

Association of
Native Child and
Family Services
Agencies of
Ontario

ANCFSAO



FACTOR-INWENTASH
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



MAKING THE SHIFT^{INC}

Maa-Daa-Qun-Naag: Eternal Flame

Improving Housing Outcomes for Indigenous Youth Transitioning
out of Child Wellbeing and Child Welfare to Independent Living

Artist Credit:



Hadi. Siy sozi Zakkarry Witset hazdli. Hello, my name is Zakkarry and I am from Witset First Nation. My pronouns are They/He, and I am a self taught 2 spirit artist and activist. I have so many stories and lived experiences from my life thus far and I use my art as an expression of my past, present, and future. My art is an extension of me. Every piece is made with something connected to me one way or another and I try my best to represent my communities as an intersectional person within my art pieces.

Aaniin! I'm Kodah. I'm a proud Métis and Anishinaabe person who is passionate about learning and connecting with my community. I have a background in animation and art, and like to incorporate that into my role on the Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (IYAC). When I'm not doing work in Indigenous child welfare, I enjoy boardgames, painting, being involved in culture and spending time outside with my pets or family. I care a lot about the work IYAC is doing and I'm in this 100%. I'm dedicated to advocating for Indigenous youth and will continue to do so!



Elder Bios:

Elder Danette Restoule



Danette Restoule, Wasse-shka-kwe, from Wikwemikong where I was raised, and my journey began. As a social worker I have devoted over 40 years working in the field of Native Child Welfare, working in many different capacities with many different communities. Every now and then I have taken a break and worked in the field of education and as a Native Language teacher. Our language is the core of our being and the essence of our spirit, it strengthens our identity, honors our ancestors, and reminds us to keep working on restoring our language and culture.

One of my greatest teachers is and continues to be “my journey of life” which are life lessons and teachings we experience along the way, and they are our life’s transitions from one experience to the next. In time, these become your wisdom after time and healing. I am very grateful for my lessons and teachings, as they have enriched my life personally and professionally.

This lifetime is the only one we have been given and what we do with it is a personal choice, but we can’t forget we have an ongoing responsibility to our children, families and the future generations of our people.

Chi Miigwech, Wasse-shka-Kwe, Danette Restoule

Elder Bios:

Elder Clarence White Sr.



Clarence was born and raised on Naotkamegwanning First Nation (Whitefish Bay), Ontario for 83 years. He attended the Whitefish Bay Day School and Confederation College. He is fluent in both English and Anishinaabe. He is a fierce advocate and practitioner of Anishinaabe customs and traditions. Clarence has been Chief and Councilor of Naotkamegwanning First Nation, as well as other leadership and management positions within his community and within Grand Council Treaty No. 3. Since 1999, Clarence has worked at Anishinaabe Abinoojii Family Services located in Wauzhushk Onigum First Nation (Rat Portage) Ontario as the Cultural Coordinator.

Naotkamegwanning First Nation is located at the Lake of the Woods region in Northwestern Ontario in the heart of Treaty #3 territory.

Naotkamegwanning is known in the territory as one of the few communities that have been able to keep track of their Anishinaabe cultural practices and beliefs strong and vibrant with 48% of the population able to speak their Ojibway language. The importance of passing on teachings, language and cultural practices is evident within the community.

Project Name Gifting:

Maa-Daa-Qun-Naag

Gifted by Elder Clarence White Sr.

As part of our cultural protocol, tobacco was offered to Elder Clarence White Sr. for the request to engage in ceremony and ask the creator and ancestors to receive a name to be gifted for the project. A gifted name both represents and guides our work and the meaning and teaching of the name is an important foundational component of Indigenous research.

Elder Clarence accepted the tobacco symbolizing his agreement to undertake this spiritual work and following the ceremony, within the next day, received a vision. In his vision he saw a building/house and when the doors opened, he saw two young people - male and female, approach the house. When the inner doors opened again, he saw two elderly people sitting in the very centre of an empty, large room, around a fire. They did not say anything to each other or to the young people. They just smiled.

