

# **DECOLONIZING CHILD WELFARE AT NCFST: THE ADVISORIES DEVELOPMENT & IMPLEMENTATION**

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## **REDESIGN PROJECT TEAM:**

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NCFST Staff Advisory Circle

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## **INTRODUCTION**

On September 30, 2021, Canada held its first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in honor of the hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people impacted by the lasting legacy of colonization. Soon after, and inspired by this commemoration, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto launched its own program of policy and practice transformation known as *Decolonizing Child Welfare*. The program aims to increase NCFST's transparency and accountability as related to child welfare operations, prevention and funding and to understand the needs of the community as they relate to child welfare services. NCFST opened as many pathways for feedback and story telling as possible using community consultation, surveys, round tables and written submissions. The response has been overwhelming: staff and community members connected with NCFST have energetically embraced opportunities to discuss and promote decolonization and transformation as this report will reflect.

In 2004, NCFST accepted a mandate from the Province of Ontario to deliver child protection services to the Indigenous community in Toronto. The dedicated community members involved in this process could not have known how NCFST's journey would be forever changed by this decision. Over the past 15 years NCFST's CFWB workers have served more than 37 thousand community members in the city of Toronto and beyond; reaching across Turtle Island. As we approach September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, our minds and hearts join with all FNMI people around the globe dedicated to authentic post-colonial transformation through strengthening families and empowering Indigenous children and youth.

## **COMMUNITY ADVISORY: VISION & PURPOSE**

Launched on October 25, 2021, NCFST's Community Advisory Circle is a standing committee of Native Child and Family Services of Toronto that provides advice and input to NCFST's Child Welfare Redesign Steering Committee regarding Child Welfare Transformation and Decolonization. The vision and objectives, priorities, and key issues for the community advisory are derived directly from NCFST's Learning Series Webinars; designed to unpack larger child welfare issues involving (but not limited to) legislative compliance, risk, permanency, Indigenous over-representation, staffing, community referrals and file closure.

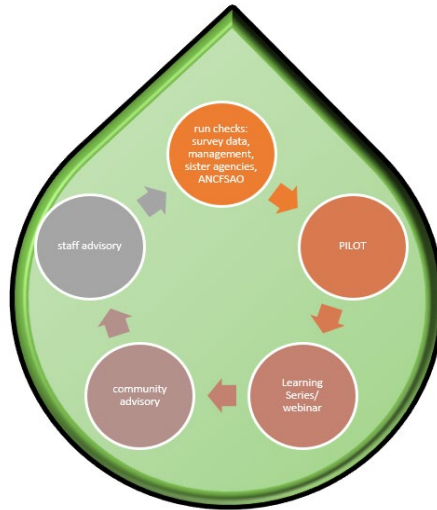
Premised on the belief that for FNMI communities, consultation and consent are both ethical and mutually beneficial aspects of service delivery and resource management (i.e. funding allocation) NCFST's Community Advisory Circle is made up of community members with first-person experience in NCFST's services and/or operations, identify as members of Toronto's Indigenous community and who have expressed a belief that on-

going service consultation will result in positive outcomes for families. The advice and input provided by the Advisory Circle may touch on any issue or subject relevant to the redesign of child welfare for the purpose of decolonizing Indigenous child welfare. The advice and input may be related to holistic and prevention services, child protection and residential services, culture and ceremony, community relationships, quality assurance, governance, or other areas of NCFST's structure and operations that fall within the agency's mandate and authority. The Advisory Circle may also provide advice and input regarding advocacy in relation to issues or structures that fall outside NCFST's mandate or authority.

## **INNOVATIONS**

The primary objective of the Child Welfare Transformation initiative is the development of *transformation innovations*. Innovations, put simply, are *ideas* (rooted in lived experience) about improving the practice of child protection for Indigenous families *from the community's perspective*. To be an innovation, an idea should improve practice and support policy developments and achieve 1) increased satisfaction for families involved in CFWB; 2) reduced length of care for children in the care of NCFST; 3) promote NCFST's service model that acts as a 'blanket of care' for Indigenous families spanning across Toronto and related service areas; and 4) reduce the shame and stigma of Child and Family Well Being services.

