

Meetings with
Acadian Communities
Regarding Amendments to the
Children and Family Services Act

Summary of Feedback Fall 2016

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Introduction

The Children and Family Services Act (CFSA) protects one of Nova Scotia's most vulnerable populations – children who are living in situations of abuse or neglect. Although the Act provides a solid foundation for the protection and best interests of children, it is almost 25 years old and is no longer reflective of best practice and today's family structures.

In the Spring of 2015, the Department of Community Services (DCS) introduced amendments to the Act to:

- incorporate research and best practices
- improve our ability to ensure safety of children
- remove provisions that impair permanency for children
- decrease gaps in protection for youth; and,
- streamline court processes, and promote more collaborative work with families where possible.

The Bill was introduced in the Spring Session but was not passed until December, 2015. DCS consulted targeted stakeholders through a two phased approach, as follows:

- Phase I (prior to the introduction of the Bill) – the Assembly of Nova Scotian Mi'kmaq Chiefs, child welfare staff, management staff of Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services, private family law practitioners who represent the Department in child welfare matters and the Judges of the Family Court
- Phase II (following the introduction of the Bill) – continuation with the Assembly of Nova Scotian Mi'kmaq Chiefs, other government departments, community services agencies, Legal Aid, professional bodies, community stakeholders, policing services, residential programs, representatives from African Nova Scotian service providers, and a sample of parents and youth familiar with Community Services programs

Subsequent to the passing of the amendments, DCS reached out to the African Nova Scotian, Acadian and Mi'kmaq communities to gather feedback related to the development of regulations and policies to support the amendments.

This document summarizes the feedback from a consultation meeting held on June 14, 2016 that included five Acadian communities. An on-line survey was made available but no responses were received.

Methodology

The Department of Community Services held a meeting with five stakeholder groups on June 14, 2016. The facilitators presented at the Université Sainte Anne campus in Halifax while participants from Chéticamp, Petit-de-Grat, Pointe de l'Église, and Tusket joined by web cast. DCS worked in partnership with Acadian Affairs. A French speaking DCS staff facilitated the sessions. Approximately 40 individuals participated in the session.

The purpose of this session was to inform members of the Acadian community of the proposed amendments and to gather their input/feedback with respect to the development of regulations and policies. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation in French used in the session can be found at *Appendix A*.

As part of the meetings, participants were asked the following five questions:

1. What do you think is working well in serving Acadian children, youth and families in Child Welfare?
2. What would you suggest to make programs or services more helpful to Acadian families when Child Welfare becomes involved in problems?
3. The amendments say that when any child comes into permanent care and custody there must be a plan to keep the child connected to his or her culture. The plan must be in writing and must include information and guidance to help make sure that the child can learn about and appreciate his or her cultural identity. What should be included for Acadian and francophone children?
4. The Act allows the Department to provide services for a child from 16 to 18 years of age." Services to these youth will be offered only if the youth agrees. What do we need to think about when offering services to Acadian youth in this age group?
5. What can the Department of Community Services do to improve our ability to work with people of Acadian descent?

The responses were carefully recorded and transcribed by a French speaking DCS staff. Participants were given the option of providing written responses to the questions. In addition, an anonymous survey was posted to the DCS website. One response was received in writing and none through the survey.

Summary of Feedback

The community meeting provided feedback with respect to the importance of the preservation of French language to the Acadian communities. In addition to feedback to the specific questions, a number of themes recurred during the session:

1. Preserving the French language is important for Acadian children when they come into the care of the Minister of Community Services. It is crucial to their cultural identity and connections.
2. DCS should have more French speaking staff; there should be designated social work positions in Acadian communities.
3. The Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP) schools are available in Acadian communities and offer the services of Schools Plus as well as access to French early childhood education programs. Enrolling Acadian children in these institutions when they are displaced needs to be part of the Department's priority when planning for children.
4. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the French-language Services Act assure that French languages services be provided by provincial government agencies.

The following is a summary of the feedback received during the community meetings, specific to the individual questions.

