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Feathers of Hope: Child Welfare Youth Forum

KARLA KAKEGAMIC

My name is Karla Kekegamic, I work at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth as a Youth Amplifier connected to the Feathers of Hope project. A Youth Amplifier is a youth leader who helps organize events and helps keep the youth voice central in all aspect of our work.

Feathers of Hope is a powerful youth movement drawing thousands of First Nations young people from across Ontario together. Since its launch in 2013, the Advocate's Office has worked with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC); the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Commission; provincial, federal, and First Nations leadership at the territorial and federal level; and met with young people from across the country to talk about the role First Nations youth can play in creating change. Since 2013, the Advocate's Office has hosted Feathers of Hope forums on the justice and jury system, and on child welfare. The Feathers of Hope Youth Forum aims to bring together two youth delegates from each of the ninety-one First Nations communities in northern Ontario. The youth delegates will speak to issues they experience within their communities. They will further discuss and make recommendations, as well as begin development of an action-oriented plan to address those issues they experience.

The Child Welfare Forum took place in Thunder Bay, Ontario in May 2015. We brought youth to Thunder Bay who were mainly from the northern communities. Some youth were flown from southern Ontario, who may have been located in that area because of a child welfare agency placement. The youth forum looked at themes to explore the condition of Child Welfare for First Nations youth in Northern Ontario. We explored themes such as:

1. Access to culture, identity, and values;
2. Building a vision for community child welfare services;
3. Transitions: Your journey through the child welfare system; and
4. Knowledge and understanding of child welfare system.

To build an understanding of what youth thought about the services they were getting, the condition of their wellbeing while being in care and their overall knowledge of the child welfare system was discussed. The youth had discussions around the systemic issues in child welfare, such as traditions and culture, care and support, foster care, case workers, rights education in child welfare, community, intergenerational trauma, racism and stereotypes, drugs and alcohol, mental and physical health, and lastly education and school.

A major theme in the forum was the difference in support services for youth that weren't there. The youth want more support in services and knowing how to access services that are helpful to them. The youth also want more support in transition, including:

- Foster houses;
- Group homes;
- Coming into the system; and
- Exiting the system (aging out).

The youth wanted support in gaining access to their culture, and/or their own spiritual beliefs without the pressure to assimilate into another culture or spiritual belief. The youth called for:

- Acceptance of the different beliefs, values, and their own cultures;
- Support from elders;
- Support from their social workers and foster parents as to how to access their own culture (including transportation to, knowledge about, where the culture/spiritual activities are).

Education was a huge theme that regularly came up in the discussion workshops. Not being educated of their rights, and not being educated in how the systems work was one of their major issues when coming into the system. The youth didn't know their rights, or how the systems work, or why they were being removed from their home and family.

The youth wanted more support in foster homes/healthy homes, and healthy relationships with people who are their support system: people such as social workers, foster parents, their peers, and their role models. They don't want to feel alone, or isolated, and many of them said, "that it's not only about money." The youth want to be listened to and know that they are cared for. That they are trusted to help make choices about their lives, choices such as where they want to live, services they want to access, and other choices that affect their lives. The youth don't want to be just a number, or case file.

The youth also talked about having resources for travel to keep family members connected, no placements outside a fixed radius, and to have their needs met immediately, instead of saying, "we'll see what happens." A project that was suggested was making a handbook about the system for youth by peers.

Feathers of Hope is rooted in listening to young people: to hear their stories and experiences, and to give them a chance to be a part of positive change that affects their lives. It allowed them to discuss the issues surrounding Child Welfare and how they can help come up with solutions and recommendations to make it a better experience for other young people, so that the cycle of hopelessness is broken. Feathers of Hope is an action plan tied to partnership with the different levels of government, community leaders, and youth in the hope we can all work together to move towards positive change in our communities.¹

¹ See the report, *Together We Are ... FEATHERS OF HOPE; A First Nations Youth Action Plan* (Ontario: Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2014) online: http://cwrp.ca/sites/default/files/publications/en/Feathers_of_Hope.pdf