



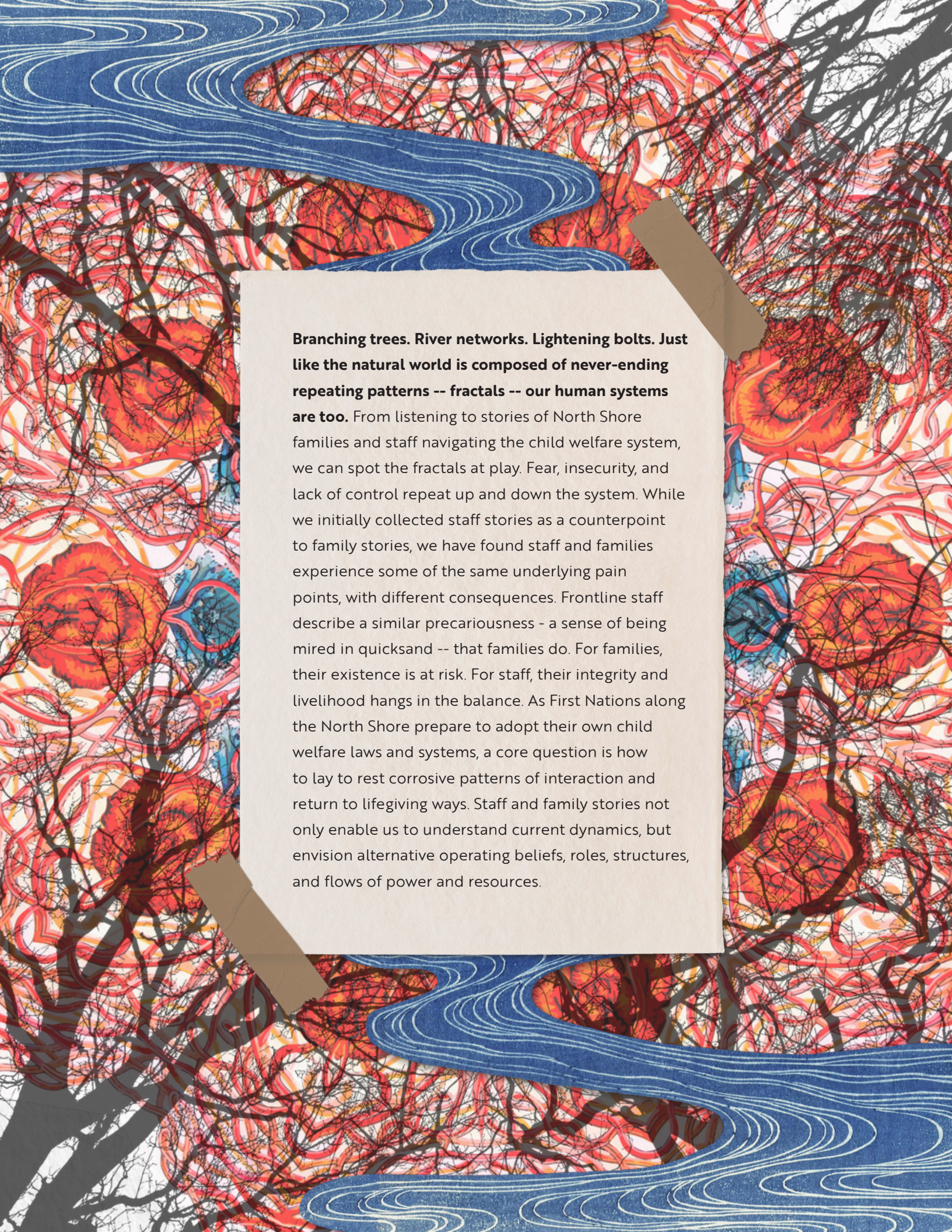
an ethnographic deep dive into the experiences of child welfare staff
in 5 Indigenous communities along the North Shore