Clarence had understood that this was in response to the tobacco offering and the request to receive a name for the housing project. For the young people it represented a physical place, “Kaa-Maa-Daa-Qun-Naag” and in the house there was a fire that represents the eternal flame. The fire represents the eternal and permanent, something that never goes away. In our culture the fire also represents the essence of our spirits. In the Medicine Wheel, at the very centre of the four quadrants of the four directions and the four areas comprising our wholistic wellbeing (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual) – where the four quadrants meet in the centre is our spirit – the fire. We are all living spirits, and the structure of a building envisioned in the dream represents that safe space when individuals have a home or a place they are always able to return to. It is a place where one will find our grandparents and elders, culture and their identity – belonging and knowing who they are. The grandparents and elders will always be there and will welcome us home no matter the journey.

The meaning of a home and grandparents and elders, particularly for youths, is that they provide that unconditional love, support and warmth when we need it. This project represents what the young people need in times where they have no one or a place to go, to find that comfort and to heal from traumas, reconnecting with their self via connectedness to culture and community. Lastly, the fire is also representative of one’s capacity to self-regulate, respond to internal and external factors and triggers. Managing one’s fire and its size is related to a young person’s capacity to be resilient and as they mature find the right response within themselves, without getting that fire get huge and entirely out of control. On the other hand, a tiny fire that has no warmth or strength is the extinguishing of one’s spirit. As we support our young people through the stages of life and transitioning out of care, our responsibility is to nurture their fires and guide them to ensure they can thrive.

At the time when the name was gifted via ceremony to the research team, in the lodge hosted on its traditional land by the Mississauga First Nation, Clarence sang a song in the Anishinaabemowin (or Ojibwe language) that accompanied the name and which spoke about the flame of the fire and that you can hear the sparks of the embers and the crackle of the fire, even with your eyes closed. That is how strong our spirits are and our connections to our ancestors, culture and identity. It is not something that can be put out by removing a child from one’s community and family and placing them in another, different one. They will always seek that connection and to find out who they are, without which their spirit will never be at peace and therefore healing cannot be truly done.

Improving Housing Outcomes for Indigenous Youth Transitioning out of Child Wellbeing and Child Welfare to Independent Living

The Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario (ANCFSAO) is a membership organization mandated to build a better life for all Indigenous children through promoting the delivery of culturally-based, wholistic services. ANCFSAO and the Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (IYAC) collaborated with researchers from the University of Toronto to better understand youth's experiences with housing during their transition to independence.

