



# Understanding the Lack of Cultural Match Placements

For Inuit Children & Youth  
in Care in Ontario

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TUNGASUVVINGAT INUIT



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It is widely recognized that Indigenous children are best cared for by Indigenous communities. Bill C-92, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, came into law in 2019, with the goal of “keeping Indigenous children and youth connected to their families, communities, and culture.” (Indigenous Services Canada) The Ontario *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* (2017) requires that the Inuit Representative must be consulted throughout every stage of case planning for an Inuit child/youth, to align decision making with Inuit priorities[1]. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action* recognize that it is important to keep “Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Ontario falls outside of Inuit Nunangat[2], but is home to the largest diaspora population of Inuit in Canada (Canadian Geographic & Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018). Urban Inuit are vastly overrepresented in the Ontario child welfare system. In 2017, 38% of Inuit living in Ottawa reported child protection agency involvement with their families (Tungasuvvingat Inuit & Well Living House Action Research Centre, 2017). Yet, cultural match placements (Inuit family homes for Inuit children) remain the exception in Ontario child welfare practice. At present, there are only two known certified Inuit foster families within the province of Ontario.

In July 2020, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services announced a child welfare redesign strategy that focuses on prevention, early intervention, and seeking more permanent homes for children and youth in care when they cannot stay in their own homes or communities (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2020).



Map of Inuit Nunangat - [www.itk.ca](http://www.itk.ca)

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[1] On July 1, 2019, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) was listed as an Inuit community, meaning ITK is afforded certain rights and obligations with respect to notifications from Children Aid Societies/Child and Family Services agencies and participation in decision making and service planning for Inuit children and families in Ontario. ITK has designated Tungasuvvingat Inuit to be its representative further to the Child, Youth and Family Services Act and to receive notifications and participate in consultation and decision-making on its behalf as needed.

[2] Inuit homelands. The four regions of Inuit Nunangat in Canada are the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut.

The goal of Inuit child welfare reform should ideally be prevention: to keep Inuit children out of care through intensive preventative funding and supports (i.e., increased availability of subsidized housing and supportive family housing, wrap-around support models, culturally appropriate addictions supports, etc.).

However, the harms done to the Inuit family system during colonization, and the subsequent impact of intergenerational trauma on Inuit today, make the need for safe homes for Inuit children and youth a current reality. The focus of this report is the need for cultural match placements (Inuit homes) for those Inuit children and youth who cannot safely remain at home. This report examines three barriers to the availability of Inuit homes for Inuit children and youth in need of temporary or permanent care in Ontario. These barriers are: **(1) the context in which Inuit relate to the child welfare system, (2) the cultural inaccessibility of Ontario's foster care licensing criteria, and (3) the financial inequality Inuit caregiver homes experience as a result of the interplay of these first two barriers, in combination with the Ontario caregiver subsidy structure.** It aims to provide some recommendations for improving access to cultural match placements for Inuit children and youth.

## 1) THE CONTEXT IN WHICH INUIT RELATE TO THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

The devastating historical context of the child welfare system as one branch of colonization has been well established. With the arrival of whalers, fur traders, missionaries, and then the Canadian government within Inuit Nunangat, the social fabric of traditional life was dismantled. Disruption of nomadic lifestyles, contrived settlements, and forced relocations led to severe food insecurity and extensive changes to the structure of kinship networks (Canadian Geographic & Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018).



