



No wonder B.C. child-welfare workers are seeking union membership; Membership with the BC Government and Service Employees' Union would not change the workers' pay structure, but it would provide some protection for staff who are all too easy to blame when tragedy occurs on their watch

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Premier Christy Clark was swift to blame a government-funded aboriginal child-protection agency for the death of Alex Gervais, a teenaged boy who was placed in a hotel instead of a foster home last year against government policy. For the workers at that agency, the Premier's threat of consequences came as a gut-punch, given the impossible demands of their jobs.

"I have often gone home from work wondering if I have left a child at risk because I could not respond," one veteran front-line worker said in an interview. With overwhelming case loads, there just isn't enough time in the day. Staff at the Fraser Valley Aboriginal Children and Family Services Society are not permitted to publicly discuss their work, but agreed to be interviewed - on condition of anonymity - about working conditions as they await the results of a ratification vote that will determine if they join the union representing social workers in British Columbia.

Membership with the BC Government and Service Employees' Union would not change the workers' pay structure, but it would provide some protection for staff who are all too easy to blame when tragedy occurs on their watch.

Staff are required to follow the provincial guidelines set out in a 142-page handbook titled Aboriginal Operational and Practice Standards and Indicators. "Honestly, I don't know where mine is any more," the employee said. What is the point of looking up required response times, when caseloads are as much as three times bigger than the province says they should be?

"I need two of me to do this job properly," another seasoned front-line worker said. The workers describe a "culture of fear" in the office, where each day is managed in triage: pick up the most urgent files and hope nothing goes wrong for the rest of the children, youth and families they are assigned to help. There are few opportunities to connect families with the support that could avert a crisis.

"A lot of us feel much of the time that when you are putting out a fire, you are thinking, 'I wish I could have gotten out [to a client] sooner, maybe I could have prevented this from happening,'" the worker said. "There are days when I go home feeling defeated."

The **BCGEU** released a report last year that suggests the delegated agency in the Fraser Valley is not unique. Aboriginal child-welfare services across the province are underresourced, oversight is opaque and governance models are complex.

The result, union president **Stephanie Smith** said in an interview, is that children and youth are put at risk. "We're failing British Columbia's children and, in particular, we are failing our aboriginal children."

The agency, which serves indigenous families both on-reserve and off-reserve in the Fraser Valley, is one of 23 delegated aboriginal authorities in British Columbia that have

negotiated varying levels of responsibility for child welfare. Funding for on-reserve services is provided by the federal government, but responsibility rests with the province.

It is a responsibility that the provincial government would like to hand off: The Attorney-General has launched talks to transfer jurisdiction for child-welfare services to First Nations communities. The initiative is framed as a reconciliation effort because of the concerns about the high number of aboriginal child and youth in care.

But aboriginal leaders, even as they seek to reclaim responsibility for children and families in their communities, note there are huge issues to be addressed.

There is a funding disparity. Both the province and the federal government spend less on each indigenous child in care than they do for the rest of the population. That translates into fewer services for families and more pressure on front-line workers.

But there are also questions of governance and oversight. Chief Doug Kelly is president of the Sto:lo Tribal Council and a founder of the society, which serves many Sto:lo families. He said the Sto:lo are working to restructure the agency to improve governance and to establish a single standard of care. The tribal leadership is working with the province and is in negotiations with Ottawa to ensure the federal government does its part as well.

"The system is not working and we want to contribute, in collaboration, to find a way forward to fix the system that is not serving our children," Mr. Kelly said. That means policy work, but it also means an end to inequitable funding. "We need to find a way to move us from being the poor cousin to being a cousin that shares in the available wealth to meet the needs of children and families."

In September, 2015, the Premier concluded that someone had made a mistake that led 18-year-old Alex Gervais to kill himself. She put the entire agency under a cloud, and it is no surprise that the workers are now seeking the protection of union membership. But an independent investigation into the circumstances of Alex's death has not yet wrapped up. When it does, it could be the Clark government - responsible for oversight and funding - will have to share the blame.

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