1. What do you think is working well in serving Acadian children, youth and families in child welfare?

- It is good to see that an effort is being made to recognize Acadians and Francophones as an important cultural group in Nova Scotia. A reminder that it is important to be aware of and sensitive to the differences in language, cultural expression and dialects in the various French regions across Nova Scotia.
- Schools Plus programs are offered in all but one of the CSAP schools. It is helpful for staff from the Department of Community Services to educate their clients about the services offered by Schools Plus. These may be of benefit to their clients.
- The French-language Services Act requires that services be offered in French and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms compels the provincial government to translate documents in French for their clients. It is helpful to have access to French resources.

Summary of Feedback

2. What would you suggest to make programs or services more helpful to Acadian families when child welfare becomes involved in problems?

- Acadian families need to have child welfare social workers who can offer service in French and who reflect one's culture, language and values, etc.
- It would be helpful to have more French speaking service providers including therapists under Policy #75.
- French children in the care of the Minister of Community Services should have the right to continued education in French if they are enrolled in a French school prior to their apprehension.
- Many Acadian families have been assimilated in Nova Scotia, a predominately English speaking province. We are however seeing a surge of people wanting to reconnect with their language. The requirements have changed for registration at CSAP schools. For some parents who lost their French language skills or may not have learned them while growing up and who identify as being Acadian are now choosing to send their children to French school. It is essential that DCS respects their wishes and maintain these Acadian children in French schools.
- It is stressful on the relationships between parents and schools when parents are informed that child protections services are becoming involved. Sometimes children are removed from their parents and then registered in English schools.

3. What should be included in a cultural connection plan for Acadian children?

- Acadian children should be placed with Acadian families so that they may experience their culture and language. It is not enough for a child to have occasional exposure to their culture; it must be a daily lived experience. This will help promote healthy self-esteem and identity. In order for a child to feel accepted and comfortable in a setting, they need to see themselves reflected and represented in their surroundings.
- Foster homes need to be culturally competent. The long term goals for a French child in care should be placement in a French family if reunification with birth family is not the plan.
- Children who are taken into care should continue to attend a CSAP school and should be referred to the Schools Plus programs.

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4. What do we need to think about when offering voluntary services to Acadian youth from 16 – 18 years of age?

- When Acadian youth are placed in Secure Treatment, they should have access to French education. DCS should work with the local CSAP schools to ensure that this happens. Perhaps French teachers could be contracted to come into the facility given that the youth are not permitted to attend school off premises.
- Youth from this age group can benefit from the Schools Plus program; therefore, should be referred to these services while in care.
- Youth who come into care should be able to stay in their same school with teachers and peers who know them and can support them.

5. What can the department of community services do to improve our ability to work with people of Acadian descent?

- It is important to recognize that there are differences in the dialect and the accents of people coming from various Acadian regions across the province. The public is counting on DCS to offer them services from staff who will make them feel at ease and understand them when they speak.
- There is recognition that there are DCS services offered in French in some regions of the province; however, this is not the case in others. It was recommended that DCS consider how it will provide access to basic French language services in all regions in the province.
- There was a problem in the Yarmouth area where the transition house is located across the street from an English school. Francophone children were registered at this English school during their stay at the transition house because the location is considered convenient. There should be recognition of the importance of maintaining cultural identity for these children and efforts made to ensure they continue their education in French. It is recognized that this is a decision that rests outside of DCS.
- DCS should recruit more Acadian and French speaking foster families. They should partner with Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse to get the message out that there is a need for foster families.
- DCS should appoint French speaking staff to the Schools Plus committees. This would allow meetings to proceed in French. It would be also helpful to have staff from various levels of the Department with some who have the authority to make decisions on behalf of the Department.

Next Steps

The amendments to the Children and Family Services Act will be proclaimed in late fall of 2016. Prior to that, regulations and policies need to be finalized, IT enhancements need to be completed and staff need to be trained.

The feedback from the Acadian communities will be shared with the regulation and policy writers to see where this can be incorporated into regulations and policy.

The majority of those in attendance at the June 14th session were professionals from the Department of Education. Most of the discussion focused on the importance of Acadian children attending French school and receiving services from Schools Plus when appropriate. There were few concerns expressed in relation to the proposed amendments to the Children and Family Services Act.