Research by:



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Branching trees. River networks. Lightning bolts. Just like the natural world is composed of never-ending repeating patterns -- fractals -- our human systems are too. From listening to stories of North Shore families and staff navigating the child welfare system, we can spot the fractals at play. Fear, insecurity, and lack of control repeat up and down the system. While we initially collected staff stories as a counterpoint to family stories, we have found staff and families experience some of the same underlying pain points, with different consequences. Frontline staff describe a similar precariousness - a sense of being mired in quicksand -- that families do. For families, their existence is at risk. For staff, their integrity and livelihood hangs in the balance. As First Nations along the North Shore prepare to adopt their own child welfare laws and systems, a core question is how to lay to rest corrosive patterns of interaction and return to lifegiving ways. Staff and family stories not only enable us to understand current dynamics, but envision alternative operating beliefs, roles, structures, and flows of power and resources.

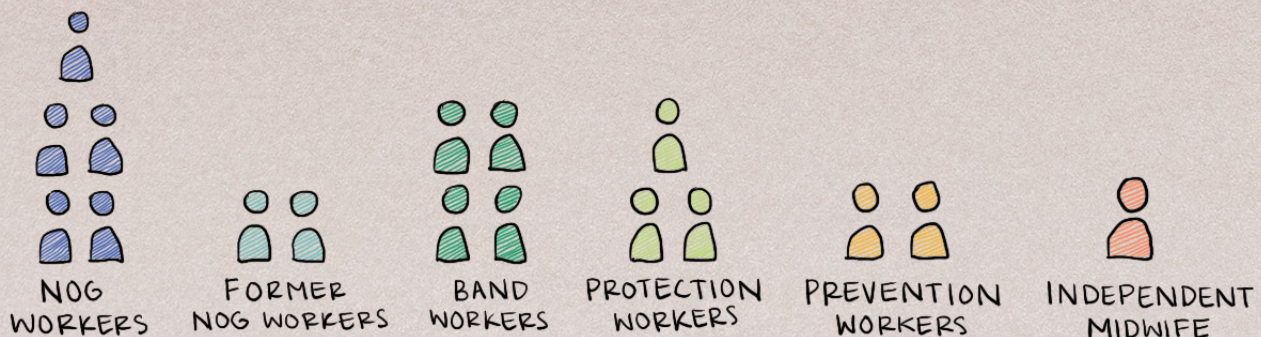
Setting the scene

Family and staff stories of child welfare are inextricably linked. Over two years of story gathering with families as part of the North Shore Tribal Council's Koognaasewin Initiative to reclaim First Nation rights and jurisdiction over child welfare, we've seen family-staff relationships rooted in mutual respect, openness, and growth and those embroiled in mistrust, obfuscation, and conflict. Too often, families and staff come to treat each other as adversaries. We wanted to understand how staff experience their role and relationships, and the ways in which they navigate the system of which they are so often the face. Ultimately, to bring to life a child wellbeing law and system grounded in Anishinaabe values, the people who make up this new system will have to inhabit different ways of thinking, being, and relating.

Many families and staff recount being here before. In 2017, when Nogdawindamin assumed responsibility as the designated child welfare authority for the North Shore First Nations, hopes were high that an Indigenous-led agency could usher in different ways of thinking, being, and relating. Hamstrung by provincial legislation and capacity shortages, Nogdawindamin rehired workers from existing Children's Aid Societies. For all the desire for root and branch change, underlying mental models, belief systems, habits, and decision-making logics are stubborn. While the Koognaasewin Initiative is working to establish its own legislation, community capacity to attract, competitively pay, and retain good staff remains challenging. It is likely that many of Nogdawindamin's existing staff will work under the new Koognaasewin laws and systems. How, then, might we learn from staff's experiences, pain points, needs, and hopes? What might it take for communities to cultivate the conditions for managers, staff, and families to be in collaborative versus adversarial relationships with one another?