Missionary presence in communities, leading to the establishment of churches and day schools, resulted in sudden and traumatic rifts in Inuit cosmology and spirituality. Families were broken by the residential school system, the forced removal of children to tuberculosis sanatoriums in the south, and the non-consensual adoption of children by southern families. These policies led to language, culture and identity loss, mental health crises, and cycles of poverty, abuse and intergenerational trauma that continue to this day. *Interrupted Childhoods*, a report on Black and Indigenous overrepresentation in the Canadian child welfare system (2018), outlines the devastating impact this history continues to have on communities today:

*Canada's history of assimilationist policies, including residential schools, resulted in Indigenous children being uprooted from their families and communities and being disconnected from loving child-rearing practices, parental role models, their cultures and identity. These inequalities continued as residential schools began to close. Starting in the 1950s, child welfare authorities removed Indigenous children from their families and communities in great numbers. Known as the "Sixties Scoop," children were sent to be fostered or placed for adoption in mostly non-Indigenous families. Formal inquiries into these policies and practices have concluded that the residential school system and Sixties Scoop constituted forms of cultural genocide against Indigenous families and communities. . . . This history of oppression and the continued discrimination that Indigenous peoples face today has led to multiple negative social and economic disadvantages, such as low levels of education, high levels of unemployment, extreme levels of poverty, inadequate housing and health disparities. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018)*

As troubling and all-pervading as the historical context of child welfare is for Inuit society, we cannot ignore the complexity of the current dynamics between Inuit communities and child welfare bodies. It is necessary to recognize how current child welfare agency mandates, government policies, and provincial financial structures continue to contribute to the broken relationship between Inuit and the child welfare system.

So great is the cultural competency and language barrier between social workers and Inuit kin caregiver families that misunderstandings in basic logistical communications are still commonplace today. The 2016-2017 annual report by the Nunavut Representative of Children and Youth describes a case in which Inuit caregiver grandparents had no idea why a social worker had arrived at their home and removed their grandchild or whether he was ever to be returned. With the help of an advocacy specialist it was determined that a social worker who had recently checked in on the family caregiving arrangement had requested respite care for the grandparents without their knowledge, sending another worker

to pick up the child and bring him to a non-related foster home. It was three weeks before the grandparents were able to find out why the child had been removed and arrange to have him returned (Representative for Children and Youth, 2018).

Non-Inuit foster families in Nunavut communicated, in a 2012 report by Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre, that in order to help children and youth with the formation of their identities, they need formal culture and language training, which is not part of the current certification process for Nunavut foster parents. The report highlights the fact that many foster parents have recently arrived in Nunavut and have little experience with Inuit culture.

For Inuit in the Nunatsiavut region, there is such a dearth of foster homes within communities that children are sent to live in homes in southern Labrador, three-hour flights away from their families and home communities—continuing the era of forced displacement of Inuit children to southern communities. In Roddickton, foster care for Inuit children from Nunatsiavut communities has become a lifeline industry for a town which has few other economic options. As of 2017, CBC reported 45 foster homes in the town of 2000. The cost to the government of Newfoundland and Labrador to maintain this system is \$33,000 per child annually (Roberts, 2017).



Similarly, children and youth from the Nunavik region are frequently placed in homes in Montreal and other parts of southern Quebec because of a lack of foster and adoptive homes available in Nunavik communities. Return visits to parents and home communities are scheduled only twice a year due to distance and travel costs. A study of cultural dynamics in a Montreal group home serving Inuit youth from Nunavik found that the residential program was developed and staffed entirely by non-Inuit individuals (Fraser et al., 2015). When an Inuk "culture broker" was introduced to the home as part of the study, the youth "spoke about the desire to be surrounded by more Inuit staff—individuals who speak Inuktitut and can share traditional activities and the Inuit way. Not being understood by non-Inuktitut speaking staff created mounting frustration among the youths." (p. 44) They confided in the Inuk culture broker that "By far, the most difficult part of being at the residence was being away from family. Many youths felt guilt, sadness, or desperation at being far from family members." (p. 43)

Fifteen percent of Nunavut children and



youth in care (68 children and youth in 2018) live in southern Canada as well (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2018). This is largely a result of healthcare inequality, as there is a lack of access to medical treatment in the North. These children and youth are cared for in southern Canada in non-Inuit foster homes and supportive living or group homes, and their numbers are reflected only in Nunavut case counts of Inuit children in care because their care is contracted directly from the Government of Nunavut to privately run foster care agencies; they are not included in Ontario statistics tracking numbers of Inuit children and youth in care in the province.