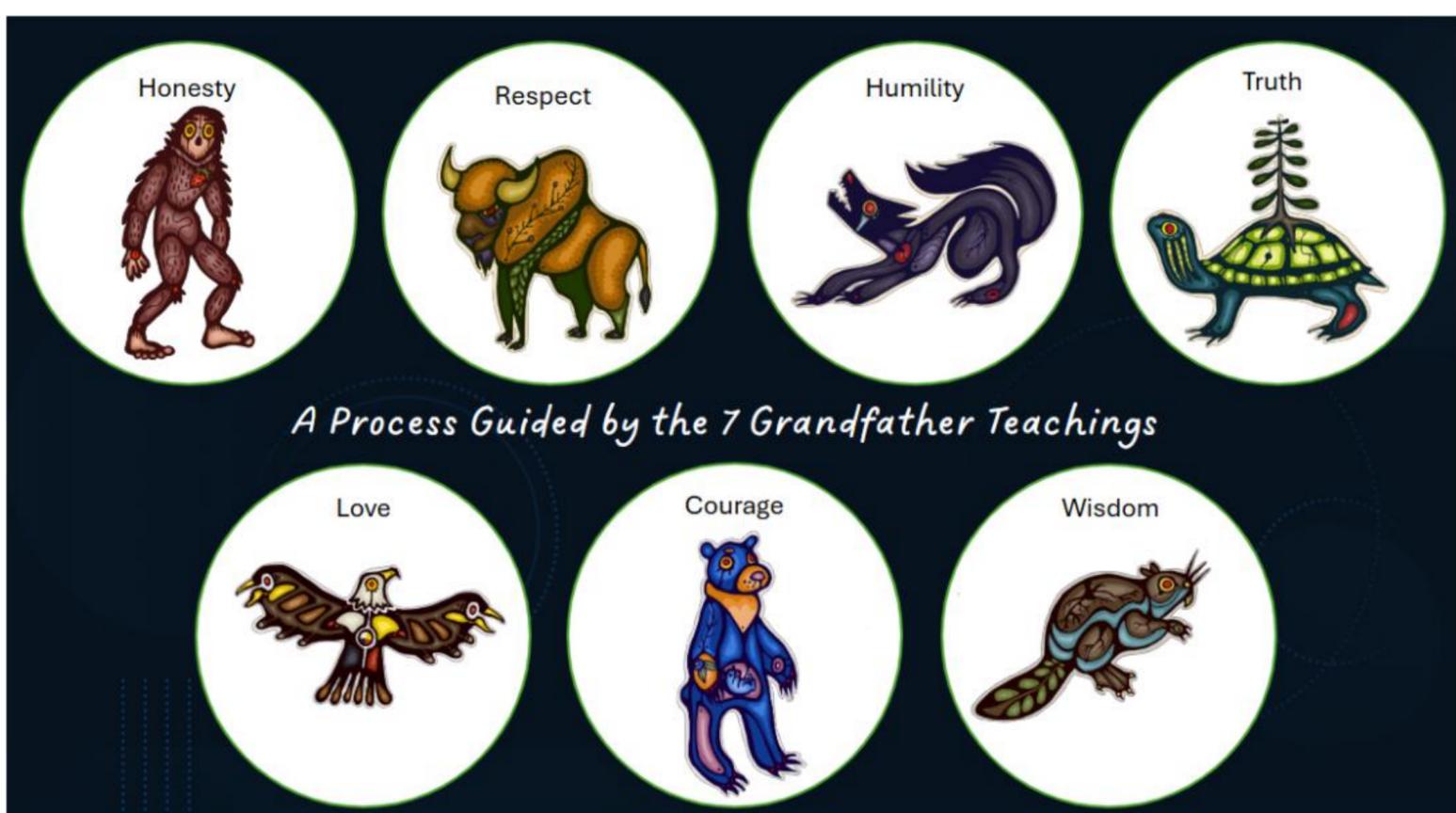
ANCFSAO sought to map the trajectory of Indigenous youths receiving services to better understand the changes required to improve wholistic outcomes. The study amplifies the voices of those with lived experience and frontline workers as the true experts in the sector.

This research was funded by a grant from Making the Shift, a youth homelessness social innovation lab. The project has been supported by the Elders Advisory Committee and a few dedicated Elders who strengthened the cultural support, sensitivity of the project and competence of the team.

Note: All words and phrases that have been defined in this document have been underlined, and the list of definitions can be found in the Glossary of Key Terms section at the end of this document.

Guiding Principles: Seven Grandfather Teachings

This study was guided by the Seven Grandfather Teachings of love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, wisdom, and truth. These principles “emphasize the interconnectedness and balance between the mind, body, and spirit and the harmonious relationship between the individual, community, and the land” (Goss et al., 2024, p. 7). These principles guided ethics and relationships with the Indigenous youth, stakeholders, and all the decisions made throughout this study.



The **purpose** of the study was to identify the barriers faced by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth transitioning out of care and to examine current practices used by Indigenous Child and Family Wellbeing Agencies (ICFWBAs) and other community stakeholders (e.g., homelessness shelters) in Ontario. The findings will be used to inform the development of best practices and address existing policy gaps in supporting youth.

The study pursued three key **objectives**.

1. To gather information on how to prevent homelessness for youth who exit child welfare care.
2. To gather information on gaps in care as youth transition from care to independent living.
3. To create recommendations to influence policy and practice specific to First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations involved with child welfare.

It is important to acknowledge that colonialism deeply disrupted Indigenous systems of care by removing Indigenous children from their homes. Given this history, it is crucial to design an approach to housing that is equitable and responsive to the needs of Indigenous youth. More information on this history can be found in the **final report**.