Who we met

In this wrapper, you will find shared pain points, themes, and early opportunity areas that have emerged from listening to ten staff stories. Here's an overview of the staff we met from accross 5 communities



What our process looked like

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REACHING OUT

We recruited staff via word of mouth and connections through Koognaasewin team members.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Many staff were apprehensive to talk. Permission from managers did not quell their anxiety. Setting up story gathering as a confidential experience from the start might have helped.

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We developed a moments dice, card decks, calendar tools, and future prompts to explore staff journeys, what a day in their life looks like, the relationship between their personal and professional values, and what weighs them down versus lifts them up.



TOOL DEVELOPMENT

WHAT WE LEARNED

Tool use varied widely. Some staff were resistant to the use of prompts and wanted to retain more control over the process. Others found the prompts cathartic and introspective.

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STORY LISTENING

We met staff for a conversation where they felt most at ease -- from Tim Horton's to diners to offices. Conversations unfolded over several hours.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Spending time with people in context is key to our story gathering approach. For privacy reasons, staff were reluctant to have us shadow them. This meant much of our conversation unfolded in a non-work space.

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We transcribed our notes, highlighted key quotes, and composed a narrative to capture each staff member's perspective.

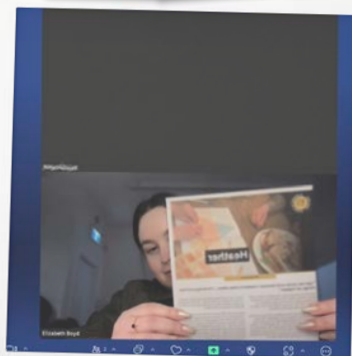


STORY WRITING

WHAT WE LEARNED

Given the sensitivity with individual stories, we could develop a range of other share back products: including quotes without any contextual details and testimonial theater scripts.

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STORY RETURN

We tried to reconnect with each staff member to share back their story, solicit feedback, make edits, and gain consent. Follow-up was incredibly challenging.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Staff face significant time pressure. Turnover is also high. Reducing the time between story gathering and return might have increased our return rate. Perhaps inviting staff to a more explicitly therapeutic or ceremonial experience would have helped too.

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Given the high rate of withdrawn stories, we have developed an alternative product: personas. Personas are a form of creative non-fiction: they are a composite, drawing on quotes and experiences from multiple staff.



PERSONA DEVELOPMENT

WHAT WE LEARNED

In the future, we might use creative non-fiction methods right from the start, working with staff to create their own persona that can reflect their experiences without revealing personal details.

Common themes



WORK IS PERSONAL

Everyone we spoke to, regardless of whether they work for their band or Nogdawindamin, deeply cares about the work they do. Working in child welfare is hard, that everyone agrees on. What drives people to show up for work is a deep commitment to child wellbeing, often born out of their own experiences growing up. For staff who identify as Indigenous and who work for their home community, that sense of personal responsibility intensifies. And yet, professional codes of conduct leave little room

for developing discernment, good judgement, or adopting a more relational ethic of care. Instead, decision-making often pits workers against family and community members, unable to recognize the many hats workers wear. **How might the field of relational ethics, which eschews one-size fits all policies, be one basis for organizational decision-making going forward?**



DUAL ROLES

Many staff expressed the desire to become alternative care providers, but worry that the double role might be interpreted as a liability to manage. Staff who have taken on a double role say that despite their unique vantage point and plenty of ideas for improving the system, they are often sidelined and assumed to have 'biased' motives. **How might a new system welcome and leverage people's personal stake in child welfare? What could it look like to create explicit roles for staff with dual perspectives so they can shape policy and practice?**



CHILDREN VERSUS PARENTS

While staff shared a similar desire to look after the needs of children in their communities, they held very different perceptions of the needs and capabilities of parents. Staff in child facing roles were much more likely to express skepticism about parents' desire and capacity for change. One long-time staff member had been part of only one successful reunification. Without firsthand experience or stories of parental growth, it's easy for negative narratives about parents to take hold. The expectation becomes that parents will fail. The way child protection roles are structured can exacerbate this factionalized view. **How might the new system adopt a team-based organizing structure?** In

such a structure, two or more workers might be

connected to an extended family unit and have a collective aim to strengthen family wellbeing, rather than simply to represent individual interests.



