for. This is when she first heard of Child and Family Services and what they do. Personally, she had seen it with her own family: parents caring for children that were not theirs but became theirs, through love and support. Employment at Peguis CFS is more than a job for her. She has come full circle in her life, taking this experience of sharing her home with foster kids growing up and now working at an Agency that is committed to securing homes for children. Her story was powerful and emotional as she shared how her personal experiences and life goals are being actualized in her professional life at Peguis CFS. The social justice she observed as a child and teen are now in practice during her adult life.

*"It was amazing to witness the negotiations. Our management team fought so hard for this and when it (the new legislation) became live, I literally had tears in my eyes." -a Peguis CFS employee*

- One employee of Peguis CFS spoke about how the community members are now listened

to. This leads to their needs being met. For example, if there is a community gathering going on, staff will be 'checking in' with members about what they would like to see and asking them for their suggestions and input. The employee stated that this approach is refreshing because for a long time, people were nervous about CFS and attendance at gatherings would be low. But currently, Agency events are well attended and people "don't have to be scared".

The employee continued on to say during gatherings, you can see a notable difference. Members are paying attention, being interactive and asking intelligent questions. There is also lots of laughter and visiting. These are all positive signs that slowly, people are starting to emerge from a place of fear and noticing that CFS can offer support. This is a relief for other reasons too. People have been suffering since the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020. People have their own issues at home and in their personal lives, but the Agency can provide safe, alcohol-free events where people can bring their kids. The Agency has been acting as a 'community hub' of healthy, fun activities for families.

## CHALLENGES

Employees working through a transition as large as this are bound to encounter some challenges along the way. During adulthood, we are well versed in our daily habits. It can be difficult to grow accustomed to change.

### A SHIFT IN MINDSET:

- An employee shared that there were certain individuals who were not quite prepared for the logistical piece that comes with being a sovereign state. One former employee actually ended up leaving the Agency because adjustments could not be made. This individual simply could not accept that the SFNNC was not in an authority position anymore. They struggled with decision-making in matters that had been handed over to the Southern First Nations Network of Care for years. It is better, in this evaluator's assessment, that individuals such as this remain in the colonial child welfare system, so as not to do any further harm by perpetuating its acts.

Child welfare literature also prepares us for this. Not everyone is going to be ready to leave the 'colonial mindset' behind.

### 10 CHARACTERISTICS & SKILLS OF SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL WORKERS

- Empathy
- Communication
- Organization
- Critical Thinking
- Active Listening
- Self-care
- Cultural Competence
- Patience
- Professional Commitment
- Advocacy

(University of Buffalo, 2024)

Employees like the one mentioned above were not the only ones that had difficulty adjusting to the 'immediate practice shift'. Employees at the provincial level had commentary about the move that Peguis First Nation was taking toward sovereignty. However, their actions displayed more reticence than their words. Despite being invited to the discussion tables for almost two years prior to the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act* going live, the provincial authorities arrived one month beforehand. Having finally catching their attention that this move was going to occur, they asked then to be part of the conversation. *What could they do? What role did they have? How was this transition going to affect them?* Peguis Child & Family Services worked with them to the best of their abilities, to catch them up on all they had missed.

Overall, despite the heavier workload responsibilities, staff members interviewed reported that the new legislation, the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*, is better for the community of Peguis First Nation and Peguis Child & Family Services. Important cultural imperatives such as Customary Care are built into the act thus supporting a shift in practice for options that support openness and transparency. This will invariably lead to positive social work approaches such as enabling and empowering a community and families to be able to have more influence over important decisions.

## **EXPANSION - EXCITING YET CHALLENGING**

One piece of advice for any agency hoping to engage in this same type of endeavor is to be ready for expansion. As stated above, Peguis Child & Family Services has grown from 70 employees to approximately 206 employees in two short years. Office space, office supplies, office management will have to be overseen by someone. At Peguis Child & Family Services, these responsibilities are overseen by managers and of course, the Executive Director. But it could be a full-time administrative job position. The growth will be quick and any organization hoping to do this is encouraged to plan ahead.

The Human Resources department at Peguis Child & Family Services was focused on hiring so much that at times, it felt that it was all they were doing. Hiring and appropriate onboarding are crucial to any organization. Onboarding allows new employees to get to know your organization and it sets the tone for their overall experience at a new workplace. Choosing the most appropriate candidate, interviewing, follow-up, etc. all take time and careful attention. When expansion takes place this quickly, hiring is going to monopolize much of HR's time and energy. Supporting each other, clear communication and remaining focused on the positive opportunities that expansion allows for has been the key to success at Peguis Child & Family Services.

Expansion is full of surprises and bumps in the road. At Peguis Child & Family Services, there is also an employee that oversees all capital projects related to expansion. Despite CFS agencies being mostly filled by social workers, economic and capital project management is not within a social worker's skillset. Hire an experienced, community-based individual who knows business, with excellent contacts and a strong reputation. This will take you far. In other words, social workers will do much of the work but not all of it. Many CFS agencies, including Peguis CFS, have researchers, consultants and hired full-time staff with backgrounds in law, economics, health, communications, project management etc. within their ranks. As well, Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders will be invaluable. At Peguis Child & Family Services, everyone's gifts are celebrated, revered and utilized. This model seems to be working very effectively.

## **RELATIONALITY**

At Peguis Child & Family Services, the internal reviewer observed a connection between those who are employed at the Agency and the work that they do. Most employees who come to Peguis CFS tend to stay and longevity was a main human resources aspect demonstrated. What are the reasons for this? When other child welfare agencies struggle with recruitment and retention, and burn out and compassion fatigue are commonplace, how does Peguis CFS approach talent management?

One of the main themes that emerged from interviews is how content staff are at Peguis CFS. They feel supported, they feel acknowledged, and they feel safe. Safe to ask questions, safe to be themselves and safe in their professional roles. This is not typical in child welfare services. Child welfare, particularly in the province of Manitoba, is a political titan. Under the wrong leadership,



it can be a place of competitiveness and disquietude. Lateral violence, especially, is at an all-time high at many organizations and agencies, as well as abuse of power by those in charge.

Further, social work is known to be a field of high worker burn-out rates. Distressing situations can be difficult to handle, emotionally or practically, leading social workers to feel hopeless or helpless. Sometimes referred to as 'compassion fatigue' in the literature, burn-out is caused by work-related stressors such as high demands, low levels of control, and poor (or zero) managerial support. Burn out at Peguis Child & Family Services appears to be mitigated by a solid employee assistance plan, wellness days and sick leave, cultural support and support from direct supervisors/managers.

Lastly, this new legislation has made people proud to work for Peguis Child & Family Services. One employee reported that this new legislation has made things much more 'adaptive' and the actual needs of individuals and families can be addressed now. This particular employee was quite new to the Agency and has several years of experience working for other organizations. He was unsure at first of taking a job in child welfare because he is not a social worker. Without the obvious job suitability of being a social worker, he wondered if he would even have a place within the Agency? But he is a Peguis band member and emotionally invested in his home community. He shared that he is relieved and proud to see the different way that Peguis Child & Family Services is doing things with families.