It is also important to acknowledge the Indigenous Child and Family Wellbeing Agencies (ICFWBAs) and Children's Aid Societies (CAS) who have adopted distinct approaches to supporting youth during this transition, reflecting the unique needs of the communities they serve and the diverse worldviews that inform their practices.



How did youth design and work with ANCFSAO and UofT to carry out the study?

Fifteen youth from the Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (IYAC) at the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario (ANCFSAO) **co-designed** the study. Their expertise guided this work to ensure that it was led in a culturally appropriate and good way. The IYAC members were responsible for informing the focus of the study, the questions asked to participants, leading interviews and notetaking, reading through responses to find themes, and putting the themes together meaningfully. The youth also led the sharing of findings. Their expertise, contributions and artwork makes this study even more impactful, as it is guided by their needs throughout each stage and seeks to elevate the voices of those with lived experience. ANCFSAO and UofT supported this work.

Youth expressed positive experiences co-designing the study, especially in relation to impacting housing outcomes and policies in Canada. Youth brought much needed insight into housing research, presenting a unique lens and offering valuable expertise related to their lived experience. Youth not only acted as researchers, but as advocates for those that come after them.



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Youth led the study

This research took a participatory action research approach where the researchers and youth with lived experience worked together to challenge the current status quo experienced by Indigenous youth in care.

Who participated? What did the study explore?

Several community workers, agency workers, and youth were interviewed to better understand youth experiences and how these experiences were shaped by service delivery.

The study addressed the following **research questions**:

1. What early interventions/prevention methods can be applied to children in care to strengthen as they move into young adulthood and are empowered to make the right and safe choices once exiting care and into independent living.
 - a. To prevent homelessness?
 - b. To eliminate and reduce human trafficking and violence against Indigenous women and girls?
 - c. To reduce cycles of violence experienced and committed by Indigenous boys and men?
2. How do we ensure identity, Indigeneity and relationships, cultural and personal, are nurtured throughout the lives of children and youth in care systems?

What themes came out of the study?

The findings were organized into **themes** to reflect the main sentiments and concerns expressed by youth, community workers and agency workers. This style of analysis and presentation allowed for a clear layout of main takeaways from the interviews.

- Category 1: Early Intervention/Prevention (6 themes)
- Category 2: Culture and Relationships (4 themes)
- Category 3: Gaps and Barriers (5 themes)