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For Inuit from the Baffin Region of Nunavut, Ottawa is the gateway to the South, as the city links remote fly-in communities with southern Canada. Inuit have settled throughout rural and urban areas of Ontario, with Ottawa having the largest known population of Inuit outside Inuit Nunangat. For Ontario Urban Inuit the presence of non-Inuit families who are raising Inuit children is commonplace at community events. Parents pick children up from Inuit-specific programming—camps and Head Start programs and daycare—and find a disproportionate number of non-Inuit caregivers in the parking lot. Inuit parents attend children’s birthday parties where all children are Inuit but all other caregivers are not. There is a haunting sense in day-to-day life within Urban Inuit communities of a continuous stream of Inuit children being moved from Inuit homes into non-Inuit homes. Sometimes the child then disappears from community life, but in more “successful” arrangements the child continues to attend the same programming but arrives with different caregivers.



As this transfer of children is observed, Inuit families notice financial inequality at play. They see that non-Inuit foster families (and some non-Inuit adoptive families) are given a subsidy to care for Inuit children, while no such financial support is available to Inuit families who are struggling financially, even in cases where poverty played a factor in an apprehension. Similarly, foster families are given additional financial support when caring for a special needs or medically fragile child, but birth families

do not (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2018). When Inuit family members are identified as alternative caregivers for children and youth, arrangements are most often made by the local child welfare agency to approve the Inuit family as “kinship service” caregivers. This is a status of involvement that most agencies consider preferable, as it is least intrusive for the child/youth (not involving court applications or giving the child/youth an “in-care” status wherein an agency is granted care



and custody). It is also a care status that comes with no financial subsidy (as will be discussed in detail in section 3 of this report).

Low-income Inuit parents (69% of Inuit adults in Ottawa report an annual income of less than \$20,000 (Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2018)) rely on the Canada Child Benefit as a significant portion of their income, a benefit that is discontinued on the apprehension of children and youth. When low-income parents voluntarily agree to place their children in care temporarily while addressing concerns of a child welfare agency, they often do not realize that this significant portion of their income will be lost. Thus, housing and food insecurity drastically increases at a time when families are attempting to demonstrate an ability to provide a safe environment for their children, and voluntary short-term agreements can quickly escalate into court-ordered apprehensions.

Given both the historic and the current landscape of the child welfare system within Inuit communities, it is unreasonable to assume that Inuit families are prepared to trust and to partner with child welfare agencies. It is in this landscape that local child welfare agencies attempt to recruit Inuit families, asking them to consider taking the Ministry-approved[3] training to become certified foster homes—a process in which a social



*"69% of Inuit adults in Ottawa report an annual income of less than \$20,000"*

worker enters their home and assesses their strengths, weaknesses and suitability as a healthy family.

In order for child welfare agencies to even begin to recruit Inuit caregiving families, significant system changes would need to be created and implemented for a long enough period of time to impact outcomes and build a foundation of trust.

Alternatively, Inuit child welfare agencies would need to be created to begin the work of building new relationships with Inuit families that might lead to the certification of Inuit family caregivers down the road.

[3] Ontario's Ministry of Children, Communities and Social Services



## 2) THE CULTURAL INACCESSIBILITY OF ONTARIO'S FOSTER CARE LICENSING CRITERIA

Our current foster care system demonstrates, at its foundation, a cultural disconnect between Inuit and Euro-Canadian worldviews. Still partially rooted in Christian conceptions of charity, the public foster care system is based on the idea that families with greater resources will take in, and improve the lives of, children and youth from underprivileged backgrounds. This contrasts with Inuit conceptions of social equality and communal responsibility for childrearing, wherein the kinship network responds to a need as it arises. Becoming “certified” in advance of a need is not compatible with Inuit worldviews of time, community relationships and collective responsibility. Both these approaches show good will and desire to help children and youth in need, and this cultural contrast would not be at issue if it merely reflected two different social approaches to child welfare. However, the fact that the Ontario

licensing and funding structure for caregiving families reflects a Euro-Canadian approach to child welfare is problematic for the establishment of cultural match homes for Inuit children and youth in care.