## ***DID YOU KNOW?***

*Peguis Child & Family Services and Yellowquill University College started a First Nations Child and Family Services Worker Diploma Cohort Program in September 2024 for anyone from Peguis First Nation who is interested in working with families and children*

## **KNOWLEDGE FROM THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS - PEGUIS CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES**

The Board of Directors at Peguis Child & Family Services are initially appointed by Chief and Council and are responsible for four main areas:

- Agency Results – to govern policies that result with outcomes for all members that receive services from the Agency
- Executive Director – constraints that establishes transparent, accountable and prudence in the delivery of child and family services
- Board Conduct – provides direction with one voice and adheres to governance policies to ethically ensure equitable service delivery
- Board/Executive Director Relationship – the Board's power is delegated and its proper evaluated in relation to the Executive Director role and authority

*(Peguis Child & Family Services, 2024)*

The five board members of Peguis Child & Family Services were interviewed for Phase One. This board of directors is what is referred to as a Working Board. A Working Board is more than just a governing entity. It has many staffing and strategic responsibilities, including day-to-day activities

such as fundraising/financial management, attending gatherings, decision-making related to programming, etc. Working boards are governing boards. Just like governing boards, working boards are responsible for the 'big picture' strategy and policies of an organization, but the members of a working board implement those strategies, whereas members of a governing board do not.

This is commonly seen in smaller, community-based organizations because as most people know, boards are comprised of non-paid volunteers. Volunteers living in smaller communities feel an investment in an organization is not only a benefit for other community members but also for themselves. This seemed to be the main theme of the information collected from the five board members.

The board members shared that they have a vision for the community of Peguis, with the focus being on children and healthy families. They recognize that if Peguis children are healthy and are cared for, this will have everlasting effects on the entire community. This includes each child having a strong supportive, loving network of people, resources and services surrounding them.

Storytelling took place where the board shared personal accounts of the Residential School Era and its effects on their families. The Trail of Tears was also discussed: Peguis First Nation 1B is the second site of this community because of a forced removal that took place in the early 1900s. St. Peter's Reserve (1A) was located around the Selkirk, Manitoba area. One board member shared family stories of the move from St. Peter's that she had been gifted. It was a long, hard, arduous journey of walking and sadly, the community lost several Elders and small children. The loss of St. Peter's was so much more than just a loss of land. As well, site 1B was nothing but bush, trees and marshy lowlands, prone to flooding. The entire 1B site had to be developed by the community members themselves. The government helped very little.

It was a very powerful moment for sharing their own family histories and how they have now come to be board members of Peguis Child & Family Services. The board members take this role very seriously and remain aware of the heavy responsibility that rests with them. They are the Keepers of family and community law.



## **PEGUIS CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES' RECOGNITION THAT PREVENTION IS THE PATHWAY TO HEALING**

Child welfare prevention services are intended to address the risks associated with child maltreatment while strengthening the factors that protect children and families. Prevention programming at Peguis Child & Family Services are being designed and implemented to ensure children live in an environment that maximizes healthy development and well-being.

Peguis Child & Family Services is taking a family-centered approach to protecting children and cultural revitalization is key in this service delivery. These resources are important so community folks can have a place to go for healing. Prioritizing prevention services has been included in the new legislation. This allows the message to be clear: prevention is not only the priority but the preferred mode of service delivery. If the family allows, early intervention services will also be coordinated.

Kinship care is a model of caring for children where kids are raised by family members whenever possible, instead of stranger-based foster homes. The Agency is trying its best to move away from the stronghold of a 'child protection/apprehension model' to a family services model. They recognize that this is going to be the way of the future. A family service system promotes a healthy childhood while also being conscientious of 'risk'.

The Agency has also moved away from using standardized assessment tools, often designed to only serve white, middle-class families. Instead, they have adopted the Signs of Safety approach utilized in New Zealand with Māori communities that examines risk. Most importantly, Peguis Child & Family Services has been listening to community. If community members have something to contribute, the Agency would like to hear about it. This type of evaluative measuring is rare in child and family services.

Considering what children and families need is important work. The importance of working collaboratively and assessing what kinds of support to offer families is crucial. But the only way that you get to this important point is by listening to what families have to say. Peguis Child & Family Services is working toward trust, transparency, and mutual understanding amongst all stakeholders. People with 'lived experience' with CFS will guide and innovate through their insights and solutions about how CFS can do things better.

## **CHILD PROTECTION IS COMMUNITY PROTECTION**

A community-based approach, based on the natural laws of kinship has been the standard that Peguis CFS has set for itself, and this vision remains at the forefront of their strategic planning. Service outcomes with the most positive impact in Indigenous communities have strengths and needs of kids and families at the top of the priority list. Providing families with dignity and care is part of respectful practice. Social workers, who are working in the name of social justice, will continue to work at developing shared care plans. (A change in terminology could accompany all the positive changes at Peguis Child & Family Services. "Case planning" is something derived from the colonial approach to CFS where plans for families were developed case by case. This gives the wrongful impression that the families we are working with are merely case files or case numbers.)

Expanding and strengthening prevention-based services to families and kids is the overall goal of Peguis Child & Family Services. This 'Families First' approach will bring meaningful change into the community.

Analyzing statistics or 'keeping track' of the progress at Peguis Child & Family Services is the responsibility of every community member but the Agency should continue to take the lead by

providing the community with regular statistics to review (this occurs during an organization's annual general meetings). The data is undeniable evidence of the fact that the vision of the Agency and the Board of Directors is coming to fruition.

## **PHILOSOPHY OF PRACTICE**

The restructuring of Peguis CFS includes traditional teachings and guidance. There is recognition that going back to the teachings is what is going to provide for change. This is how Indigenous people have always responded to changing social conditions and challenges: by placing centrality in our teachings. The relevance and application of traditional teachings at Peguis Child & Family Services currently looks like this:

### **LOVE** – Traditional Ways of Healing

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its Community Wellness Services

Love is carried by the eagle. Creator had cleaned the earth 2 other times, first with ice then with water, when the human beings lost their way and were getting out of control. As the Creator had planned to cleanse the earth again – because once again the humans had lost their way – the Eagle came forward to speak on their behalf. “Let me fly out and search to see if any people are still trying to follow your way.” So, the eagle flew out searching, until he came across the Red people still honouring the Creator and the life he gave them. The Creator then instructed the Eagle to do this every day and as long as some people were still following the Creator’s laws, he would not cleanse the earth again, for how much he loved the people. The eagle carries the teaching love, he flies closest to the Creator and carries our prayers and so we always offer him tobacco to thank him. Love is the most powerful medicine that Creator gave us. We must love ourselves first to be able to love. Love can heal. Love can work miracles. We must use love in everything we say, think and do. We feed the Eagle fish in the Fall as they leave and in the Spring upon return. The Eagle carries the medicine Sweetgrass.

To know love is to know peace. The Eagle has the ability and strength to carry all teachings. Eagle can reach the highest of all creatures and is believed to be closest to Creator. Love is based on admiration, tenderness, devotion, and kindness for all things around you.

### **RESPECT** – Traditional Ways of Caring for our Children

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its Family Preservation services

Respect is carried by the buffalo. The buffalo gave every part of his being to the Red people. The Red people used the buffalo for food, tools, homes, clothing and in ceremony. So, this give and take between the Buffalo and the Red people is the ultimate development of respect. Respect must be earned by showing it. Respect yourself, and all living things. Respect everyone’s uniqueness and free will from the biggest to the smallest. Treat everyone the way you wish to be treated. We feed Buffalo apples or berries. The Buffalo carries the medicine, Sage.

### **COURAGE** – Traditional Ways of Protecting Our Children

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its Intake Services and After Hours Program

Courage is carried by the Bear. We are told in the wintertime that the Bear is hibernating, but the truth is that the bear is fasting and it is because of him that the Red people did not lose their way



of life. The Red man evolved from the bear, the Bear is our brother and when we want to know who we really are we should call on him. It takes courage in this day and age to live as the Red man. But the Bear tells us to be strong and proud to be who the Creator made us. To face life with integrity and bravery is to know courage. Bear teaches us to overcome challenges and fears that prevent us from what's in our heart and spirit. Bear shows us to live a balanced life and to stand up for what we believe in and have the courage to be yourself. We feed him in the Fall before he begins his fast and again in the Spring when he wakes, fish, berries and honey. The Bear carries the medicine Bear Root.