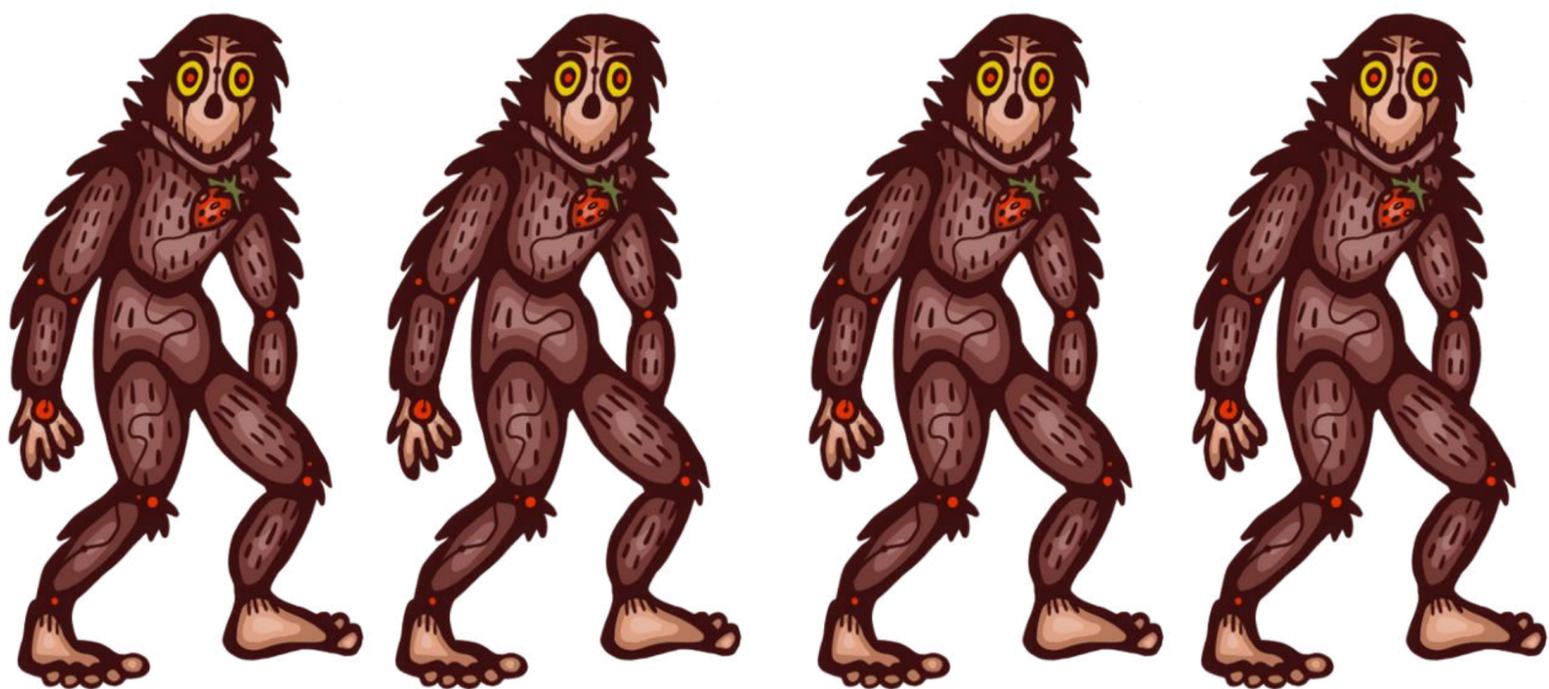
Fifteen themes came out of the study. The first set of themes focused on identifying **early prevention methods** that child wellbeing agencies, community partners and youth use and recommend that can be applied to children in care to strengthen as they move into young adulthood and are empowered to make the right and safe choices once exiting care and into independent living.

The next set of themes focused on how we can ensure **identity, Indigeneity and relationships** (cultural and personal) are nurtured throughout the lives of children and youth in care systems.

The last set of themes focused on **gaps and barriers** as Indigenous youth transition from care to independent living, such as:

- Shortage of safe and affordable housing
- Lack of transparency in communication with youth
- Misalignment and inconsistency of provincial and federal supports for youth (e.g. on/off reserve, eligibility age, requirements and claw backs)
- Considerations of readiness - not all youth are equipped to transition to independent living due to the impact of compound trauma and complex needs
- Lack of supports and resources for youth transitioning from out of home care (staff tools, funding)
- Gaps in access to culturally relevant, immediate/timely, trauma-informed, wholistic mental health and substance use services
- Systemic racism and discrimination (gender, race) in human services (including child welfare)
- Exclusion of youth voice in service planning and decision-making

The identification of these gaps and barriers was helpful in preparing recommendations aimed at improving the transition to independence for youth aging out of care.



What recommendations came from the findings?

Recommendations regarding **intervention and prevention** strategies:

1. Agencies should have their own transitional homes to bridge the gap between care and transitioning to independence.
 - a. Agencies should own and operate needs-based, safe and culturally responsive transitional housing, including support programs, to bridge gap between care and transitioning to independence..

1. Focus on building youth capacity through life skills, financial literacy, job readiness while connecting youth to those who can help strengthen skillsets.
2. Service plans should be youth-led, emphasizing youth choice.
3. Improved communication with youth on the side of the workers is necessary for youth to thrive and feel supported. In addition, greater transparency is needed in communication between the worker and the youth.
4. Create more “youth days” so that youth can see their workers, learn in workshops, make friends and pick up their cheques.

Recommendations to address **culture and relationship building**:

1. Increase access to cultural supports to nurture connection to community and identity.
2. Emphasize and help facilitate a circle of support in the youth’s life, including community heroes and external supports, people the youth can connect with, look up to and feel supported by.
3. Support youth to learn self-nurturing.
4. Use more accessible language in relevant documentation.