The placement options for a child or youth in need of a safe home are varied. Foster care, with its complex licensing requirements and subsequent ample financial support, is only one placement option used by Ontario child welfare agencies. The least invasive care option is “kinship service,” wherein a family member, community member, or person otherwise known to the child volunteers to care for the child/youth. Such a placement is considered ideal for a child or youth who cannot remain at home. In addition to the obvious benefit of lessening upheaval for the child by placing them in a familiar home, the child/youth

is not in the care of the government (does not take on “in-care” status). The caregiver is not required to undergo Ministry standard licensing, but is assessed as a safe home through the much quicker and less invasive “place of safety” assessment instead. In many ways the kinship service option functions as a culturally accessible option for Inuit communities whereby a family or community member connected to a child/youth in need responds to that need as it arises. However, being unlicensed, kinship service homes do not qualify for the foster care subsidy; and other placement options that would qualify the care-giving home to receive the subsidy, like “kin in care” and “formal customary care” options, similarly require the completion of standard licensing.

For Inuit families the components of the Ontario caregiver certification model are culturally inappropriate to the point of being inaccessible. Because of the historic abuses and the continued overrepresentation of Inuit children in the child welfare system,

mistrust creates a significant barrier for prospective Inuit resource families to undergo the SAFE assessment (Structured Assessment Family Evaluation). While assessment workers may be well-intentioned, SAFE requires these workers to enter Indigenous family homes and ask them to divulge all personal and extended family traumas they have experienced, including all instances of addictions and abuse, knowing that workers have a “duty to report.” Caregivers are required to trust the social worker to receive this information without removing children from their home, or homes within their extended family network. The intent of the SAFE tool is to accurately identify areas of risk within families so that, if any are found, they can be addressed and mitigated before a child is placed in the home. For Inuit communities, where intergenerational trauma is ubiquitous, such an assessment tool forces individuals to re-live overwhelming numbers of traumas which they are still trying to survive.



The training piece of the certification program, the 27-hour PRIDE course (Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education), also poses significant barriers for many Inuit. Challenges include a lack of Indigenous instructors, highly sensitive topics (particularly given the Inuit experience with child welfare), and extensive cultural differences in learning and knowledge-sharing. Courses often take place within local agency buildings which many Inuit community members may not be able to enter without experiencing physical, mental or emotional trauma responses. PRIDE content is delivered through Euro-Canadian cultural norms typically practised in southern-Canadian education systems. It is theory-heavy, and relies on written more than oral knowledge transmission. The PRIDE curriculum presents Indigenous issues through a Euro-Canadian lens, and in addressing cultural differences between communities, focuses on “surface culture” (dance, music, dress, food) rather than “deep culture” (communication styles, behavioural expectations, attitudes towards elders, styles of learning). It presents healthy family and parenting models based on individualist norms (rather than collectivist), and normalizes the nuclear family over the extended kinship systems (Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2010).

*“...components of the Ontario caregiver certification model are culturally inappropriate to the point of being inaccessible.”*



In addition to PRIDE and SAFE, provincial certification requires caregiving families to complete extensive paperwork, child welfare checks and police record checks, to gather certified financial statements and doctor’s notes, and often to negotiate with landlords to make changes needed to meet the home safety requirement. Systems navigation is a common struggle for Urban Inuit as day-to-day life in northern Inuit communities requires significantly fewer bureaucratic processes. Inuit who move to Ottawa are often unprepared for the amount of administrative work required to live in an urban setting and may struggle with the practicalities of and rationale behind such systems.