### **HONESTY** – Coming Together to Speak Truth in a Sharing Circle

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its investigation services

Honesty is carried by the Sabe. The Sabe is a very gentle creature, and for this the Creator gave him a gift. The Creator saw that it saddened Sabe when the people were so afraid of him. So, the Creator gave him the ability to be either physical or spiritual, and this is why he's never been captured and never will be. But he brings the message to live honestly. Be who the Creator made you with honor – the Red Man – whether you're a man or woman and live it to the best of your ability. And if you live a truly honest life you will be as big as Sabe. To journey through life with integrity is to know honesty. Sabe walks among people. Sabe teaches us to be true to ourselves and our spirit. Allowing truth to guide us and accepting who we are will guide us to being honest. We feed Sabe potatoes and onions by placing them in a tree. The Sabe carries the medicine Weekay.

### **WISDOM** – Learning From Life Lessons and Embracing the Teachings of our Elders

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its intervention services

Wisdom is carried by the Beaver. The Creator gave the Beaver the gift of his teeth. When the Beaver uses his teeth, he can divert water to a burned out place and create a beautiful place once again. If he should stop using his teeth they will grow until he is unable to eat and will die. Like the Beaver, the Creator gave us all unique gifts to learn and develop for the betterment of the people, and it is said that when we don't know our gifts or don't use them, we become dead inside and feel as though we have no purpose. And if we all use our gifts as the Beaver does, we can create a beautiful world. We feed the Beaver turnip, carrots, and any other fruit or vegetable that is hard. The Beaver carries the medicine Grey Willow.

### **HUMILITY** – Recognizing Strength Within Our Families

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its Collaborative Family Engagement services

Humility is carried by the wolf. Wolves are the reflection of working together. The Wolf pack chooses a lead wolf, and the rest humble themselves by following his lead. All decisions, like where their territory is, and where they hunt are made by the lead wolf. The wolf teaches us that alone and on our own we fail, but by turning our lives over to the Creator and his guidance, we will be successful. Humility is knowing that we all need help in our lives in order to be happy and achieve our purpose. Wolf teaches us to find balance within ourselves and be selfless and kind. We can show humility with our compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. We feed the wolf meat. The wolf carries the medicine Berry Roots.

### **TRUTH** – Reconciliation with Our Children & Families

- Under the guidance of this teaching is where the Agency has placed its Protection services

Truth is carried by the turtle. Grandmother Turtle has been here since the beginning of time. It is said she survived the purification of the earth and holds the truth. Once you know and live the other seven teachings, you will then know truth. The back of Grandmother Turtle's shell represents Turtle Island, the sweat lodge, and the 13 moons calendar. She draws herself inside and like her, we must look inside ourselves to find truth. We feed the turtle fruit. The turtle carries the medicine, Cedar.

*"We are so fortunate. We have our own In-House Legal Counsel, and he comes from Peguis. That was really great. He gathered views from workers on the new legislation. It was a joint effort."*

*-Peguis CFS Manager*



# LOOKING TO THE WEST

## MOVING FORWARD

Putting these values into practice are the next steps. Respectful practice and cultural continuity for children have been valued at Peguis Child & Family Services for a long time but to actualize these values, what could that look like? Before operationalizing values, one must ensure policy and procedures are in place. The program manuals for the various areas of service delivery have been written or are almost complete: the Child Abuse Program Procedures Manual, the Prevention Program Procedures Manual, the Inter-Nation Program Procedures Manual (in draft form), etc. This required a team effort on behalf of management and front-line staff, including hours of collaboration and writing. For the foreseeable future, these manuals will be revisited and revised as needed.

The Peguis Child & Family Services Strategic Service Plan is a document worth reviewing. It is substantial at almost 100 pages in length but what it has working most in its favor are the details. The SSP outlines:

*Continue partnership with Sun Lodge Village and Rainbow Lodge to provide cultural services that will support the wellbeing of children, youth and families.*

(Peguis CFS Strategic Service Plan, 2023-2026, p. 63)

Goal statements such as this are how the mission or vision of an organization is interpreted, then carried out. Goals give an organization something to strive toward and it is imperative that goals are foundational to any strategic service plan.

There is also a carefully written Agency Program Communication Guide that was compiled. For each manager/coordinator of Peguis Child & Family Services, there are roles and responsibilities listed in bullet form under their respective area. This document ensures that nobody is unclear about communication and who is responsible.





# THE HONOURING OUR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND NATION ACT ("HOCFNA")

The Act is a living law, derived from *Inaakonigewin*, laws given to the Anishinaabe. Pipes have been lifted, and the drum has been sounded and guidance from Spirit has been sought for this journey. Our people have been called together to lift up those children and families in need, by collectively supporting their journey to wellness (HOCFNA, 2022, preamble).

## CONSTITUTIONAL VALIDITY OF THE FEDERAL ACT

As a province, Quebec challenged *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families* (Bill C-92) stating that it was "unconstitutional", but this was overruled by the Supreme Court of Canada in February 2024. The Supreme Court found that this federal act's dominant purpose concerns "the well-being of Indigenous children, youth and families by promoting the delivery of culturally appropriate child, youth, and family services and, in doing so, advances the process of reconciliation with Indigenous people" (Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, 2024).

This decision has major implications for helping governments, both Crown and Indigenous, learn how to integrate different legal orders. How will Western law concepts and Indigenous law concepts co-exist with one another? Today, Crown and Indigenous governments will need to collaborate to create a workable real-life model of integrated jurisdiction in child welfare because of this act. In the future, this real-life model could be an important tool to show courts that even in the absence of federal legislation, Indigenous jurisdiction not only must exist but can operate fully and independently (JFK Law LLP, 2024).

The legalities of today's new era in child welfare will continue to be monitored carefully by the legal team at Peguis Child & Family Services.

## NEW LEGISLATION, NEW JOURNEY

As an Agency, the leadership at Peguis Child & Family Services have been planning this move toward sovereignty for a while. There were provisions being made to ensure the Agency would be in the best position possible when Bill C-92 was enacted into law. Like many First Nations and Indigenous communities across the country, Peguis had been making necessary preparations for a long time.

This legislation marks Peguis First Nation's exercise of their inherent and sacred right to protect their own children. The coming into force of the new legislation acknowledges collective efforts to put a stop to the intergenerational trauma faced by the community and to revitalize traditional parenting practices. Peguis First Nation's law requires the Agency, Peguis Child & Family Services, to stand with families and cultivate relationships with parents, letting them lead the way forward. Parents and families know what they need and their journeys toward healing are to be supported.

## THE CSA SETTLEMENT CASE - SYMBOL OF A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

In March 2024, the Province of Manitoba agreed in principle to pay \$530 million to plaintiffs after three class-action lawsuits were filed by child and family services agencies. These lawsuits were filed after a judge found the province's decision to order CFS agencies to give money from the federal Children's Special Allowance (CSA) to the provincial government as unconstitutional and discriminatory.



It is important to mention the leading role that Peguis Child & Family Services took in this matter. The racial discrimination demonstrated through the rejection of funds by the Province of Manitoba to Peguis children in foster care was unacceptable to the Board of Directors and a lawsuit was subsequently filed against the Province on behalf of the Agency. Other CFS agencies eventually became part of this same lawsuit.

