



# Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario

P.O. Box 719, Ohsweken, Ontario N0A 1M0 • Phone: (519) 445-4324

October 2015 Edition

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## Response to the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

### Introduction

***The Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario was formed as a response to a resonating call from management of Aboriginal-mandated shelters across the province. These leaders wanted to see a network created that was supportive to shelter managers in meeting the unique healing requirements for Aboriginal families.***

The average Canadian likely does not understand that a genuine difference exists in the requirements in supporting an Aboriginal family's transition through the healing process. To speak to this issue, we must look to and understand the sordid history of Canadian policy regarding Aboriginal families. Imperative to the success in supporting an Aboriginal client on their healing journey is an understanding of the intergenerational impact that residential schools has had in destabilizing the functioning of families in Aboriginal communities.



PHOTO used, with permission, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission website.

Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario provides this response to the recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

### Mobilizing social change

From the experiences of the residential school survivors, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada made 94 recommendations for systemic change in areas of child welfare, health, justice, education, business, immigration, museums and archives, media, sports and recreation, and reconciliation. Each of these recommendations are supported absolutely by the Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario. We encourage our readers to review the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at [www.trc.ca](http://www.trc.ca).

### Intergenerational Impacts

Our experience with Aboriginal clients is that the ruthless manner in which government policy during the residential school era was administered and the harms inflicted on these children continues to afflict Aboriginal families. Generations of Aboriginal children were forcefully removed from their homes and sent to these institutions where the proclaimed intent was to commit cultural genocide.

This government policy was administered by people in positions of authority; people that the average Canadian would consider to be in a position of trust: government officials, churches, RCMP and child welfare agencies.

The experience of growing up in an institutional setting reduced the opportunity for Aboriginal people to develop parenting skills. The experience of being separated from family undermined opportunity to experience healthy bonding critical during the primary developmental stages of these children's lives. The experience of being psychologically, physically and often sexually abused led many to perpetrate these same acts of violence.

Canada's history of barbarous policy against Aboriginal people has impacted the sanctity of the family unit, of gender roles and responsibilities according to traditional values and served to undermine previously strong traditional governance structures and ways of life.

Each and every day at our shelters, these are the burdens that we witness our clients carrying. These are the burdens that we help Aboriginal families and communities overcome. We find that the most valuable tools we have to



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support families on their healing journey is to work with clients in regaining a sense of cultural pride.

## Current Status

Many Aboriginal people have learned not to trust authorities. As a consequence, Aboriginal people in crisis are often far less willing to seek help from police or child welfare authorities. This exercise of restraint means that Aboriginal victims of violence often do not seek assistance from police until the abuse is obviously life-threatening; IF they survive to report it at all.

The RCMP report “Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women” indicates that Aboriginal women are more likely to be victims of violent crimes and they endure more heinous acts of violence. The staggering statistics of over-representation of Aboriginal families in shelters, incarcerated in jails and penitentiaries, and disproportionately high numbers of children being apprehended across Canada illustrate that change is needed.

The value added by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report is that it adds proper context to these statistics.

Let us all understand that there is no “inherent weakness” in Aboriginal people that causes these anomalies in the statistics. Arguably, the opposite is true. A war in Canada was waged against Aboriginal people for 7 generations; primarily targeting children. In our shelters, we see the residual impacts this war had on our people, but we also get to bear witness to the strength and resiliency as families reclaim their identity as strong, proud Aboriginal people.

## Education

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission promotes giving Canadians an accurate picture of Canada’s history. Education on the residential school era must be mandatorily required for all post-secondary students, in particular in the fields of social work, child welfare, policing, medicine and law.

Unfortunately, too often we see these systems fail our clients during high-risk crisis situations which can have dire consequences. With all the data available to explain the unique needs of Aboriginal people, the level of apathy and misjudgment from professional service providers should not exist. The harm that imprudent staff in these systems can do to Aboriginal families cannot be overstated.



PHOTO used, with permission, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission website.

## Funding Disparities

Current government funding models that permit underfunding programs based on the race of the clients served must stop. This practice continues to marginalize and victimize Aboriginal people while denying the value added to the social service sector within Canada by Aboriginal-mandated organizations and professionals.