Innovations, called "*seeds*" at this stage, begin as discussions with community members about their experiences receiving services from NCFST. Conversations are semi structured and informal in nature – meaning community members are both discussing personal interactions as well as making suggestions about how or what could have changed in that interaction for it to be more productive and less painful. Once space is held as an idea at the community advisory stage it is threaded through the staff advisory as well as matched with data from the staff survey and from the team meeting narratives. Once this is done, a decision is made whether the seed has enough buy-in from both the community advisors and the staff participants. It is then contemplated by the our knowledge keepers (ideally an Elder's Council) for vetting, shaping and ensuring any proposed change is a positive one for involved community members. Moving from there, the seed moves into implementation at the Director/Board level. Seeds can be work-planned and project managers from QAD will be assigned to manage the changes associated with each seed.



*Figure 1: Seed Development*

## **ENGAGEMENT**

Due to the restrictions caused by the COVID 19 pandemic the Community Advisory sessions have been held virtually using a Zoom link approximately every six weeks. Sessions are scheduled on Monday's from 4pm-6pm. During this period, six sessions were held with an average of 7 community members in each session. Participating community members are all previous and/or current service users of NCFST. Several members are youth (18-24) and a handful are both parents *and* youth. Multiple members have experienced time in 'care'. One member of the advisory is a caregiving-grandparent (kokum) and at least one community advisory member is a previous agency board member.

	2021	2022 YTD
<i>Sessions Held</i>	2	4
<i>Total Consultation hours</i>	4	8
<i>Total community members</i>	9	14
<i>Honourarium dollars distributed</i>	1206.59	7312.46

*\*Table 1 Community Advisory Engagement 21/22*

Enrollment for the community advisory began in August 2021 using direct recruitment through CFWB staff. Initially, service staff identified 20 interested community members with experience with NCFST and/or the wider Ontario child protection system. On average there have been 7 community members in attendance per session. QAD continues to conduct rolling recruitment, adding to membership as necessary to maintain a core group of advisors.

## **COMMUNITY: EMERGING THEMES**

Each Community Advisory session was precluded by a “Decolonizing Child Welfare” Learning Series Webinar which presents topics to the public drawn from the current child protection investigation and service delivery framework. Topics for the learning series include: referral and intake, investigations, ongoing services and NCFST’s Family Finding Program. During the advisory session participants are asked to comment on the content of the Learning Series although it is not mandatory that conversation remain on this topic. Over the past six months, dozens of topics and reforms have been enthusiastically discussed by advisory membership providing some concrete feedback and direction for transformation moving forward. Refer to the chart below for a week by week breakdown of themes and topics.

Webinar Date	Learning Series Topic	Advisory Date	Key Advisory Messages	Questions	Innovation seed
10/29	Introduction: history & service model	10/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a key piece for indigenous parents – they are going from child to parent without those steps, the teachings, so they need that now from the workers or agency. They need the cultural pieces and all that comes with those rituals and practices (i.e. berry feast, fasting, etc)</li> <li>How the agency started, as a community organization, grass roots, is how it should be continuing – this is being lost trying to rebrand and change into a power player</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do CFWB staff know teachings connected to parenting? Are these being offered? What % of the CFWB staff know about traditional parenting?</li> <li>Is rebranding efforts by the agency alienating a core group of community members? How are community members experiencing the rebranding of NCFST?</li> <li>Who is the rebranding FOR?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CFWB staff to focus on offering parenting teachings</li> <li>Deemphasize branding (exclusive), reemphasize community roots (inclusive)</li> </ol>
		Nov 29 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flag raised about the authenticity of Indigenous staff – concerns about if their claims are vetted</li> <li>NCFST workers have a reputation for not following through all the time. Workers need to follow through or at least touch base if its taking a long time – especially for issues like housing</li> <li>“aging out” housing – NCFST needs to provide housing for children exiting care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the impact that non-indigenous staff have on community members?</li> <li>Are there a variety of opinions here or not?</li> <li>Have agency workers experienced homelessness and understand how stressful it is?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership positions need to be staffed by Indigenous people with demonstratable Indigenous lineage using an established transparent process</li> <li>Community members to get a “touch base” contact at a regular interval even if no progress is made</li> <li>Increased aging out planning and infrastructure for young adults (housing, schooling, support: “Young Indigenous People’s Centre”</li> </ol>