The settlement will compensate every child affected by the Province's actions, including interest and additional money for other damages and legal costs, through the creation of a resolution fund. The Province of Manitoba had no right to withhold these funds from vulnerable foster children. As most social workers know, CSA is money for special requests or cost-of-living needs of foster kids.

The money withheld from Indigenous children in foster care represents some of the worst racism against the Indigenous community the Government of Manitoba has ever demonstrated. The Government of Manitoba understood the CSA payments were made by the Government of Canada to agencies for the sole purpose of funding children in care. These CSA payments were never designed to be used by the Government of Manitoba to subsidize its own funding obligations to CFS agencies or to be illegally placed into its own general treasury.

## **SPOTLIGHT: ASPECTS OF THE PEGUIS FRAMEWORK**

In this section, a few programs are going to be spotlighted for their contributions to the Agency as a whole.

### **CAPITAL PROJECTS**

Peguis Child & Family Services negotiated Capital Projects as part of this agreement to provide adequate services to Peguis membership to prevent children from coming into foster care. Building and strengthening the community has been a major focus of the Agency. It is proactive that Peguis CFS included capital projects (expansion) as part of their new legislation implementation. This way, they have control and autonomy over expansion planning, including responsible spending and reporting. This way, families and children benefit with transparency at the forefront. Here are a few of the projects undertaken:

### **MAAMAWIBIWAY - OUR GATHERING PLACE**

Maamawibiway was purchased by Peguis Child & Family Services in July 2023. Maamawibiway is 166 acres in total and is located 2 miles east of Hodgson, Manitoba on Highway 325. Maamawibiway was seen as an opportunity for the Agency to secure an asset that would provide adequate space for development and programming. Currently, the site houses the Traditional Independent Living Program and the Family Reunification Program. The site is not yet fully developed. But there is camper parking, a ceremonial arbor, A-frames being built, etc. and there are major goals yet to come:

- Play structures for children's entertainment
- Hockey rink
- Splashpad
- Skateboard park
- Re-unification homes
- Paintball park
- 3 hole golf course

- 7 Sacred Teachings mini golf course
- Basketball and volleyball courts
- Concert stage

The internal reviewer had several chances to visit the Maamawibiway property. It is an incredibly sound purchase by the Agency that will pay off its value in years to come. It is central, well-kept, and new developments are visible every time I visit. The idea of buying this land was innovative and solid. The families and children of Peguis First Nation will benefit greatly.

## YOUTH SERVICES

The subculture of Indigenous youth can be vexing for many social workers who cannot seem to 'build a bridge' with them. What Peguis Child & Family Services has done is bring in a team that focuses on youth. The Youth Services team is skilled at communicating, relating, and listening to young people. Youth talk to us through their words and their silence and their actions. We must learn how to interact with young people. They have their own culture, their own language, and their own customs.

Peguis Child & Family Services' Youth Services Team uses their time to assist young people with the daily challenges of gradual independence and gaining autonomy within their respective environments.

The Youth Services Department provides focused support to Youth between the ages of 15 to 26 years. The Department is divided into 2 Youth Empowerment Units. The Child in Care Youth Empowerment Unit supports Youth between the ages of 15 to 17 years while the Extension of Services (EOS) Unit supports Youth between the ages of 18 to 26 years, who have entered into an Extension of Services Agreement. These units provide focused support to Youth transitioning from adolescence and into adulthood.

An Extension of Service Agreement can provide Peguis First Nation's Youth who have been in a guardian relationship with a Child Welfare Agency, or party to a Customary Care Agreement or an Agreement with a Minor, the opportunity to receive support while transitioning into adulthood. Supports are goal-oriented, with a focus on future independence. Eligibility may begin upon reaching the age of eighteen (18) and services are available until the age of twenty-six (26).

Peguis Child & Family Services provides the following services to youth:

- Youth empowerment support
- One-on-one support for goal setting
- Employment and education guidance and support
- Housing support
- Crisis intervention
- Mental health and addictions guidance and support (excluding the provision of treatment programming)
- Financial resourcing education and support
- Life skills training

Maamawibiway houses the Traditional Independent Living Program where the following supports are offered to young people:

- Intensive life skills coaching for targeted support
- Multiple housing units (tiny homes) are being made available for Peguis youth

- On-site programming and support offering a foundation for healing and development of capacity for meaningful independence
- Upon a youth becoming ready for independence, the youth will leave Maamawibiway with a home of their own
- Youth homes will be moved into the community to offer long term housing stability

To build connections and reclaim identity, cultural programming also takes place as part of the Traditional Independent Living Program:

- Youth sharing circles
- Sweat lodge ceremonies
- Traditional hunting and fishing
- Medicine and grandfather picking
- Mentorship
- Grief and loss workshops

Lastly, programming that focuses on youth becoming emancipated to become successful citizens is offered:

- Résumé building and job readiness workshops
- Financial management skills workshops
- Drivers Safety Education
- Basic Training in CPR, Food Handlers, First Aid, WHIMIS
- Information sessions and tours with community resources and learning centers

## CHALLENGES & SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Despite everything that Peguis Child & Family Services is doing to address the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental needs of youth living in Peguis First Nation, there are gaps that exist. The interview with the Youth Services Director uncovered important challenges posed to Peguis Child & Family Services. One of these challenges is that CFS workers are not trained addiction specialists. Like most specializations, to walk with someone through the journey of sobriety takes different levels of training than what the average CFS worker has. Wellness and “well-briety” must be left to the local addiction centre in Peguis First Nation, the Peguis Al-Care Treatment Centre. These are the professionals that are trained in the capacity of addictions and substance misuse.

The Director that oversees Youth Services is right to worry. The issue of addictions and mental health are directly correlated with serious issues we see in our province. Kathleen Buddle, a researcher at the University of Manitoba shares that Manitoba has had the highest homicide rate in recent years (for further reading on this, please see article, *Wahkowsowin* Strengthening Program: At the Intersection of Age, Gender, Race and Socio-economic Status in Winnipeg by K. Buddle). All these serious issues intersect for many youth living or leaving the foster care system. Peguis Child & Family Services is doing their best to address systemic gaps.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - QUALITY ASSURANCE AND COMMUNICATIONS

## QUALITY ASSURANCE

At Peguis Child & Family Services they are interested in hearing insights and constructive feedback from community members. The Agency's Quality Assurance Coordinator is responsible for reviewing and assessing complaints relating to case management. It is the responsibility of the QA Coordinator to inform the public of the complaint process as outlined:

- An initial assessment of a complaint must occur. This is a team approach; it is the responsibility of the worker and supervisor to address the immediate concern first – prior to proceeding with the formal complaint process.
- The worker and supervisor need to document their efforts to resolve the concern.
- If the service user is not satisfied, then they must be informed of further steps that can be taken in the complaint process.

(Peguis Child & Family Services, 2024)

## COMMUNICATIONS

Peguis Child & Family Services has a Communications Director who plays a pivotal role in providing valuable information to community members about the latest developments at the Agency. With years of expertise in the area of communications, this individual is responsible for designing and implementing communication plans to guide public relations.

The Agency's website located at [peguiscfs.ca](http://peguiscfs.ca) provides key information about current events, videos, job postings, and community members can sign up to receive an Agency newsletter. The Agency is prioritizing updates to the website to ensure it is user friendly,

The Communications Department supports the Agency staff as they continue to provide services and programming to Peguis First Nation children and families. A constant focus of the department is to increase member awareness of programming, services, events and updates to laws and policies.

In the name of transparency and sharing, the Agency has an electronic newsletter which is emailed monthly to subscribers. The Agency encourages all Peguis community members to sign up to the newsletter to stay up to date on current events.

