

# REPORT BACK TO COMMUNITY

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September 2023



NCFST



# About Native Child and Family Services of Toronto

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Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) is the largest multi-service Indigenous agency with a child protection mandate in Canada. NCFST strives to provide a life of quality, well-being, caring and healing for children and families in Toronto's Indigenous community by delivering a broad range of programs and services that are culture-based and respect the values of Indigenous people, the extended family, and the right to self-determination. The agency was founded in 1986 by Elders, knowledge keepers and community leaders in the Toronto Indigenous community to address the ongoing impacts of colonization, residential schooling and mainstream child welfare. Today the organization is comprised of some 350 staff working across 20 locations delivering more than 100 programs and services to 8,000 unique individuals annually.

# Introduction

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In September of 2021 Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) launched its Child Welfare Transformation project aimed to reduce the harms inflicted on the Indigenous community by mainstream child protection policies. These policies, responsible for the gross over-representation of Indigenous children in care, value separation over togetherness and are reflective of a colonial approach to child and family development that does not belong in Indigenous communities. Children belong with their kin and kith within their communities. Child welfare transformation at NCFST for 2022/23 has seen a solidification of the Community Advisory Circle that provides critical feedback on services experience and recommend improvements.

Accomplishments outlined in this report came directly as feedback from the Community Advisory Circle. The implementation of a revised and highly accountable complaints process; an improved privacy program including mechanisms to ensure there is no inappropriate use or access to personal and community information; increased cultural supports for children in care (see tables below); focus on governance and improving decision making at NCFST as well as an increase in foster homes who identify as Indigenous. Over the upcoming year, NCFST will be supporting work developing Indigenous-specific service standards, working toward greater service integration and continuing to track and support community concerns and complaints in preparation for the first annual report back to the ILC and the community.

# Governance

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In response to the action items developed from the 2022 Indigenous Child Welfare Reform Annual Report to Community (ICWRARC) as well as the directives outlined in NCFST's 2023-2028 Strategic Plan, NCFST's Board of Directors instigated in late Fall of 2022, an agency-wide transition from a western-style governance structure to an Indigenous-style model that better reflects the values of the community served. This shift specifically addresses Action Item 1 from the ICWRARC, stating that NCFST will use its current mandate to make bold reforms for families and children to remove practices, rules, standards, and tools that are in tension with Indigenous values, culture, and world view and, where necessary, replace them with Indigenous practices, Indigenous tools, and Indigenous law. It also addresses Direction 2 from NCFST's 2023-2028 Strategic Plan, which says that NCFST will enhance relationships with and direction from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, community advisory and youth councils, and other Indigenous led organizations on NCFST's services and programs; as well as Direction 3, which says the agency will increase relationships with Nations in the surrounding areas and enhance Nation to Nation collaborations through NCFST services and programs.

The agency has moved into a transitional phase of leadership including the formation of an Interim Leadership Council (ILC). The most significant change is that NCFST is no longer led through a hierarchical model in which the Directors report to an Executive Director; rather, they now all work as a team. NCFST is also developing and implementing a new permanent Indigenous governance model. As part of this transition, the agency has convened an Elders Advisory Circle, Directors have participated in leadership retreats about governance, and an academic partnership has been established whereby a report on governance will be prepared and presented to the ILC. It is expected that a new governance model will be developed and implemented at NCFST by April 1 of 2024.

To gather community advice, a series of Community Consultations were hosted. The consultation period ran from April 20th to June 30th of 2023. During this time, a total of 8 consultations were held. Of these, 3 were done online via Zoom while the other 5 were delivered in person at the Mt. Dennis, Galloway, and Scarborough sites. All of these were with community members except for one Zoom meeting held at 30 College with staff. A total of 50 unique individuals participated in these meetings. Furthermore, each participant was sent a link to an anonymous follow-up survey that they could complete. A comprehensive report on these Community Consultations was presented to the ILC at their July retreat.

Beyond the move to an ILC and the development of a new governance structure for the agency, another significant change is the addition of two new Board Members who are also members of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN). This welcomed inclusion is significant as the MCFN are the Treaty Holders for the lands upon which NCFST serves. Their participation should help the agency develop a new governance structure in a good way, and it should also help keep the agency accountable to Indigenous values and ways for the benefit of the community served.