The gross disparities in funding of Aboriginal programs as compared to mainstream is an issue that Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario has been outspoken about. It is well-documented by government sources that the health, social, employment and justice needs of Aboriginal people are comparatively higher than those of mainstream, yet our agencies are expected to service more clients with far more critical needs, utilizing specialized knowledge on only a fraction of the funds that our mainstream counterparts are granted.

With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission data available to inform policy, we hope that this issue will not continue to be trivialized, justified or ignored.



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Aboriginal-mandated shelters are struggling to survive on threadbare budgets. Aboriginal families in need of shelter have limited access to culturally appropriate healing programming even though we know the powerful impact traditional healing incorporated with modern treatment modalities has on Aboriginal family healing.



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## Systemic Changes

Within the justice system, there is movement to take a different approach with Aboriginal people. The 1999 Supreme Court of Canada decision *R v Gladue* compels sentencing judges to consider remedial options as alternatives to incarceration. Provincial family legislation includes opportunity for some protections, including involvement of the Elected Council when a court is deciding the fate of apprehended Aboriginal children. While these systems are moving in the right direction, more change is required to effectively advocate for Aboriginal families, children and victims of crime.

Ideally, courts would be better informed of the reality of life for the people they serve. "Indian reserves" tend to be small, rural or remote, have limited remedial services, limited law enforcement services and even fewer housing options. There tends to be a higher level of acceptance of violence and dysfunction. These are all factors that are currently considered in sentencing Aboriginal offenders

through the *Gladue* process but little consideration is given to how these same issues impact the safety of an Aboriginal victim. Because there has not yet been a Supreme Court of Canada decision compelling judges to give astute consideration to the unique safety needs of Aboriginal victims, courts can often overlook these issues from the perspective of the victim.

Equally problematic is the assessment of the credibility of a witness. Crimes against Aboriginal people often go unpunished because the victim or the witnesses do not meet Eurocentric standards of what a "reliable" or "honest" person looks like or talks like. It seems to especially challenge the courts if the victim is in an "unsavory vocation" such as sex worker, has an addiction or lives in the depths of poverty.

Court processes regarding assessing the potential risk for harm of the victim and credibility of the witnesses should be informed and vetted by both the victim and a trusted Aboriginal victim support agency. This would reduce errors in judgment based on cultural differences and would mirror the level of support provided to Aboriginal offenders during sentencing.

The creation of this type of intervention would improve the justice system's response to violence perpetrated against Aboriginal victims in all instances.

The systemic change required within the child welfare system is that the focus of intervention needs to shift away from questioning, "Do I apprehend or not?" and move to considering, "How can I help this family?" Until that paradigm shift occurs across Canada, the child welfare system will continue to unfairly vilify Aboriginal families and force continued displacement of our children.

With the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, we hope that Canada's politicians make it a priority to change child welfare legislation and processes regarding victim support for Aboriginals.



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## Reconciliation

Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario thanks and honors the over 6,000 residential school survivors that shared their stories to inform the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. The bravery required to impart your personal stories for the benefit of future generations, in our minds, makes you true warriors. We are truly humbled by your acts of bravery and commitment to creating positive social change for future generations.

Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario is committed to proceeding on the road to reconciliation between Canadians and Aboriginal people.

We are in the unique position of being frontline workers in promoting healing, offering educational resources and carrying a voice within the political arena. Our voice is inspired by the amazing healing work we see happen in our shelters and in our communities. There is a commitment in our clients to learning healthy new ways of being. New relationships are forming between Aboriginal and mainstream organizations.

We would like to hear from our readers. To email Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario, please contact Board President, Sandra Montour at [smontour@ganohkwasra.ca](mailto:smontour@ganohkwasra.ca) or ASOO Coordinator, Gabriela Boskovic [gboskovic@ganohkwasra.ca](mailto:gboskovic@ganohkwasra.ca).



PHOTO: Baby August in a Haudenosaunee gustowa (headdress). Photo provided by Jillian Fraser. Photographer, Sandra Hill Newborn Photography.

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