## MORE NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS

**Mentorship:** one employee spoke of a recent promotion and how she was now mentoring the person who took over for her. Professionally, this is best case scenario. Mentoring in the workplace is the best route to follow to allow employees to gain leadership skills and learn from their peers. Mentoring impacts everyone involved in a positive way, including the work environment itself. People are inspired during the mentoring process, which allows them to 'put their best foot forward'.

**Humility:** Humility is important to effective social work practice and should not be overlooked. If we are to be conducting true social work, in other words, helping others, we need to practice a high degree of personal and professional humility. The self-awareness, confidence, and security that one must have in oneself to be humble leads almost naturally to helping others. Social work



is merely a field of a) understanding human behavior and b) responding to human behavior. If practitioners achieve a deeper understanding of the importance of critical self-reflection, they will be able to fully engage in stronger relationships. And relationships are key to any organization.

In fact, the Executive Director shared that the Agency is committed to hearing/listening to anybody receiving services. The Intake team plays a big role in this. For instance, if an Intake Worker helps secure some groceries for a family, they would ask the family for feedback by providing them with a paper copy of the Agency's evaluation form. Filling out the evaluation form is not mandatory but at the discretion of the service user.

This is impressive to new employees of the Agency who have never seen an organization operate in such a way. One employee interviewed in April 2024 stated that community members are specifically asked, *"What would you like to see?"* and he enjoys this. He believes this is how community-based organizations should be operating; with the best interests of the community coming first.

This approach is almost unheard of in typical CFS settings. CFS has been a powerful entity in the lives of many people and rarely does CFS ask service users to respond with their own feelings, thoughts or opinions on service delivery. Receiving constructive feedback from community members is important and Peguis CFS recognizes this. All information can lead to the Agency doing things better.

**Competence:** One employee shared in his interview that the Executive Director and senior Managers are very competent at staying calm and assessing situations. If there is a social worker upset or overwhelmed about a case plan not being adhered to, or the family's situation has become a bit more precarious, the Executive Director and Managers will listen and remind the social worker what they are there to do: prevent children from coming into foster care. So, if there are routes of service delivery that the social worker had not thought of, or somehow missed, the Executive Director and/or Managers will take the time to offer guidance and advice. Having a strong senior management team increases the level of success at any organization. This example of the Executive Director and senior management offering mentorship and problem-solving skills illustrates an effective management team bringing diverse perspectives and experience to the table.

## ALTERNATIVES TO CHILD PROTECTION

The prospect of becoming or being involved with child welfare is overwhelming. One of the biggest barriers to family engagement is the court process in CFS matters. Once the courts get involved, it usurps any type of parental authority or decision making. This shift in power can be profoundly disruptive and can be a 'turning point'. Parents are less likely to be cooperative (with the court process or with the assigned social worker). In other words, this is when you can start to lose them.

At Peguis CFS, the court process is viewed as only one alternative. It is recognized that the courts are not a place where effective family engagement occurs.

Peguis Child & Family Services is taking the time to listen to families and learn from the families themselves about what support they could use. Families are being given the opportunity to outline what areas of support they could benefit from. Especially the younger kids and teenagers. The Agency provides space for kids and teens to talk about their perspectives of home life, or life in foster care.

## **COURT ALTERNATIVES: SUBSIDIZED GUARDIANSHIP & CUSTOMARY ACCEPTANCE**

Customary Acceptance under the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act* allows for guardianship by way of customary acceptance with the blessing of the Acceptance Commission consisting of Peguis Elders.

These agreements allow for children who are in long-term kinship homes to access financial support, while remaining with family members. Kids in family-based care are allowed to have the same type of financial support as the average foster child would have.

Guardianship is a legal permanency option for children placed in out-of-home care in the CFS system where an appropriate family member is appointed as legal guardian of the child. Under the subsidized guardianship and customary acceptance options at Peguis CFS, the legal guardian can receive much needed financial support.

Peguis CFS has been working with families to introduce them to this option. There has been much interest. As well, the Agency has completed this process for a handful of families and remains invested in continuing.

### **A NOTE ON FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**

The need for positive, honest communication with Finance has been stressed throughout this process of implementing the new legislation at Peguis Child & Family Services. Audits are a very real, very necessary aspect of child welfare. No organization wants to be in the position of being accused of financial mismanagement. The Finance Team is working collaboratively with the service delivery teams to ensure accountability and responsibility. During the 'busyness' of everyday social work comes the need to know where each and every dollar is spent, through receipts, records, and diligent account keeping. This cannot be stressed enough.

Peguis CFS Finance offers training for Agency workers in their policies and procedures on a regular basis. The Finance Team will answer questions about spending, maintenance and operations. The Finance Team is trying hard to keep up communication with everyone at the Agency to maintain a positive relationship. They are aware that social workers are not necessarily trained in such things during their university years. Financial accountability is something that is learned during those first important years at a job. The Finance team is respectful, yet firm in providing information about what is required from the workers and Management for the purposes of their reporting. This evaluator agrees that this approach is best. Finance is responsible for 'checks and balances'. It is important that Finance is heard, acknowledged and respected for the work that they do. The Executive Director and the Board of Directors are ultimately responsible for the financial management of the Agency; however, the Finance department plays a major advising role.

### **GRIEVANCES**

There were a couple instances of interoffice strife reported to the internal reviewer. This can be very common in organizations but nothing that was overly concerning. When people are working toward a common goal and the work hours are long, this can get overwhelming. This type of reporting is also natural during evaluations where some employees feel safer talking to a neutral party about isolated incidents where they have felt disrespected or unheard. This does not mean that they are leaving the organization, or they are not committed to their work. It just means that

disagreements occur, as well as different perspectives on professionalism. This internal reviewer does not see this as a negative issue. Since workplaces are places where people of various backgrounds and cultures come together, conflicts will naturally arise. Further, when people feel safe with each other, this is when disagreements can occur. Respectful dialogue, exchanged firmly with one another, can be very constructive and lead to better decisions. Peguis Child & Family Services seems to be a workplace that embraces open communication and where the uniqueness of employees is celebrated.

Overall, the staff members that offered feedback during Phase One were strongly gifted, knowledgeable, respectful, steadfast, and dedicated. Efficiency is demonstrated at Peguis Child & Family Services because responsibilities are shared, tasks are delegated, goals are communicated, and measurable outcomes are prioritized. The overall team-oriented environment at Peguis Child & Family Services encourages personal and professional success, increases job satisfaction, and reduces inactivity and redundancy. This internal review observed professionals who treat each other well, have a good time together, and value each other's views.



# LOOKING TO THE WEST

## RECOMMENDATIONS

No internal review report would be complete without some recommendations about moving forward. This evaluation focused on continuous improvement at Peguis Child & Family Services. Evaluation is a cyclical process that should inform ongoing improvement efforts. It is the hope that any recommendations generated during Phase One will feed into subsequent phases, creating a 'loop of feedback' for continuous improvement.

### RECOMMENDATION #1

#### Keep Focusing on Anti-Colonial Indigenous Social Work

Anti-colonial social work has been defined as social work practice that defies colonialism. This is what Peguis Child & Family Services has been doing already. This internal reviewer contends that this important work should continue.

Anti-colonial Indigenous social work is a social, cultural and political stance that social workers must take against the realities of colonialism: oppression, racism, dispossession, conquest, domination, authority, destruction, power imbalances, inequality, and displacement. As well, it is a revitalization of Indigenous ways concentrating on the protection, recovery and maintenance of Indigenous knowledge systems. The values of these knowledge systems are based on collectivism, traditions, orality, restoration, resistance, self-determination, inherent rights, solidarity, relationships, Spirit and the land.