## Privacy

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Action Item 12 of the ICWRARC states that NCFST will initiate Community Sharing Circles, inviting community to sit in circle to begin a conversation about Indigenous child welfare and its appropriate role in the life of our community and to provide input into our continuing journey toward self-determination and reform. Direction 2 from the Strategic Plan says the agency will enhance relationship with and direction from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, community advisory and youth councils, and other Indigenous led organizations on NCFST's services and programs. This will happen simultaneously with Direction 1, where NCFST will ensure monitoring tools align with ANCFSAO[i] and MCCSS[ii] revised evaluation tools. With that in mind and in response to feedback from the Child Welfare Transformation Community Advisory Circle, improvements were made to NCFST's Privacy Policy.

The new policy is more robust than the old; also, a new Privacy Breach Process was created and implemented. Standardized forms for Access and Correction Requests were also made, and a more comprehensive Personal Information Collection Statement was crafted. Just as importantly, regular audits of staff members' accessing of client records (commonly called "snooping audits") are now being performed with findings being reported back to the ILC. Lastly, in conjunction with and through ANCFSAO, NCFST is contributing to the development of culturally appropriate privacy tools. A more culturally appropriate Privacy Impact Assessment tool and Risk Registry tool are under development for use. More information will be shared in the future as this project unfolds

[i] ANCFSAO – Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario

[ii] MCCSS – Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services

# Complaints

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Guided by the principles of Direction 1 and 3 in the Strategic Plan and in response to criticism from community members about the previous complaints process, NCFST has researched and developed a new and comprehensive Complaints Policy. Direction 1 from the Strategic Plan says NCFST will engage with children, families, staff, and partners who use NCFST services on an ongoing basis and learn stories about their experience with NCFST as well as ensure monitoring tools align with ANCFSAO and MCCSS revised evaluation tools. Direction 3 states NCFST will continue to seek out partnerships with sibling organizations and enhance each other's work. This new policy reflects "best practices" as found at other agencies and in other industries. It is also consistent with the new Child, Youth, and Family Services Act (CYFSA) regulations introduced by the MCCSS in response to the Quality Standards Framework (QSF). The policy allows for informal, formal, and even anonymous complaints. Regular reporting to management and to the MCCSS are also features of this improved method.



## The Importance of NCFST's Multi-Service Approach

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NCFST stands out against other mainstream child welfare agencies because it not only facilitates child and family wellbeing services, but holistic prevention services as well. The multi-service approach that NCFST takes is rooted in the four strategic directions as illustrated in the Strategic Plan that NCFST seeks to uphold, which include child-centered, self-determination, all our relations, and community resilience. The reason why this approach is taken is because the population served by NCFST is more nuanced than a mainstream agency can address, especially given that mainstream agencies have historically contributed to the intergenerational trauma that NCFST's service population faces daily[1].

The systemic issues that FNIM community members face, while on the surface may seem like those of non-Indigenous families, are inextricably linked with colonialism and historic trauma that intersects within FNIM community members' lived experience[2]. The trauma that FNIM people face is rooted in and affected by colonial impacts, attributed to challenges that they further face with emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental health, financial stability, access to services, and family dynamics. These issues are chronic and generational, and NCFST is specialized in understanding the intricacies of FNIM families, with many staff also identifying as FNIM, creating an environment where community members are more likely to feel safe and trusting of those providing support due to such relational aspects. Mainstream agencies specialize in urgent short-term cases, and while they do indeed deal with long-term issues as well, they do not have the same training surrounding working with Indigenous families. Child and Family Wellbeing (CFWB) workers at NCFST are trained as Indigenous Authorized Workers and Holistic staff also have access to CFWB training so that everyone has the same understanding of what is required of NCFST staff.

[1] Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2018). *Interrupted childhoods: Over-representation of indigenous and black children in Ontario child welfare*. Retrieved from: [Report Interrupted Childhoods \(ohrc.on.ca\)](https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/report-interrupted-childhoods).

[2] Bombay, A., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2014). The intergenerational effects of Indian residential schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 51(3), 320-338.