In order to address similar problems of cultural inaccessibility within First Nations communities, the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario (ANCFSAO) developed the *Heart and Spirit: Indigenous Family Development and Assessment Program* in 2020 as an alternative certification option. The program, which has been approved by the Ministry as an alternative licensing option, “incorporates fundamental Indigenous values and perspectives, honours and respects Aboriginal traditions, practices and learning styles, [and was] developed within an Indigenous context.” (Hill & Borau, 2021) ANCFSAO describes the three strands of the *Heart and Spirit* program as “helping caregivers on the healing journey, supporting caregivers to increase their parenting skills and capacity, [and] assessing the suitability of the caregiver and their home as a safe place for a child.” (Hill & Borau, 2021)



Recognizing the distinctness of each First Nation in Ontario, ANCFSAO offers to work with local community members to tailor the program contents and delivery to the specific culture of each local Indigenous community. While the program shows promise for improving Ministry certification of First Nations caregiver homes, it is not rooted in Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit<sup>[4]</sup>, Inuit history, or Inuit cosmology. Because of the distinctness of Inuit culture among Canadian Indigenous peoples, no amount of tailoring within the program would sufficiently address Inuit cultural modes of knowing. From the Inuit perspective it therefore unfortunately represents another culturally inappropriate route to Ministry certification, even though it is presented in Ministry documents as an alternative option for First Nations, Inuit and Métis families (CW 003-20).

[4] traditional Inuit knowledge and epistemology

Inuuqatigiit specifies the harmful but common practice within child welfare programs of amalgamating Inuit with First Nations and Métis communities with regard to assumptions about history, cultural values, and practices:

*For those child welfare organizations serving Inuit children and families, it is critically important that the uniqueness of Inuit history and culture be recognized as distinct from First Nations and Métis communities. While these peoples share some common experiences, their history and cultural traditions are quite distinct. The current focus on child welfare's reconciliation with Indigenous peoples must avoid the assumption that approaches adapted for First Nations families (a much larger community) will be suitable for Inuit. However, many mainstream service providers take a "pan-Aboriginal" approach, often rooted in First Nations' traditions that are irrelevant to the Inuit. (Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre, 2018)*

If an alternative, culturally appropriate certification program was to be created through which Inuit caregiving families could demonstrate that they adequately meet Ministry licensing criteria, it would go a long way towards removing barriers to the creation of Inuit foster homes. Parenting programs that address Inuit perspectives on childrearing, child development, healing, identity and returning to cultural knowledge frameworks already exist within Inuit communities and could serve as a basis for program creation—most notably the Inunnguiniq Parenting Program, which is already in use by Inuit community organizations in Ontario.

### **3) FINANCIAL INEQUALITY AND THE ONTARIO CAREGIVER SUBSIDY STRUCTURE**

The financial structure currently utilized by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and its child welfare agencies in Ontario maintains the status quo: mainstream certified non-Inuit foster families continue to serve Inuit children and youth. These caregiver families undergo the intensive educational and assessment (PRIDE and SAFE) licensing requirements and receive the caregiver subsidy. But the PRIDE and SAFE programs remain culturally incompatible for Inuit families and so the subsidy remains out of reach. If the Government of Ontario is truly seeking to improve outcomes for Inuit families by placing children and youth in care within cultural match placements, it is imperative to re-examine this structure.

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## KINSHIP SERVICE

The kinship service model is held up as the ideal placement option by child welfare agencies because it meets two sought-after criteria for Inuit children:

(1) It keeps Inuit children out of the court system and prevents “in-care” status (and since the child is not “in-care” in the kinship service model the timelines to permanency<sup>[5]</sup> are not activated). Considering the historical trauma around Inuit child welfare and the current overrepresentation of Inuit children in care, it is of vital interest to all involved to keep Inuit children out of the care of the government wherever possible.