In that way, I offer these suggestions:

#### 1.) Peacemaking - The Essence of Indigenous Systems of Social Order

##### The Traditional Law of Peacemaking

Peacemaking is a complex process, often integrated into Indigenous approaches within the Justice System. But there is adaptability to peacemaking, as it pertains to *adjudicating*. Peguis Child & Family Services does not wish to 'police' families. There is a role of working with families to help keep kids safe, however, that can feel like monitoring or correcting. So, what can be done about this? How can the workers at Peguis CFS engage effectively with families when conflict has arisen?

If a parent has lost direction in their life, there are ways that Peguis Child & Family Services can assist but not direct the process of redirection. Autonomy is grounded in the idea of belonging. Belonging in a family, surrounded by a community, rooted in a nation. Belonging is a need that each human being holds. In order to get to a solution with a family or individual, workers need to engage with Peacemakers. *What is missing from the individual's life? What will help to provide a sense of peace to the individual or family?*

Peacemakers do not necessarily have to adjudicate because the solutions will offer themselves. Once a family or individual feels safe (this is something that can elude CFS workers), they will start working on what is off-balance. Having said this, Peguis CFS workers are already taking on many qualities of Peacemakers. The workers do have to consider the best interests of the child as their primary concern, however. Also, the Elders have a huge role to play in Peacemaking. Peguis



CFS will be implementing their Community Circle of Care programming where Elders are directly involved with working with families and establishing realistic, fair plans. But Peacemaking can take many forms. The following are a couple of tangible suggestions:

- Peacemakers could be peer support workers for families. Families helping other families.

Peer support is relatively new to the field of child welfare, but it is already demonstrating better outcomes for families. Peguis CFS is already re-imagining support for families in effective, creative and sustaining ways. As healthy families emerge, the Agency would be in a key position to offering mentoring or assisting roles to those who have valuable knowledge to share. They would know firsthand what it is like to encounter CFS and come out the other side. Families would be less intimidating to deal with than an assigned worker. Utilizing parents' acquired knowledge of how to navigate the CFS system and better negotiate/communicate could benefit all.

It is recognized that Peguis CFS is already utilizing the skill set of community Elders and traditional teaching methods like the Sharing Circle to help families. But Peacemakers could play a vital role.

Peacemakers or peer mentors provide social support, link parents to services, accompany parents to important engagements, and provide overall guidance. Further, peacemaking is directly related to the concept of reconciliation. In fact, many argue that we will not achieve reconciliation without it.

## **2.) A Home Visitors Program**

Home visiting programs are a key component of services provided to parents (new parents or young parents). During these visits, in the name of prevention, the Home Visitor can share parenting support, provide information or resources, link families to community gatherings, and provide social support and mentorship.

## **HOME VISITORS PROGRAMMING & SIGNS OF SAFETY**

If parents feel safe to talk (the home visitor has established a trustful working relationship) about the risks that they are facing, receive information about how to reduce them, seek care and treatment for mental health/substance issues, and obtain support to help change their current conditions, this helps to keep kids safe. Peguis Child & Family Services is already on this track. This is not going to be anything new to them. For instance, Peguis CFS utilizes the Signs of Safety model of assessing risk and safety for children. The main tool that helps workers in this aspect is called the Harm Analysis Matrix or as many workers call it, the Harm Matrix.

According to Michael Caslor, the licensed Signs of Safety Trainer and Consultant who Peguis CFS has been working with, the Harm Matrix helps workers ascertain whether they should be worried about the child's circumstances OR is there a child actually being harmed. Children actually being hurt is rare in CFS situations. I know this may sound surprising. But the number of cases where abuse is being found, reported and substantiated are low. Always have been. Instead, the risk comes to many children when their parents are struggling with mental health issues because of the 2 most common situations found in these homes: domestic violence and substance (mis)use.

According to Mr. Caslor, in child protection, what is found are very few instances where children are being hurt physically. Instead, we find parents that are struggling. As child protection workers, we find concerning situations where we assess a level of risk to the child. Typically, child protection services would intrude on the family and remove the children, without fully understanding where the risk was coming from. This removal of the children from their home then becomes the most harmful incident in that child's life.

In other words, there is much to be done BEFORE a family goes into crisis. CFS needs to be addressing harm, not causing harm. Peguis Child & Family Services has been working from a preventative approach model for some time, developing sustainable programs and policies that support Prevention. Adopting Signs of Safety was a first correct step.

## WHERE TO START?

Effective home visiting programs begin with a clear vision. This is a suggestion for a possible vision statement: "Peguis Child & Family Services strives to contribute to Peguis First Nation in which every parent/caregiver is able to raise resilient children in ways in which they can develop their full potential, protected by victimization and abuse in a community free from violence".

Peguis Child & Family Services can continue designing programming that suits them. The research shows that families can heal themselves with proper, adequate and appropriate services. Within this cycle, they can learn to reconcile the issues that are causing instability:

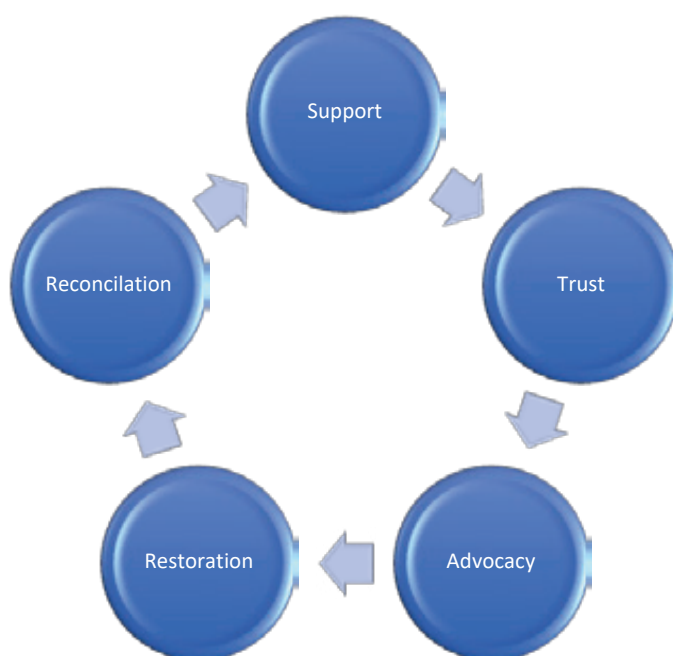


Table 1.1

Peguis Child & Family Services has been thinking forward in their actions. Prevention is going to be the new way of child and family services. In fact, this is what CFS should be: support and resources for families. The families being engaged with their gifts and strengths being honoured, completely and wholly. Peguis Child & Family Services has demonstrated openness and willingness to take on Prevention.

## **RECOMMENDATION #2**

### **Keep Addressing the Harms of the Past & Building Relationships**

During more than one interview during the data collection stage, it was evident that there is lingering distrust for the child and family services system. As much as Peguis CFS is moving in a new direction, there remains a divide between the Agency and some Peguis community members.

One community member who was interviewed shared their concerns about social media posts especially that are disparaging against the Agency and wondered out loud what the Agency plans to do about it. Especially where the younger generations are concerned, the young people of Peguis First Nation are having difficulty understanding that CFS has undergone a major shift. For many folks, CFS is CFS and that still carries very negative feelings.

This recommendation includes forming (and the continuing of forming) relationships with the people of Peguis First Nation. This Agency is known for its community-based gatherings and this Agency is very giving and kind-hearted, providing food/groceries, Red River Ex tickets, and other gifts to families. Relationships are the building blocks for all community organizing activities. The relationships that we have with our co-workers, the communities we serve, and even our adversaries are the means for achieving our goals. People do not work in isolation; we enjoy working together more.

