VOICES FROM THE FIELD -
Aboriginal Service and Programs for Low-Income Families and Children

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Aboriginal perspective

"When providing services, we consider every aspect of a person's life. It is ineffective to deliver a service only to the child or parent(s). You need to look at the dynamics of the entire family, including parents, grandparents, children and then more broadly, at the community (in this case, the Métis/Aboriginal community)," says Ryan Calder.

The Child and Family Enhancement Plan began approximately 13 years ago with a training program that was developed to meet the needs of community members (50% of the people having a Grade 8 education or less). Once the training program was implemented, other social issues that needed attention were identified and a social department was created. Since then, the Child and Family Enhancement Plan has tried to bridge some of the gaps in rural services through the development of partnership agreements with both government and non-government organizations.

What are the implications of the research findings in the CEECD papers for your work?
Within the CEECD papers,[1-7] there are some commonalities with the services provided through the Child and Family Enhancement Plan, but there are also pieces missing. The papers fail to address the difference between reasons why the general population lives in poverty and why Aboriginal people live in poverty. The demographics of the population served by the Child and Family Enhancement Plan are 50% Métis, 25% First Nations and 25% non-Aboriginal. The Métis feel that the non-traditional environment in which they are compelled to live has an effect on their employment opportunities, community service provision and access to other programs, such as education and employment training.

Research tells us that a child in a family in which the parents are well educated has a better chance of also being well educated. However, within Aboriginal communities, there is an older generation that did not have access to education, or as children were put into residential schools. This has had a major impact on the transfer of knowledge from parent to child – a key element if children are to succeed in school.

Young adults/parents who have previously dropped out of school are now coming back to complete adult-education courses in order to increase their level of education. As they learn, they receive support from the Aboriginal and surrounding communities, which boosts their self-esteem as parents. The children see the importance of education because their parents are involved in learning. As those parents gain more confidence in themselves, they are better prepared to be parents and members of the community.

The CEECD papers[1-7] reference home visiting as an access point. When making an intervention, it is essential to develop a trusting relationship with the family. The people do not trust social services: they remember when children were taken from their homes and placed in residential schools or foster care. The home visitor needs to be able to relate to the conditions and living environment of that home. If it is a Métis home, it works best with a Métis home visitor.

There is a big difference between rural and urban settings, a distinction not made in the CEECD papers.[1-7] There is access to public transit in urban settings, but not in small communities. If a family has to travel to access a service available only in another community and they do not have access to transportation, they are unable to utilize the service. Families living in rural areas then believe that the services are readily available only in urban centres. What do these families do? Some relocate to urban settings, which cuts them off from their family and community infrastructures. As a result, they often get lost in the urban centres. If there were a way to keep them in their community where they have their support structures and still ensure their access to needed services, there would be more success stories.

Where are the main gaps between the research, practice and policy, and how might they be overcome?
"Stove-piping of services" is an issue when dealing with other organizations. Over the last five years, this organization has been working to build new partnerships and break down barriers. However, there is no core funding and a lot of time is spent trying to develop additional funding and resources. If changes could be made to realign funding and how it is used, we would be able to provide better services.

Technology could also help facilitate rural service provision. For example, if a family in a rural community with no access to educational services were to be given access to a computer and staff to teach them how to use it, they would be able to go online for distance education. *"Technology is one of the areas that we should be concentrating on,"* says Calder.

When government organizations look at program development and implementation, they do not always include organizations that provide services in the discussions. Changes in government mandates for program delivery have an effect on rural programming. Yet policy-makers do not come to rural programs to see what kind of impact they would have or why. Program-providers need to have more opportunities to speak directly with governments in order to share ideas about service provision in rural areas. This lack of consultation is a serious gap in services and policy development.

Calder was once asked, "How do you know you have been successful in what you are doing?" He responded, "I haven't been to a suicide funeral in three years. That is how I know I've been successful. When work first began in this community, there were way too many funerals. Success like this may not be something concretely measurable, but the message is clear."

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