Dec 31 21	Investigations (Intake)	Jan 10 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the emotional &amp; social impact of a referrals that pathologize cultural practices or routines (i.e. children smell of campfire smoke; children attending sacred fire instead of school, refusing to cut long hair even if lice is present, etc.)</li> <li>• Experience of Community Members when a NCFST staff make a referral anonymously</li> <li>• Suggestions for community facing education about Indigenous parenting – for schools and NCFST staff so practices are understood</li> <li>• Are we tracking referral sources? What types of analysis do we do for referral sources that are consistently not verified?</li> <li>• Increase proactivity and tackle issues before there is damage – i.e. advocate for abuse by police and take more action for missing girls and women</li> <li>• Are families being made aware of the reasons for referral and informed of all aspects of service delivery and supported in making choices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are screeners encountering culturally based referrals? What is the process around this? Would increased public education help (especially for our frequent referrals)</li> <li>• Should we have a procedure for staff who feel they need to refer a community member to CFWB? Should staff be allowed to refer anonymously, or should we be more transparent? What is the impact of anonymous referrals on CM's?</li> <li>• Should NCFST focus on broader education for the public and collaterals around Indigenous family and parenting practices?</li> <li>• Do families know their rights? Are workers able to do this or should we offer more advocacy through holistic?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Post referral therapeutic services</li> <li>7. Complaints process w accountabilities and client satisfaction tools</li> <li>8. Staff referral of CM policy and procedure – posted publicly and followed</li> <li>9. Informed and data driven community consultation with staff and collaterals around referrals and alternative ways to manage concerns</li> <li>10. Launch data base/community concern hub for potential missing women and girls. What is happening now? How can NCFST be proactive here?</li> <li>11. workers have a prepped narrative or a hand out that explains the process and client rights right at first encounter with CFWB?</li> <li>12. What about an info line to help families cope with CYFSA issues? Or to get support and advocacy? What about a community partnership?</li> </ol>
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			<i>at critical times? Do they know their rights?</i>		
		Feb 28 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Members had questions around what happens when a referral comes in and there is a long history of violence for a parent – is that considered when planning the intervention?</li> <li>Members wanted to know how decisions are made to keep a file open in ongoing – what is the process or criteria for keeping a file open vs closing a file</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Is each referral stand alone or does the history impact how the agency treats the referral?</i></li> <li><i>How are case decisions made? Is there a structure to how a file moves through the various stages? How do files close vs stay open?</i></li> </ul>	<p>13. <i>Where there is a pattern of confirmed violence toward a child interventions need to strongly address child safety and not take a soft approach</i></p> <p>14. <i>Increased transparency is required around case decisions – the community would like a more in-depth understanding of why some files stay open for a long time and why some close quickly</i></p>
Feb 25 22	Ongoing/( Family Services)	Mar 28 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Members looking at the way families and youth are addressed: is the language inclusive? How did Indigenous communities understand queer-ness? Important to recapture those ways and ideas for today</i></li> <li><i>Members reflecting on times when staffing came directly from the community. There was a sense of integration and everyone moving in the same direction. The agency felt safe and familiar and this created a very caring atmosphere that doesn't exist anymore.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>What ways can our language and how we frame families be changed to include all families? What barriers exist to making these changes? Will there be push back – where it is most likely to come from?</i></li> <li><i>Where can community members find safety at a time when so much is changing?</i></li> <li><i>How do we need to change our recruitment practices?</i></li> </ul>	<p>15. <i>NCFST must audit all programming and program materials for heteronormative messaging and exclusive language</i></p> <p>16. <i>NCFST must engage long standing community members for staffing</i></p>

Table 2: Priorities for the CAC (2021/22)



## **STAFF ADVISORY: VISION & PURPOSE**

There is no more invested stakeholder in making appropriate and lasting changes in CFWB practice than the staff team themselves and it is for this reason that from the beginning mechanisms to engage NCFST staff on transformation has been considered critical. Three feedback mechanisms were launched in October 2021 to capture all levels of interest and participation from the team: an on-line anonymous survey; dozens of “pop-up” advisories within team meetings and the development of a permanent sitting staff advisory circle lead by a Traditional Knowledge Carrier.