Furthermore, having Holistic Support Services in-house is extremely beneficial to the wellbeing of NCFST's community members as it helps prevent potential involvement in the CFWB system and streamlines access to resources without lengthy waitlists for those who are already involved in CFWB services. Involvement in CFWB services can be shortened with support from Holistic services, and having a multidisciplinary team for each family allows for integrated communication to ensure that the family is best served according to their unique needs. Traditional Indigenous familial structures are often community-based, and NCFST seeks to inform and infuse that community-focused approach into their dual-service model that wraps community members around with a circle of support and resources that will help address their needs and accomplish their goals in a good way. Having this approach speeds up communication between Holistic services and CFWB, and it also speeds up access to the supports necessary to improve the lives of our community members.

*“This approach makes it much less challenging for community to access all supports without limits and encourages open supportive communication between CFWB and Holistic supports.”*

*– Tammy McFarland, Senior Supervisor, Scarborough Integrated Team*

Mainstream child welfare agencies must outsource their services by referring community members to external organizations, that more than likely have long waitlists, stringent requirements, and are more inconvenient to access. Difficulty accessing services is widely documented, such as in the 2020 Children's Mental Health Ontario Report “Kids Can't Wait”, where children and youth in need of mental health treatment waited on average up to 2.5 years to receive services. Those living in Toronto may wait up to 684 days to receive child and youth mental health services (p. 3)[3]. NCFST's average wait time for services is much shorter, with an average 90 day wait period, and while the overall goal is to reduce this wait time, it is evident that in comparison to external services, NCFST's internal holistic services are much more accessible to community members. There is no need to outsource these support services with NCFST because there are so many diverse programs offered to help address the needs of community members, and this not only allows for quicker access, but it also helps in reducing the amount of time that a CFWB file is open and the time a child or youth spends in care. With the plethora of programming for children and youth, youth gain access to cultural education, events, and camps in which they can continue to take part even if they “age out” of care or if their family's file is closed.

[3] Children's Mental Health Ontario. (2020). *Kids can't wait*. Retrieved from: <https://cmho.org/wp-content/uploads/CMHO-Report-WaitTimes-2020.pdf>

## Multi-Service in Action: The Scarborough Integrated Team

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The CFWB department has a dedicated and integrated team for Scarborough, where many of those served by NCFST reside. This multidisciplinary team creates a more streamlined approach to accessing services beyond involvement in CFWB, giving community members access to Mooka'am clinical treatment, case management, and Violence Against Women (VAW) counselling, without having to be referred elsewhere. Tammy McFarland, Senior Supervisor for the Scarborough Integrated Team, reports first-hand the importance of having a multidisciplinary approach to serving community by emphasizing, "The integrated team provides a hassle-free approach to services and has improved the communication and wrap around supports for the families we service." Having both CFWB and Holistic Services in one place has positively impacted this community, as Tammy adds:

*"Families have been able to access their holistic services closer to home, in a safe private space without the worry of needing to locate funds for transit...making it back to school or daycare on time after a session or program to pick up their child and most importantly they are closer to home which is emotionally helpful after a counselling session."*

The Scarborough Integrated Team (SIT) was developed in response to years of community feedback that indicated a need for a multidisciplinary team in the Scarborough neighbourhood. Operating out of the Scarborough Child and Family Life Centre at 156 Galloway Road, the SIT is an integral resource for Indigenous families who live in Scarborough.



## Holistic Services Impact

As illustrated in the previous discussion, Holistic support services have proven to be an integral part of NCFST's multi-service approach. Service volumes have grown exponentially over the past five years. Most notably in the recent 2022-2023 fiscal year, holistic services have grown by 51%, and have already started to grow even more in the current 2023-2024 fiscal year with a 6% increase in service volumes. From October 2022 to September 2023, Holistic Programs have received 2,538 new referrals, totaling 4,185 unique clients and 6,692 active enrollments.

### 5 Year Holistic Services Growth

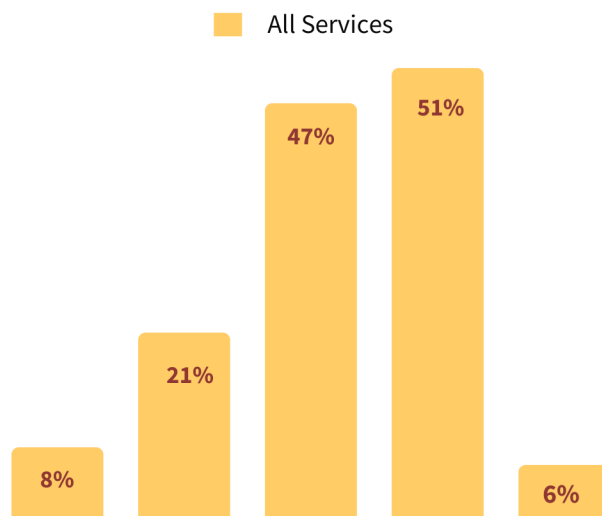


Figure 1: Service Volume Percentages for Individual or Family Enrollments in Holistic Programs