VALUES DISCONNECT

Staff named honesty, integrity, and trust as core personal values. Interestingly, nobody identified these as their organization's core values, regardless of whether they were working for their band or Nogdawindamin. Accountability and compliance were frequently selected as core organizational values. Workers don't equate their sense of accountability to higher-ups, and the rules, as an expression of honesty and integrity in their workplace. **How might a new law & system codify the idea of accountability down to community and families, not only up the line to leadership?**



READINESS GAPS

Most staff expressed anxiety about a new law and system, not because they didn't see a need for independence from provincial legislation, but because they doubted the readiness of communities to run that new system. They were well aware of current hiring and retention issues, and worried communities would fare even worse in attracting and supporting staff. Because of the heaviness of child welfare work, organizational culture must be healthy enough to foster openness, honesty, and learning versus fear, shame, and reactivity. That wasn't always people's experiences with band governance.

Until the gap between where bands are and where they might need to be can be talked about in the open, without concern of reprisal, staff felt uneasy about how a transition to local governance would actually play out. **How might communities set-up change circles to host open dialogues with both band and agency child welfare staff and collectively shape the culture of the new system?**

Shared pain points



JOB INSECURITY

Staff working for Nogdawindamin expressed a shared fear about saying the wrong thing, being called into a manager's office, and losing their job. The fear of upsetting people in charge came up repeatedly. So many staff have witnessed colleagues let go with little explanation. In a system that prizes compliance, and perhaps silence, there is no room for vulnerability. Honesty and shared vulnerability are what both staff and families crave.

How might a new system cleanse itself of fear and set-up more restorative and less punitive internal practices?



SYSTEM CRITIQUE HURTS

Everyone we spoke to attested to putting their full selves into the work they do. Reading family stories and listening to their critiques of the system or a particular worker was difficult for most. It wasn't that they didn't share a critique of the system, but that the constraints they operated under weren't always understood. That, and accepting families' truths and their own truths might diverge was unsettling! Because there aren't proactive feedback loops in place between families and staff, there isn't a practice of listening to and jointly processing the differing experiences of system stakeholders. **How might a new system establish regular feedback loops between staff and families including soliciting stories, hosting learning circles, and having joint training to hone open communication?**



DYSFUNCTIONAL TEAMS

Band office, prevention, and protection workers alike shared that messy politics and dysfunctional team dynamics are one of the biggest stressors in their work. Those who have experienced good team dynamics report feeling more motivated to take on difficult work and express huge appreciation for the supportive environment they get to work in. **How could a new system identify the healthy teams already in place and leverage their know-how?**



OVERWHELMING WORKLOADS

Staff would like to focus their energy on children and families, but find that the volume of paperwork and tickbox tasks pull them away from direct service. This can result in an overwhelming workload and burnout. Many staff described a range of physical ailments -- from headaches to stomach pains -- arising from their work. **How might a new system invest in staff care through mechanisms like rotations, healing fellowships, and the re-valuing of work that directly benefits families?**



LACK OF ACCEPTANCE

Staff who work for their home community, but either live outside their reserve or have been gone from their home community for many years express an especially strong desire to contribute, be accepted, and feel a sense of belonging that may have been disrupted by their own lived experience of addiction, absence from community of origin, and intergenerational trauma. Staff who work outside of institutional services, in more informal ways, find there is little formal recognition of their skillset. **How might the new system create rituals for staff and families to reconnect to and learn about their communities?**