## **BRANCHES<sup>1</sup>**

### **Staff Survey**

NCFST’s Transformation survey provided staff the chance to offer their feedback outside of the team and workplace environment, and for those who were unavailable to attend the team meeting visit or were unable to commit to being part of the staff advisory circle. This survey was anonymous to mitigate organizational risk to participants sharing their candid perspectives. The survey gave an opportunity for staff to share their ideas and innovations pertaining to decolonization and community advocacy, while also providing feedback on the current service approach.

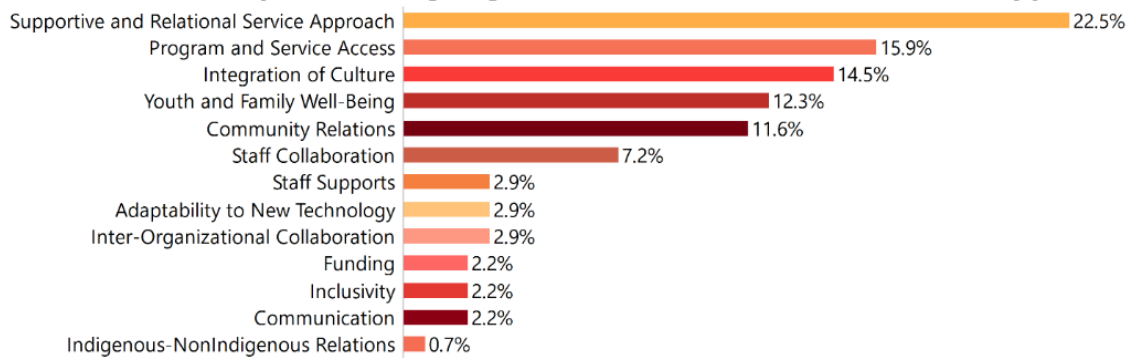
The Staff Advisory survey consisted of 2 required questions and 32 optional questions, most of which were open-ended. The survey also included rating scale questions and ranking questions as a way to gauge participants’ overall perceptions of the concepts measured. A total of 86 staff completed the survey, this included a range of participants who either completed only the required questions, answered additional questions, or completed the survey in its entirety.

Several key themes were identified among participants’ answers to what they believe is going well in the agency’s service approach. Most notably, through thematic analysis, participant responses indicate that NCFST’s supportive and relational service approach as one of the most frequently coded aspects that is going well within the agency, with 22.5% of all codes speaking to this trend. Additionally, the agency’s accessibility of programs and services, and the integration of culture in the service approach were also notable trends that emerged from participants.

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<sup>1</sup> During the period covered by this report the *Staff Advisory Circle* was in the recruitment and vetting stage and not yet meeting.

**Please share what you think is going well as it relates to NCFST's service approach**



*Table 3: Staff Survey Data*

Another key question that was explored in the survey relates to how staff believe the agency should prioritize reducing the number of Indigenous children and youth in care. Three strategies were provided to staff to prioritize in the order they believed should be addressed. Overwhelmingly, 48.21% of those who answered this question agreed that encouraging families to seek out supports provided by NCFST programs and services in a proactive manner should be the first priority in addressing this issue. Integrating a trauma-informed lens through training opportunities also scored high as the first priority, with 35.48% of participants voting as such. 39.29% of staff also agreed that redesigning assessment tools to include cultural considerations about parenting should be the next priority to follow.

**Staff Advisory Drop-in**

As part of the Staff Advisory project, QAD coordinated visits with as many teams as possible within the agency to receive team-specific feedback about what is going well and what needs improvement as it relates to child welfare transformation and reform. These visits took place during April and May 2022, with a total of 21 teams participating. There was a total of 5 managers, 20 supervisors, and 142 staff members who were present for their respective team meeting visit. Teams consisted of child and family wellbeing staff, children’s services staff, holistic staff, early years, and youth programming staff administrative and facilities staff, funds development staff, cultural resource staff, and knowledge carriers. Members of QAD facilitated and moderated discussion to ensure those wanting to share their perspectives had the space to do so.