The next steps after building or re-building relationships are sustaining them. We need relationships in order to win allies to our cause. To get support from people outside Peguis Child & Family Services, the Agency will require a community of people to share the joys and struggles of the work. This is what community wellness looks like.

## **RECOMMENDATION #3**

### **Keep Gathering Strength with This New, Authentic 'Different Response'**

An authentic different response is required in child welfare, where agencies need to sit back and let the families lead the way. Some of us were around to see the Differential Response movement in child welfare in 2008/2009. A model from Madison, Wisconsin was adopted, and agencies were instructed to use it. This trend of service delivery turned out to be a massive failure for most Indigenous communities. In fact, many would say that it caused even more harm in an already harmful system.

Peguis Child & Family Services, through the continued use of the Signs of Safety Model is working with and for families, as opposed to working against them. Families are invited to openly communicate their concerns, complaints and transgressions. Workers listen and try to value all feedback, not just the 'easy to deal with' information. Finding workable solutions when people are unhappy or dissatisfied can be challenging but the social workers at Peguis Child & Family Services are trying their best. And of course, the first step is engaging in respectful, active listening with no judgment and no preconceived agenda.

The Agency should continue this work by remaining focused on their overall strategic planning, especially the 'actionables'. This will also require regular, respectful, and clear communication with the community. Peguis CFS is already engaging community members in healthy ways and this path should continue.

## CFS AS RESISTANCE

The last argument that I will make in Phase One is that the Agency is engaging CFS as a form of resistance. As Indigenous people, we have a longstanding history with the bureaucracy and the harmful effects of colonial policies. We have also been tabled, ignored or deferred when it comes to the implementation of recommendations stemming from important inquiries. But acts of resistance and resurgence are emerging from Indigenous communities regardless. Far-reaching political changes are on the horizon.

In Peguis First Nation, the implementation of the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act* was a first step of resistance. Critical conversations are happening at the Agency (and broader community) about how to produce new knowledge and ways of addressing child welfare.

This promotion of change will stay on its current path at Peguis CFS if the Agency and community remind themselves that resistance has been a key part of being Indigenous since colonization. Advocating for those in need and being a gentle activist who stands up for kids can be important aspects to resisting policies that bring harm and unrest to our communities. For many decades, CFS policies have only deepened inequities.

It is fully acceptable to no longer want to be part of this type of system and to have your voice heard. Here are a few examples of how you can demonstrate resistance:

- Think critically about policies and procedures to ensure they meet the needs of kids and families. Ask yourself, “*does this policy oppress families or uplift families?*” “*Does this procedure make things a bit easier for families to access services?*”
- Learn to question things when it does not feel right. Listen to your gut. We are looking for kids to have permanency, stability, and security. We want their identities to be formed in a healthy manner and they should be afforded respect and dignity. If you feel these things are not happening, please speak up.
- Join conversation circles or engagement sessions when you have questions or comments about CFS. Do some volunteer work or some paid work for the Agency and see how things operate from the inside out.
- Attend AGMs and review annual reports carefully. Ask questions when the messaging is unclear.
- Come up with a campaign or slogan that you think would help the cause. Look at how powerful the ‘*Every Child Matters*’ campaign became in speaking up for the rights of Residential School Survivors. Vulnerable groups, like children in care, require strong people to voice their concerns for them sometimes and bring recognition to their cause. Don’t forget your local heroes like Raymond Mason, a Residential School Survivor and Peguis band member (and a direct descendant of Chief Peguis himself) who was behind the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). Ray Mason and a circle known as *Spirit Wind* were the grassroots community people who decided that a class action lawsuit against Canada for the atrocities of the Residential Schools was the only fair and just thing to do. *Spirit Wind* developed a mission statement in the early 1990s to lobby for justice, financial compensation and an apology from the Government of Canada for what occurred in the Residential Schools. Please read Ray Mason’s tell all book, *Spirit of the Grassroots People* to learn more about his legacy.
- Be progressive in your thinking and do some reading or independent research on matters when you are unclear. Google key terms like “CFS reform” and see what is happening on a provincial, national or international level. Stay informed.



- Do not share misinformation or perpetuate gossip rings. If you have questions, please contact the Quality Assurance Coordinator at Peguis Child & Family Services or fill out a survey on the Agency's website. Quality Assurance focuses on what is working and what is not working at the Agency. Please bring your matters to them.

## BY, FOR AND WITH WOMEN

The Board of Directors at Peguis Child & Family Services is made up of five women. The Executive Director, Executive Assistant, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Reconciliation Directors, and Directors of Customary Relations, Human Resources, Youth Services at the Agency are all women. As well as most Coordinators: Resource, Reclaiming Our Ways, Quality Assurance and Sharing Circles. This is not to say that our male relatives do not hold a special place. Men offer a key balance to women and hold valuable roles in all aspects of life.

The activism of women, however, has led us to a gradual transformation of child welfare from a system that often hurt women and children, more than it helped. Emancipating from the old way of doing CFS has been a long battle. Women naturally create places of belonging and nurturance. It is a role that we have played for thousands of years. If CFS has any hope of change, safety, belonging, relations, kinship, love, ceremony and land will be pivotal. These are all areas where you find women.

Gender relations is strongly tied to our social reality. Women's identities and their sources of struggle often represent the most vulnerable individuals in society: children. If women are uplifted, then the natural effects of well-being of children are seen. Children thrive when their parents thrive. Indigenous scholar Cheryl Suzack (2021) shares that she sees no difference between tribal sovereignty and gender empowerment. If Indigenous women and men are empowered, then sovereignty won't be far behind.

## CONCLUSION

Jodi Wilson-Raybould (2022) writes in her book, *True Reconciliation*, of how prior to colonization, Indigenous Peoples had their own governments and legal orders through which decisions were made. After colonization, the Crown imposed governing systems seeking to break up and destroy Indigenous ways of governance, in the name of assimilation. Indigenous Peoples resisted these efforts often moving their governing systems 'underground'. In other words, we maintained our traditional systems of government, while also having to operate through those imposed on us (p. 249). This careful balancing act began a relationship of dichotomy for Indigenous communities. We knew our ways, but our ways were not acceptable to the Western governments in power. We were not letting go of our ways, so we had to know *both* worlds. For decades now, we have been forced to watch as Western ways of child welfare offered destruction to our family systems. Peguis Child & Family Services is deeply entrenched in an era of revitalization: the revitalization of Indigenous family empowerment.

It cannot be expressed enough the power that Peguis Child & Family Services has taken back. Let's look at a few examples of how Canada can overrule Indigenous communities seeking sovereignty, to put this into context. In the 1920s, the Iroquois Confederacy sought to become part of the League of Nations, an international political body whose covenant promotes international peace and security. When our Haudenosaunee relatives within the Iroquois Confederacy proposed, as a sovereign state, to join the League of Nations, Canada denied their request, explaining that they were unable to politically participate on an international level because what would be Canada's role then? Canada even went as far as to say that the Iroquois Confederacy is made up

of “individuals who owe them allegiance” while looking into this matter very seriously because according to the federal government, “if such rights, under treaties with Indians all over Canada were admitted.....a condition would be created which would be inconceivable” (Nichols, 2005, p. 4). In other words, if Canada were to allow the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy to become part of the League of Nations, where would it stop? All Indigenous people would want this, so they denied the repeated requests. Yet, the Iroquois Confederacy, as many know, have had their principles of democracy borrowed, adapted or outright copied/plagiarized by nations around the world. They consider themselves a sovereign state, they always have, because their councils pre-date Canada’s federal government. Sovereignty is a key aspect of their identity. Canada was quick to remind them in the 1920s that they are not sovereign.