Recommendations to address **systemic gaps and barriers**:

1. Increase landlord awareness of provincial and federal housing-related resources like the Ready-Set-Go program to reduce barriers to renting and discrimination.
2. Improve mechanisms to support communication from workers to youth as they transition out of care.
3. Increase resources such as affordable housing and mental health supports (must be timely and trauma-informed/safe).
4. Ministry compliance standards should seek to meet wellbeing outcomes, instead of taking time away from worker/youth relationship-building and service time.



How were the findings and knowledge shared?

The findings from this study were shared at two **knowledge sharing workshops** at the annual Indigenous Child and Family Wellbeing Conference, organized by ANCFSAO. Youth from IYAC planned and co-facilitated the workshop, attended by 135 child welfare professionals. Indigenous family wellbeing agency workers and sector experts had the chance to hear about study findings at this conference, as well as the Making the Shift conference in February 2025, and a UofT Master of Social Work course in March 2025.

135
Participants at
workshops

Youth participated in knowledge sharing through two knowledge mobilization workshops in December 2024, with 135 participants, in Toronto, Ontario.

Following the presentation, youth led an interactive icebreaker and group activity based on Maire Dugan’s Nested Model of Conflict. This activity allowed for critical thinking about the complex issues surrounding Indigenous youth homelessness. The participants engaged in a conversation on strategies to address these challenges.

What were the learnings from the process from the perspective of the youth?

Youth learned various study design and data analysis techniques through the process of co-designing this study. They noted that they learned about the lengthy research process and institutional ethics processes, and stressed the importance of anonymizing data. They also learned that one interview and story can provide so much information.

Youth felt that their involvement in this research process was empowering, and that it was meaningful to help other youth who may be facing similar challenges.



What were the learnings from the process from the perspective of the researchers based at the University of Toronto?

The researchers stressed the need to decolonize the research process. They learned about doing research in a good way, which includes doing research at a pace that is responsive to participants' readiness, capacity and ability to participate. The researchers learned about and sought to attend to the Seven Grandfather Teachings.

The researchers aimed to implement trauma-informed and culturally-informed approaches to research. They were mindful about potential triggers when doing research with young people with lived experience. They also learned about the balance of autonomy and children's rights to avoid re-traumatization.

Key Takeaways

This study reflects the priorities of youth who have lived experience of homelessness and the transition to independence, directly affected by current policies and practices. Evidence surrounding specific programming and agency-specific processes in the findings has the potential to greatly improve the quality of care being offered.

Future research should focus on understanding the perspectives of additional stakeholders, to further understand the complexities of Indigenous youth homelessness. In addition, future research should seek to gather intervention/prevention methods for human trafficking and violence against Indigenous women and girls. Future research should also focus on the implementation of trauma-informed approaches to child welfare research, including understanding the balance of autonomy, children's rights and addressing re-traumatization in colonial research.



Glossary of Key Terms

- (1) Trauma-informed: Recognizing how common trauma is in the world and seeking to be responsive through this by understanding the whole individual or group, and understanding or taking into consideration their traumas in the approach to care.
- (2) Culturally-informed/Culturally responsive: The ability to recognize, understand and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of people to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion.
- (3) Colonialism: The policy or practice of gaining full control over a country, occupying it with settlers, and benefitting from it financially/economically.
- (4) Knowledge sharing [mobilization]: Activities related to the creation and use of research.
- (5) Re-traumatization: The re-experiencing of a traumatic event, due to stress, triggers or reminders of the original trauma.
- (6) Human trafficking: Unlawfully transporting or forcing people in order to benefit from their work or service.
- (7) Systemic: Relating to a system (e.g. systemic racism).
- (8) Systemic Racism: Refers to laws, policies and institutions that give unfair advantage to some racial groups while harming others. This results in racial inequality and inequity.
- (9) Discrimination: The unfair treatment of different categories of people (based on age, sex, ethnicity, dis/ability, and more).

To view & download the full research report: <https://ancfsao.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/ANCFSAO-UofT-Improving-Housing-Outcomes-for-Indigenous-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Child-Wellbeing-and-Child-Welfare-to-Independent-Living.pdf>