Numerous insights were brought forward by participants, and as meetings continued to take place, trends in subject matter began to emerge, indicating that despite the diversity of teams participating in these visits, staff who work at NCFST share similar sentiments about how the agency can continue to improve their service approach to better address

the needs of staff and the community we serve. Furthermore, participants identified many ways in which the agency can shift their service approach to better address decolonization. Changing and unlearning internalized biases and prejudices within oneself was predominantly noted as a significant theme that emerged from participants' responses. Staff and community collaboration, cultural trainings, and hiring more Indigenous staff were also identified as important innovations to address decolonization:

## **Overview of Staff Feedback**

### **1. Integration**

***“I really like that we were able to have more of an integrated team with folks coming from different positions, different experiences, working with different age groups and that we've really been able to sort of advocate for what our community needs based off of what they're letting us know.”***

Integration is a topic that was prevalent among many of the team meeting discussions, with some staff emphasizing how well integrated teams have functioned to serve community, and others sharing stories of what collaborating amongst departments in a good way looks like. Most notably, there were several instances where staff members referred to “both sides” of the agency, and this is because there is a perception that the agency is divided, with child and family wellbeing on one side, and holistic support services on the other. This division has instilled an environment where lateral violence becomes an issue across workers, which many staff outlined as a serious problem that needs to be addressed interdepartmentally.

***“We are supposed to be one agency, yet we've never functioned that way, so I think it needs to come from that is, you know, if you get hired here, these are the expectations to understand our agency as a whole and not just your specific role”***

Staff from both departments agreed that more collaboration and communication is needed to ensure there is better integration of service delivery. Some staff feel stigmatized simply because they work in a particular department, while other staff feel underappreciated for the time and effort they put into the community members they serve. To address and dismantle these negative perceptions of each other, staff identified the importance of working as one, understanding one another's roles, being transparent when there are case files that overlap among departments, and strengthening professional relationships. Some staff are already seeing the results of better communication and collaboration, which is a step in the right direction for ensuring our agency can collaborate in a good way from department to department.

*“I’ve definitely seen more collaboration and more meetings happening with different service providers and like between child welfare and support services, I have found that there’s been much more like communication and collaboration and trying to really work towards the same goal in supporting that family or those community members on an individual basis based on their needs.”*

One of the survey questions specifically queried participants on their suggestions about continuing to integrate holistic practices within the service approach. Trends coded from thematic analysis indicate more cultural training opportunities, increasing the integration of cultural supports, strengthening communication, and creating models rooted in ceremony, culture and community as principally important to ensuring the agency continues to integrate holistic cultural practices.

**Please share what you think is going well as it relates to NCFST's service approach**

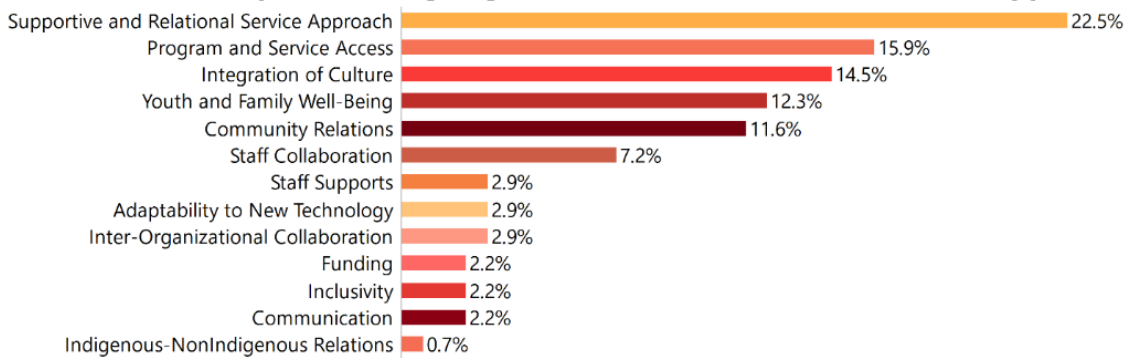


Table 4: Staff Survey Data

**2. Culture**

*“Having positive role models with cultural support really makes a difference and that is something NCFST is doing well.”*