Opportunity areas

One of the goals of story gathering is to understand 'what is' in order to generate ideas for 'what could be.' When it comes to building a child wellbeing system, grounded in Anishinaabe values and directed by the needs of each community, there are almost endless opportunities to co-create new practices, policies, roles, training, and organizing structures with both staff and families. Here are some of the opportunities that emerged in conversation with staff:

NEW POLICIES & PRACTICES

Tik Tok Doc

Redundant paperwork was one of staff's top pain points. What if a new system re-conceptualized paperwork as storytelling, and enabled staff and youth to make videos/audio recordings to capture what mattered to them? How could more 'tik-tok style' documentation better reflect the needs, wants, and realities on-the-ground?

Policy Circles

How might an Anishinaabe-led system develop a much more ground-up process for policy development? Staff and families might have to ratify new policies, and/or, could be randomly selected to form a circle to co-design a particular policy.

Accountability Circles

What if, once a month, system leadership were to report back to a community accountability circle? Members of the circle would be appointed randomly and would rotate every three months to make sure the whole of the community is being represented.

Reweighting Risk Assessment

The current child welfare system treats risk as one-sided: it comes from family, not the system. What if the future system took into account the risk of harm inflicted by system intervention? And, what if there was a way to balance risk with families' willingness to change?

Team Kiddos

Just like there is team teaching at some schools, how might there be a team-based approach to supporting children in care? Perhaps it's not reasonable to expect one CIC worker to be all things to a child, so how might children be encircled by more of a care team, with informal and formal supports woven together, where children can call/text their network rather than just a single individual?.

NEW ROLES & WAYS OF ORGANIZING

Change Cohorts

Most staff feel a little unsettled by the upcoming changes to the child welfare system. What if, during this transition period, staff could apply to join a 'Change cohort' where, in small groups, they explore tensions inherent with change, reflect on their own identity, and imagine alternative roles they could play?

Dual Role Descriptions

A handful of staff are both Alternative Care workers and providers. These staff see their dual role as a liability, rather than an asset. How might the system intentionally create hybrid formal-informal roles, and tap into the wisdom of people playing both roles as part of policy & practice development?

Community Mobilizers

Fostering family wellbeing in communities will take both formal and informal supports. Going forward, how might the new system have roles that are community facing (rather than just client facing), where they work to mobilize people who want to be part of collectively raising the next generation of Anishinaabe children? These roles would work at a street level.

Neighbourhood Based Supports

What if supports were place based, rather than case based? Instead of workers being assigned to case files, they would be assigned to neighbourhoods and their role would be to build up formal and informal supports around families. Rather than spending so much time driving between houses, and having so many different workers service the same house, the focus would shift to very localized care.

UNDERPINNED BY ANISHINAABE WAYS OF THINKING, BEING, & RELATING

Proposed next steps

WHAT'S RECOMMENDED NEXT?	PURPOSE	WHAT MIGHT THIS LOOK LIKE?
Share back learnings from staff ethnographies with Technical Committee	<i>To share staff's perspectives with community leadership and test if communities are interested in continuing to involve staff in the development of the new system?</i>	<i>Sharing persona cards and themes with the committee in a reading circle, offering space for reactions, and ideas.</i>
Co-design sessions between staff and families	<i>To test: Can we bring families and staff together to learn from each other, hear each other out, and flesh out what a new policy, practice, and role could look like that is jointly developed?</i>	<i>Facilitating a meal between staff and families to listen to each other's perspectives and build trust.</i>
Collaborate with specific communities ready to put opportunities into action	<i>To try out new practices, policies, and/or roles on a small scale. For instance, we could take an idea like Tik Tok Doc and work with staff and any young people they support to mock-up a new reporting format.</i>	<i>Working with families and staff from one specific community to co-design new roles and test them out on a small scale.</i>



This story gathering & engagement approach is a partnership between IW F and Koognaasewin, with support from the NSTC and First Nations.