(2) It keeps Inuit children within Inuit families and communities, maintaining kin ties and protecting cultural identity. It respects traditional childcare practices in which it is customary to care for a child from within one’s kin network when needed. Inuit service organizations support the kin placement option as well: “When an Inuk child or youth needs to be brought into care, every effort should be made to find a placement within the Inuit community in collaboration with an Inuit Service partner organization. The approach to kin placements and related practices (e.g. Family Finding) should reflect the broader concept of family within the Inuit community.” (Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre, 2018)



As outlined in the previous section of this report, Inuit families face significant cultural barriers in meeting Ministry standard education and assessment criteria, and another benefit of the kinship service option is that no such certification is required for a family to be approved by the local child welfare agency. When parents consent to place a child/youth in a kinship home, a minimal “place of safety” assessment is undertaken which involves a short interview and observation in the caregiver home by a social worker, as well as the completion of the home safety checklist, and multiple records checks. While the benefits of kinship service

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[5] Children with in-care status are subject to a maximum time in care of 1 year (for under 7 years old) or 2 years (for older children and youth) before the agency who is responsible for their care is mandated to seek extended society care, usually involving termination of parental rights in order to seek “permanency” for the child/youth. The rationale for this timeline is meant to be protective, ensuring that children/youth don’t get “trapped” in the system, moving through multiple temporary homes or growing up with a sense of uncertainty about the future. The timelines are cumulative over the child’s life, not continuous (ie. the time in care is not restarted but continues to be calculated for a youth who is moved between their family home and foster care multiple times). These “timelines” are frequently criticized by Indigenous child welfare advocates as being too short to allow birth parents adequate time for sufficient healing considering the complexities of intergenerational trauma.

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placements are great, the placements are also notoriously difficult to find and maintain, even with the help of agency “family finding” resources and supporting Inuit community organizations. Many Inuit families struggle financially as a result of lack of education and employment rooted in hundreds of years of colonization, forced relocation and trauma; and the kinship service option comes with very limited financial support. This lack of funding makes it impossible for many Inuit extended family members to fill the role of caregiver when a child or youth is in need of a safe home. In a 2017 survey of Urban Inuit living in Ottawa conducted by Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 69% of Inuit adults in Ottawa reported an annual income of less than \$20,000, 20% reported living in overcrowded housing, and 29% reported times that they could not afford to eat healthy food (Tungasuvvingat Inuit & Well Living House Action Research Centre, 2017).

Kin families who depend on Ontario Works social assistance may be eligible to receive \$274 in monthly benefits for the first child and \$224 for each additional child. Depending on the length of the kin arrangement, caregiver families may be eligible to collect the Canada Child Benefit on behalf of each child or youth. Additionally, some changes in the Ontario Child Welfare Redesign Strategy in 2021 allow for families to access a one-time support payment of up to \$1000 to prepare their home to meet safety guidelines and an additional \$1000 “annually to provide additional supports, such as clothing, recreation, school materials” (O Reg 156/18).

These minimal supports contrast sharply with the monthly subsidies of approximately \$900 - \$3000 per child/youth received by certified foster parents (these rates vary by local agency and by age of the child/youth). Depending on local agency guidelines, certified foster parents may also receive additional financial support for holidays, birthdays, seasonal clothing, extracurricular activities, learning or therapeutic supports, daycare costs, transportation, and extra monthly allowance for medically fragile children and those with special needs.

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, in their 2018 report on the current state of Inuit and the child welfare system, state that “Financial supports are not afforded to [Inuit] family members who may be willing and able to provide immediate and/or long term supports. Families are expected to act and take on the additional burden of costs of raising the child. For many, this is a deterrent as they are living day-to-day, with very little money (many with none) to spare.” (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2018, p. 6) When there are no available kin to care for a child or youth then child welfare agencies are forced to take that child into care and place them with a Ministry-certified foster family—in almost all cases a non-Inuit family—who is eligible to receive the monthly subsidy for each child and youth. Unless significant funding is made available to support kinship service families, it is not realistic to expect Inuit families to be able to fill the kinship service role.