Team meeting discussions often led to considerations of how culture is intertwined within the work we do as an agency. Staff find it to be especially important to ensure we have cultural resource workers, Elders and Knowledge Carriers available for young people and families, as it helps to create a safer environment and increases their access to cultural mentorship and support when needed. Having such resources available through NCFST has allowed for community members to have the agency to request those supports, participate in cultural programming or activities, and have access to medicine and ceremony. For youth in care, staff identified the importance of having a cultural plan that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous foster homes can generate to ensure the child or youth in their care remains connected to their culture and is able to participate in any practices they see as important to them. It is important for NCFST to continue to expand

what can be provided in a cultural context and steep culture throughout every department to ensure community members feel safe to explore their identity should they so choose.

***“One of the reasons this role appealed to me was because I was not raised with the indigenous side growing up. It wasn’t until I was a youth at the youth department at native child that I got to meet knowledge keepers, go to ceremonies, go to my first sweat, and do things I feel like I may have missed out on.”***

Many staff noted that staff participation in cultural events, such as cultural renewal and teachings provided by the culture team is important in ensuring we are living our values as an agency. Some staff highlighted that this also leads into ensuring mandates are culturally grounded, considerations must be made to protocols and legislation that are not measuring up to this standard. Tools and mandates rooted in Western ideology do not resonate with an Indigenous worldview, and as such, it is integral for the agency to continue to advocate for these cultural considerations to be ingrained into existing mandates so systemic barriers can be dismantled.

***“I really like to just include the family and make sure that they have a space to be heard, especially when it comes to their culture. Like, what do you want to see happen like, you know what cultural practices are important to you and really hearing what the family has to say.”***

### **3. Anti-Oppressive and Intersectional Practice**

***“...there's an overrepresentation of black and indigenous children. This agency has one of the highest biracial black and indigenous children...that we service, probably about...65% of our children are biracial.”***

Many staff acknowledged the need for more equity and understanding for the unique identities of the community we serve. Most importantly, many of the young people served by the agency are of mixed ancestry, with most identifying as biracial and Afro-Indigenous. Many staff agree that it is important to emphasize the lived experience of mixed-race families to ensure that we are not only caring for the Indigenous part of their identity, but for their whole person. When serving families and young people who identify as Afro-Indigenous, staff agree it is necessary to provide healing and support that acknowledges every aspect of their cultural identity to unpack what it means to be Indigenous and Black.

Furthermore, participants identified many ways in which the agency can shift their service approach to better address decolonization. Changing and unlearning internalized

biases and prejudices within oneself was predominantly noted in the staff survey as a significant theme that emerged from participants' responses. Staff and community collaboration, cultural trainings, and hiring more Indigenous staff were also identified as important innovations to address decolonization.



Table 5: Staff Survey Data

***“I feel like we don’t acknowledge the black folks that do the work alongside the indigenous community. And so there’s a lack of appreciation for those staff members and that then trickles down to the amount of appreciation that we give our mixed families.”***

Additionally, BIPOC staff highlighted that they themselves experience discrimination and lateral racism within the agency and from the community. During many of these team meetings, staff shared their personal stories about their lived experience, imploring for the development of equitable policies and practices that work from not only an Indigenous lens, but an anti-oppressive lens. Recognizing the multi-faceted part of identity and understanding how they intersect is important to ensure BIPOC staff feel safe to practice with community members as well as feel safe among their colleagues.