Additionally, the integration of both Holistic support services and Child and Family Wellbeing is seen in these service volumes, as a large proportion of families who receive CFWB services also utilize Holistic programs, indicating NCFST's commitment to providing wraparound services to the community members we serve. On average, a quarter of the families receiving CFWB services also access Holistic programs. Over the past five years, clinical services, Ninoshe & Zhisay supports, and Tikinagan were often integrated into the services received by families with CFWB files. Service levels for 2023-2024 are projected to be at similar levels as previously observed, thus indicating a high need for continued multi-service integration.

## Child and Family Wellbeing Utilization of Holistic Programs

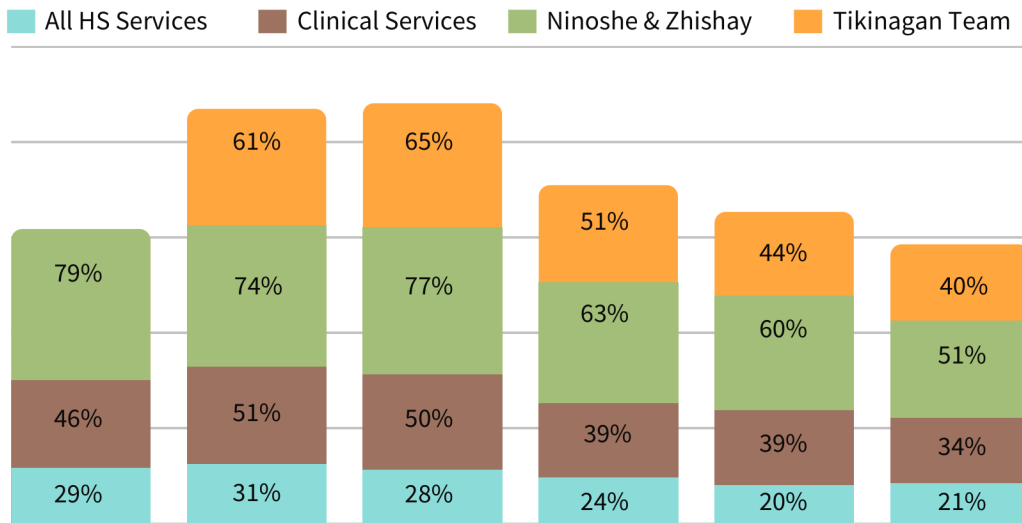
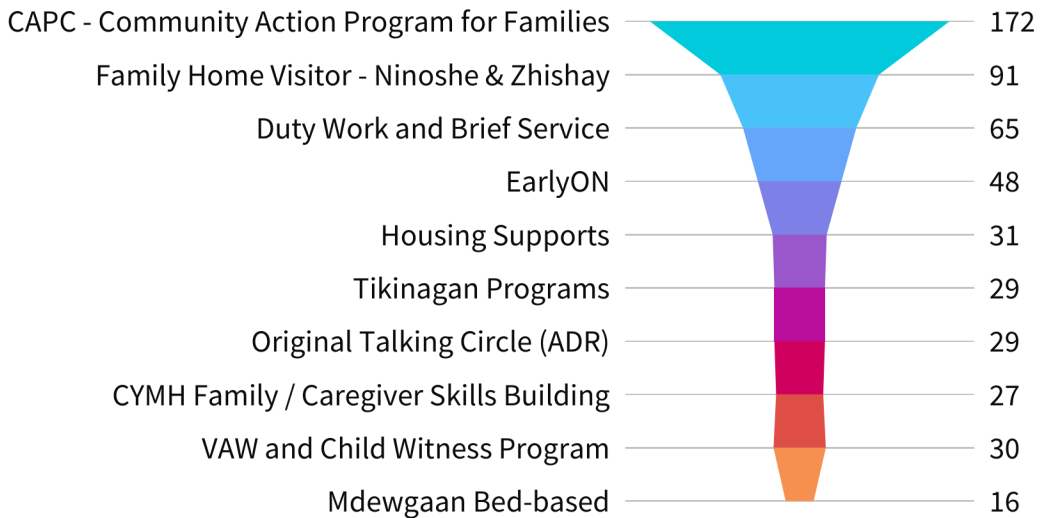
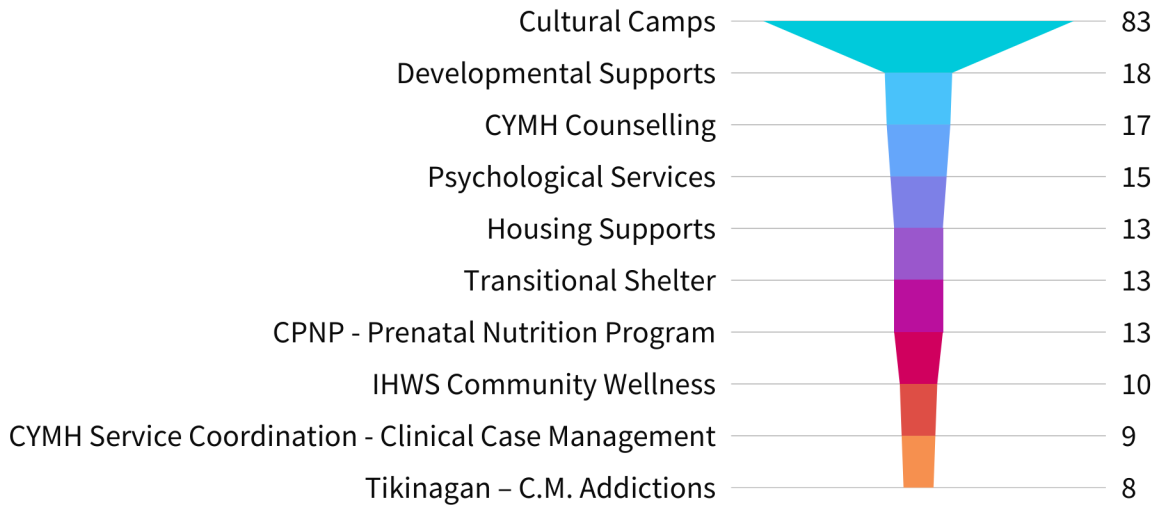