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## CUSTOMARY CARE

“Customary care” is a commonly confused term with regard to Indigenous children and Canadian child welfare systems. For clarity this report uses the term “formal customary care” to refer to the legal right of Indigenous children in Ontario to be cared for by their home communities. This practice is also referred to simply as “customary care” within Canadian child welfare. However, it is often used interchangeably with “custom adoption” which refers to the recognition of traditional Indigenous systems of adoption (also referred to as “customary adoption” by some First Nations). It is likewise frequently confused with the colloquial use of the term “customary care” which can refer to any kind of traditional childcare arrangements in which an Indigenous child may be informally cared for within a web of kinship ties.

Section 80 of Ontario’s Child, Youth and Family Services Act requires societies to make “all reasonable efforts to pursue a plan for customary care” where a First Nations, Inuit or Métis child is in need of protection. However, a formal customary care option is not yet available for Inuit in Ontario. The possibility of the establishment by Inuit governance (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in partnership with Land Claims Organizations) of a formal customary care option for Ontario Inuit children and youth would be a promising alternative to placing children “in-care”.

The potential approval of formal customary care for Ontario Inuit is presented here as a contrasting alternative to “kinship service” that has the potential to remedy the lack of financial support in the kinship service model. Yet it is still a problematic option in terms of engaging Inuit families. A major obstacle to the certification of Inuit caregiver homes would persist in the event that formal customary care in its current form were approved for Ontario Inuit families. Because the current Ministry standards require formal customary care families to undergo the same education and assessment benchmarks as mainstream Ontario foster families, cultural inaccessibility would still pose a major barrier to participation by Inuit families.



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Formal customary care has several benefits:

(1) It does not place a child into care. Children and youth remain in their community while a service provider (the local child welfare agency) supports the logistics of the placement. Because the child does not have in-care status the “timeline” to permanency/termination of parental rights does not apply, thus allowing parents a longer healing process which may be needed to address the complexities of intergenerational trauma that may lead to eventual reunification of the family.

(2) It is in harmony with customary Inuit social structures: “An underlying principle of customary care is that the responsibility for the care and safety of children is a collective responsibility that extends beyond the immediate and extended family to the community as a whole.” (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013, p.18)

(3) Caregivers are provided with the full foster care subsidy.

The unfortunate drawback to the potential use of a formal customary care option is that the Ministry requires formal customary caregivers to complete all standard licensing training and assessment requirements. A successful formal customary care model would need



to be applied in tandem with an alternative culturally-accessible licensing process (an Inuit alternative to PRIDE and SAFE). Given the fraught historic and current context of child welfare within Inuit communities, safe spaces would need to be created to undertake this alternative assessment and training. It is likely that, in order for such an alternative program to be successful, Inuit support workers would need to be present any time local child welfare agencies interact with caregiving families, and all parties would need to make use of neutral physical spaces (i.e., not requiring Inuit caregiving families to enter local child welfare agency buildings for training, and avoiding social worker presence in the family home as much as possible).

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## CONCLUSION

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls on federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to provide “adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015)

The Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services is putting Inuit families in an impossible position by requiring caregiving families who wish to care for children in their kinship network to choose between a rock and a hard place: undergoing an extensive culturally-inaccessible certification procedure or having financial support withheld. Too often in Ontario we see this conundrum result in a lack of cultural match placements for Inuit children and youth.

Considering the context of displacement, trauma and poverty in which Inuit child welfare sits, and the role that federal, territorial and provincial governments have played in creating this context, it is time for the Ministry to re-examine funding and licensing structures for Inuit caregiving families. This is not a new idea. In the creation of Bill C-92 and Jordan’s Principle/Child First Initiative, the Government of Canada acknowledged the spirit of substantive equality, saying, “Substantive equality is the recognition that not all people start off from the same position and that these unequal opportunities make it more difficult for some to be successful. Treating everyone the same is only fair if they are starting from the same position.” (Government of Canada, 2019) If we are to keep Inuit children and youth in Inuit homes, the Government of Ontario must meet Inuit communities where they are with pragmatism, creativity, and a willingness to find new solutions.





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