***“I don’t think I should have to prove my indigeneity or how black I am.”***

#### 4. Agency-Community Relations and Service Access

***“...if we can do more virtual programming, we can serve so many more youth.”***

Many staff commended the number of services and programs NCFST offers to community members. It is evident that there is a need for programming that serves the needs of the community given the amount of community members who participate in the various programs and services offered. Additionally, the hubs and program facilities located across Toronto have proven to be very beneficial in increasing community

wellbeing and making it easier for community members to access services from NCFST. Team meetings outline the important of increasing staff knowledge of what is available so that families are aware and can gain access to the services that will address their needs best. While counselling is an important service provided, staff agree that there are many programs facilitated by NCFST that attend to more immediate needs, such as food and shelter, and this should be prioritized first when submitting referrals. Lack of communication between staff and community can create a barrier to accessing services that are necessary to healing, and as such, staff identify a need for the agency to improve their communication with community members so that they have the autonomy to determine what is best for their care through knowing what is available to them.

*“I think something we could do better on is transparency and communication with the community. I feel there’s a strong disconnect and most of the push back about us as an organization could easily be rectified by having better lines of communication.”*

Staff also identified that it is important for NCFST to continue to increase access to services for community members, especially children and youth in care as there are many of such individuals who live just outside of catchment areas for programs or have been placed further away from the city center, making it difficult to find adequate transportation options to get to programming. Expanding services to Peel and Durham regions would help in reducing this barrier for community members, as well as ensuring we continue provide virtual programming that allows for more flexibility in participation.

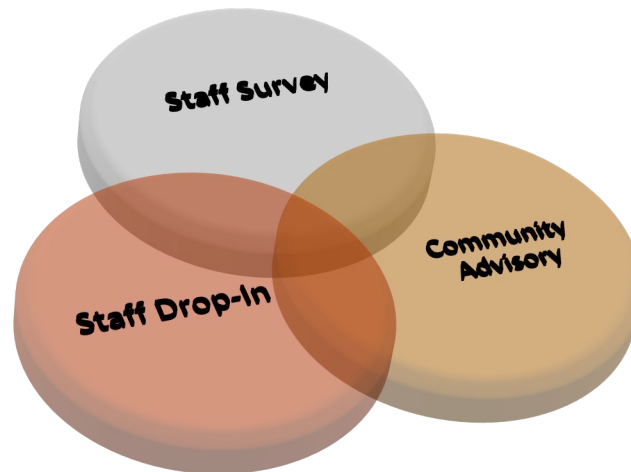
*“I know of so many youth that are outside of our catchment area...we’re having a hard time getting enough people for this program because we can only use this little area and you know I’m having...to turn away youth that have been with our agency for years and years.”*

## **CHILD WELFARE REDESIGN YEAR 2: LOOKING AHEAD**

Five key points were raised independently by all three bodies making them perfectly positioned for seed co-development:

1. Increased resourcing and poverty reduction programming for youth aged 18-24 with special consideration for those with children.
2. Increased, mandatory and on-going cultural supervision and training for all staff, volunteers, and board members.
3. Increased accountability and transparency around complaints.
4. Increase in numbers of Indigenous staff and increased accountability for self-identity.

## 5. Agency-wide funding stability and salary equalization



As we wrap a hugely successful first year of child welfare redesign activities (Learning Series webinars, staff and community engagement, implementation design and seed development) we in the Quality Assurance and Decolonization department cannot help feeling excited for year two. Moving into the second year we have learned so many key lessons from year one about engaging community and staff on topics that are at once so thoroughly personal also link many of us together. We have been both surprised and delighted to learn that community members and staff overlap considerably when it comes to feedback: this overlap is where year 2 will begin.

Year one yielded critical innovations that are just now moving their way through the staff advisory level and will soon be introduced to our implementation and vetting plan. Community innovations will move through a number of stakeholder screening tables and working groups to ensure fulsome co-development. After consultation, we will draft policies and manage all the changes these innovations will bring.

*We in QAD aim to pilot 3 practice innovations and two policy innovations by the end of year two.*

We have been honoured to have so many involved community members, staff, management and especially our Traditional Knowledge Carrier, [Kevin Fujita](#), sit with us for both community and staff advisory sessions. We crucially needed this space to celebrate with joy at our own growth, weather the pain and reflect on the work to come with hope and resilience. We say Chi-Miigwetch and look forward to your guidance and participation in year 2.

**With you in transformation,**

**The NCFST QAD Team**