Figure 2: Service Integration Percentages - \*Tikinagan Team started operating in 2019, delivering a similar range of services as the Family Supports Team

## Top 10 Holistic Support Programs Accessed by Families with Ongoing Protection



## Top 10 Holistic Programs Accessed by Children and Youth in Care



Not only do families involved in CFWB services have a need for Holistic Support Services, children and youth in care are particularly benefiting from NCFST’s multi-service approach. From October 2022 to September 2023 alone, 52% of children 0-17 years old and 56% of youth 18-23 years old accessed Holistic Programs. Also, several of such youth have accessed supports exclusive for Children and Youth in Care, including the Youth-in-Transition Program, Education Liaison supports, and Care Liaison supports from the Anti-Human Trafficking (Bekaadendang) Team.

## Children and Youth Accessing Holistic Programs

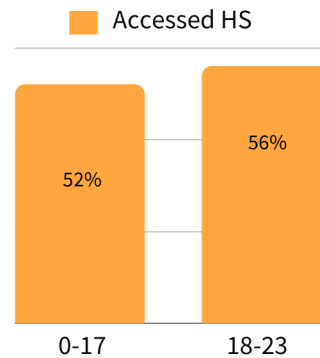


Figure 3: CY in Care Holistic Service Percentages

## Children and Youth Supports By Age

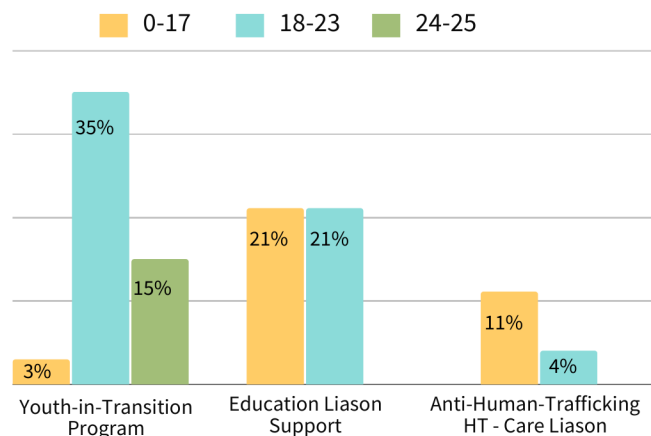


Figure 4: Service Volumes for CY in Care Exclusive Support Programs

## Program Spotlight – Bekaadendang

The name Bekaadendang (Being Peaceful) was given to the Anti-Human Trafficking team by a Knowledge Keeper and Elder from NCFST, named Don Ense. He took part in a traditional ceremony with medicines for the purpose of naming the program. This name represents how the anti-human trafficking team has supported community members and continues to innovate new programs and initiatives that seek to address the needs of FNIM community members who are survivors of sexual exploitation and human trafficking or are at risk of being victimized by those who prey on this population. While Bekaadendang opens its doors to anyone over 12 years old who meets the criteria, the majority of those served identify as women, which is representative of the broader population of those who are targeted by traffickers [4]. From providing case management, counselling, and resources, to group workshops, structured programs, and cultural teachings, the team “aims to support community members in not only finding their inner peace but seeking peace in the process of reclaiming spaces, minds, bodies, and their spirits [5].”



A program evaluation is currently taking place for the Bekaadendang program, where Quality Assurance and Decolonization (QAD) Staff are examining whether Bekaadendang situates itself strongly within its guiding principles of trauma-informed care, harm reduction, cultural safety, the 4-quadrant medicine wheel approach, and after-care peer support. According to preliminary data, Bekaadendang has a positive impact on both staff and community members alike. The common consensus in interviews with both groups indicates that every person involved gained new reflections, teachings, and healing medicine that transcends far beyond the services and program activities provided. Bekaadendang has also developed a short film called “Ni Gee e Daa” amplifying the stories of those who have participated in this service, demonstrating this impact further.

Bekaadendang continues to evolve and refine their services to ensure they provide the best quality care possible to the community members they serve. In a time where the issue of human trafficking and sexual exploitation often goes unnoticed, Bekaadendang illustrates the impact that innovative and culturally grounded service delivery can do for those who greatly need these supports to heal and thrive.

4 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Canada).

5 Bekaadendang Neechi (2021). *Peer Program Modules*. Native Child and Family Services of Toronto.

# Satisfaction Survey

In response to valuable feedback from community members who have shared their experiences and suggestions on how NCFST can improve their relationship with community, the Quality Assurance and Decolonization team (QAD) has developed a pilot project born from one of the innovation seeds developed from the Child Welfare Transformation Community Advisory Circle. The CFWB Community Member Satisfaction Survey Pilot Project<sup>[iii]</sup> seeks to fill a gap within the agency's feedback process by creating a tool that collects feedback from community members about their experiences receiving CFWB services. Youth between 16 and 29 years old who have experience in care are invited to participate in the Youth Survey, and caregivers with an open or closed file that was active within the past 3 years and who received ongoing services for at least 60 days are invited to participate in the Caregiver Survey. This is an opportunity to provide anonymous feedback about one's lived experience navigating the CFWB system.

QAD is currently collecting responses for these surveys and hopes to receive as much feedback as possible. Participating in this survey gives community members an opportunity to contribute to the continuous improvement efforts in NCFST's service approach and relationships. The information collected from these surveys will allow QAD to complete a report highlighting all the feedback received from community members. The report will be presented to Senior Leadership, it will lead toward a plan whereby this feedback is applied over the course of NCFST's CFWB Transformation journey, and it will also help improve future satisfaction survey development. As a Chi Miigwetch for participating in this survey, community members will be able to enter a draw to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. It is with hope that the CFWB Satisfaction Survey Pilot Project is the beginning of a necessary solution to address accountability and transparency within the agency, whilst also ensuring that NCFST puts their strategic goals into practice by amplifying Indigenous voices, cultures, and worldviews through the self-determination of all our relations, and by responding to the direction provided by community in the process.

To participate in the CFWB Satisfaction Survey, please scan the QR Codes below:

## Youth Survey



## Caregiver Survey



[iii] This project is currently undergoing a renaming process.



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