Sovereignty remains the ultimate goal for many Indigenous communities. While denying the Iroquois Confederacy its request, Nichols (2005) writes how Canada is not one to pass laws allowing autonomy for Indigenous communities. This is not something that they are known to do. Here is another example: did you know that in early 1984, the Trudeau Sr. cabinet killed a proposal for the disposal of the *Indian Act*? The proposal instead recommended the *First Nations Recognition and Validation Act*. This would remove colonial state powers and once again, have Indigenous communities in charge of their own governance systems. Prime Minister Trudeau Sr.’s government put an end to this proposal quite quickly.

An autonomous Indigenous community co-existing with a sovereign Canada? It has felt for decades that we are just not going to see this in our lifetime. But is this not what Peguis First Nation has managed to do with the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*? While remaining politically and socially invested in the proper care of kids and families, Peguis Child & Family Services has been situated to implement the inherent and sacred rights of Peguis First Nation as related to child and family services.

## MOVING FORWARD IN A GOOD WAY

Phase One of the internal review looked only at the beginnings of this journey. Phases Two, Three, Four, and Five will take a more detailed evaluative look at the work with children and families being done. Evaluation will continue to take place over the next months, as the Agency continues to operationalize the *Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*.

None of these steps come easy. Peguis Child & Family Services has no template to work with. They are creating the template as they go and meeting milestones impressively. As stated by Makosis (2020), “*gaining knowledge is a sacred process and must be guided by laws and ethics from the Creator. The process itself should be guided by the Seven Sacred Teachings of love, respect, courage, humility, honesty, wisdom and truth*”. It is more than clear that Peguis Child & Family Services is following their traditional values, challenging the status quo and changing the foundations of child welfare in Peguis First Nation in the name of societal improvement and social betterment. They are slowly re-building and re-conceptualizing the idea of Nationhood.

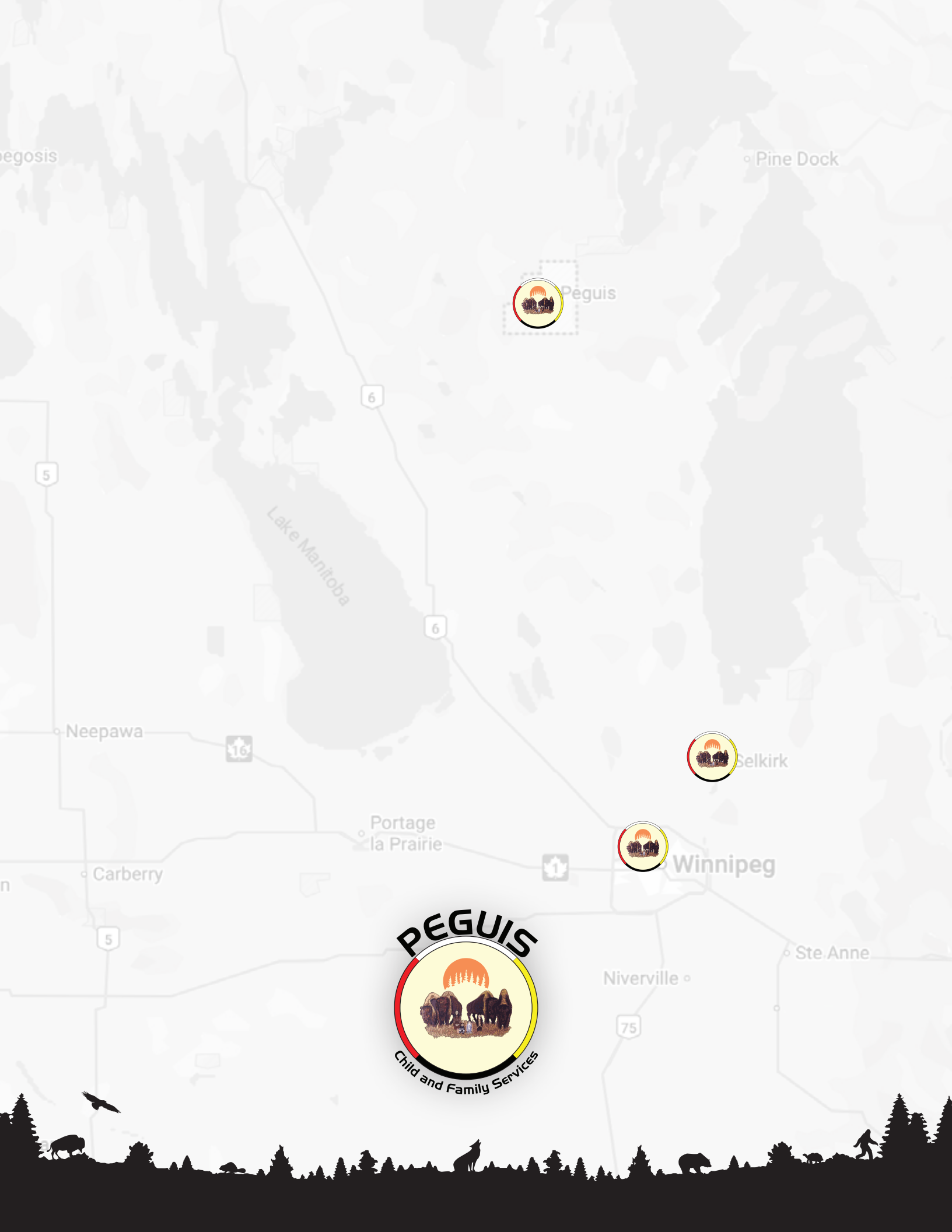
## **A DECLARATION OF DATA SOVEREIGNTY**

All of the information collected, utilized, and generated as a result of this internal review is the property of Peguis Child & Family Services. Data collected, utilized and generated came to be in the form of sacred stories. These stories will be honoured and held to the highest regard. The files, notes, recorders, laptops, cellular devices used during the internal review will remain with Peguis Child & Family Services after this project is completed. The internal reviewer and the research team hold no claim to it.

## REFERENCES

- First Nations Child and Family Caring Society. (2006). *Indigenous children: Rights and reality*. Retrieved from: ISGReport.pdf
- Makosis, L. (2020). *Ohpikinâwasowin: Growing a child, implementing Indigenous ways of knowing with Indigenous families*. Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Mason, R. (2020). Spirit of the grassroots people: *Seeking justice for Indigenous survivors of Canada's colonial education system*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Nichols, R. (2005). Realizing the social contract: The case of colonialism and Indigenous people. *Contemporary Political Theory*. Vol. 4, pp. 42-62.
- Peguis Child & Family Services. (2022). *The Honouring Our Children, Families and Nation Act*. Retrieved from: peguiscfs.ca
- Peguis Child & Family Services. (2024). *Board of Directors*. Retrieved from: Board of Directors | Peguis CFS
- Suzack, C. (2021). *Indigenous women's writing and the cultural study of law*. University of Toronto Press.
- University of Buffalo. (2024). *Essential skills and traits for social workers*. School of Social Work. Retrieved from: socialwork.buffalo.edu
- Wilson-Raybould, J. (2022). *True reconciliation: How to be a force for change*. McClelland & Stewart Publishers.





egosis

Pine Dock



5

6

6

Lake Manitoba

Neepawa



Selkirk

Portage  
la Prairie



Winnipeg

Carberry

5

Niverville

75

Ste Anne

