
CHAPTER 5

The Journey of the Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority: Serving Alberta's Métis Settlement Children, Youth, and Families

Shane R. Gauthier and Lillian Parenteau

This chapter provides an overview of the unique journey of the Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority in Alberta. This Authority serves the child, youth, and family needs of Alberta's Métis Settlements. The chapter outlines the origins of the Métis Settlements, the legislation governing them, Métis Settlements governance, and the creation of the Métis Settlements Child and Family Service Authority. The current role of the Authority is then briefly described, including its joint initiative with the Edmonton Region.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MÉTIS SETTLEMENTS

Alberta's Métis Settlements were created in 1938 under the *Métis Population Betterment Act*, later renamed the *Métis Betterment Act* (see Métis Settlements General Council, 2005-2006 for a brief histo-

Copyright © 2007 Ivan Brown, Ferzana Chaze, Don Fuchs, Jean Lafrance, Sharon McKay, and Shelley Thomas Prokop

Suggested citation: Gauthier, S., & Parenteau, L. (2007). The journey of the Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority: Serving Alberta's Métis settlement children, youth and families. In I. Brown, F. Chaze, D. Fuchs, J. Lafrance, S. McKay, & S. Thomas Prokop (Eds.), *Putting a human face on child welfare: Voices from the Prairies* (pp. 115-126). Prairie Child Welfare Consortium www.uregina.ca/spr/prairechild/index.html / Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare www.cecw-cepb.ca

ry). The 12 Settlements created were (Heritage Community Foundation, n.d.):

- Big Prairie (Peavine),
- Caslan (south of Lac La Biche),
- Cold Lake,
- East Prairie (south of Lesser Slave Lake),
- Elizabeth (east of Elk Point),
- Fishing Lake,
- Gift Lake (or Utikuma),
- Kikino (originally called Beaver River or Goldfish Lake),
- Paddle Prairie (or Keg River),
- Touchwood,
- Marlboro, and
- Wolf Lake (north of Bonnyville).

The intent behind creating the Settlement Associations and their elected Boards was for the government of Alberta and Settlements to work together to improve the living conditions in a variety of ways. Over time, however, this goal was not met in a substantial way for three reasons. First, amendments to the Act in 1940 established additional provincial government control, which resulted in the planned Settlement Associations not being developed, and considerably less voice for the Métis. Second, despite financial help for infrastructure advances in the Settlements (such as roads, houses, and schools), economic conditions developed very slowly or, in some Settlements, worsened. For the most part, Settlement people relied on farming, hunting, and fishing for sustenance. Third, in 1952, the *Métis Betterment Act* was amended, allowing Settlement Associations to elect only two of the five-member Settlement Board. The other three were appointed by the Alberta government. As a consequence, four Settlements failed, and their settlement status was rescinded: Touchwood (1940), Marlboro (1941), Cold Lake (1956), Wolf Lake (1960). The remaining eight Settlements continued to exist.

For the 30 years following 1960, continuing difficulties failed to be resolved. Poverty and ongoing lack of development were serious concerns, exacerbated by the fact that the Settlements had no effective voice in local government. A 1972 task force recommended, among

other things, the removal of boundaries around the Settlements, hoping perhaps to mitigate isolation as a factor contributing to Settlement poverty. The Settlements did not agree with this recommendation, and formed the Alberta Federation of Métis Settlements as a structure through which they might act (Heritage Community Foundation, n.d.).

Métis Settlements Legislation

The government of Alberta and the Alberta Federation of Métis Settlements established an agreement, known as the *Alberta Métis Settlements Accord*, on July 1, 1989. This Accord resulted in Alberta becoming the first province in Canada to pass legislation specifically for Métis people. The legislation "was created in an effort to accommodate Métis aspirations of securing their land base, gaining local autonomy, and achieving self-sufficiency" (Government of Alberta, 2003).

There are four separate Acts in this unique legislation:

- *Métis Settlements Act* (Government of Alberta, 2007a) provides a framework for central and local governance and establishes the Métis Settlements Appeals Tribunal, the Métis Settlements Land Registry, and the Métis Settlements Ombudsman. It also contains a schedule that allows the General Council to participate—up to 25%—in oil and gas activities on the Métis Settlements.
- *Métis Settlements Land Protection Act* (Government of Alberta, 2007b) ratifies the grant of letters patent to the General Council, sets rules against alienating Settlement lands—including rules against granting mortgages, and provides control over access to Settlement lands to the General Council and Settlement Councils.
- *Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act, 1990* (Government of Alberta, 2007c) is the only amendment in the history of Alberta's Constitution. The Act recognizes that the Métis people were present when the Province of Alberta was established, that Settlement lands need to be protected by the Constitution of Canada, and provides procedural

protections from taking back Settlements lands, or from dissolving the General Council.

- *Métis Settlements Accord Implementation Act* (Government of Alberta, 2007d) sets out how the monies from the settlement of the oil and gas lawsuit are to be applied over a 17-year period.

In 1998, the *Métis Settlements Statutes Amendment Act* was enacted to simplify and clarify implementation of the 1990 legislation.

Together, these pieces of legislation accomplished three goals (Government of Alberta, 2003):

- 1.25 million acres (505,857 hectares) of land were constitutionally protected for Alberta's Métis Settlements.
- Local governments were established.
- The Province of Alberta is committed to financial support (currently \$10 million per year, with annual reviews to examine financial need).

Métis Settlements Governance

The *Métis Settlements Act* established eight Métis Settlements in Alberta: Buffalo Lake, East Prairie, Elizabeth, Fishing Lake, Gift Lake, Kikino, Paddle Prairie, and Peavine. The membership of each Settlement elects a five-person Settlement Council, which in turn selects a chairperson to administer its affairs (Government of Alberta, 2003).

Bylaws for each settlement must be approved by its members. Settlements Councils are responsible for determining the membership of, and land allocations within, their settlements. Settlement Councils can also make bylaws provided that they do not contravene any provincial laws or General Council policies (Government of Alberta, 2003).

The Métis Settlements General Council (MSGC) was created under the *Métis Settlements Act* (1990). The elected councillors of all eight Métis Settlements make up the MSGD, which then elects a four-person executive. The role of the MSGC is to address issues that pertain to the well-being of all Settlements. According to

Government of Alberta sources (2003), the MSGD creates policies "in consultation with the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Policies dealing with hunting, fishing, gathering, and trapping must be approved by the Lieutenant Governor in Council."

Formation of the Métis Settlement Child and Family Services Authority

In the early 1990s, the Government of Alberta held a provincial consultation to redesign services to children and families. The Métis Settlements recognized in this a rare opportunity to advocate for the establishment of an Aboriginal Authority, dedicated to providing supports and services to the Métis Settlement children, youth, and families. The process involved community members as well as local and provincial Métis leaders. In November 1997, the General Council and all the residents of the Métis Settlements unanimously passed a resolution, which was subsequently forwarded to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, stating that land-based Métis people wished to provide supports and services to their families through their own Authority. A formal service plan was developed and the communities and Métis Settlement leaders acted as one voice to lobby for their own Authority. The Alberta government enacted the *Child and Family Services Authorities Act* in 1999, which established 10 Authorities for the province (see Government of Alberta, 2007e for additional details and maps of the areas covered by the 10 Authorities). One of those was the Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA) Region 10 (hereafter referred to as Region 10 CFSA), which serves all of the residents of the eight Métis Settlements.

Each Regional Authority is led by a community board, whose members are chosen from the community and appointed by Alberta's Minister of Children's Services. The community members serving on this board provide strong leadership and work closely with communities in the region. The board's policies and decisions are implemented by Region 10 CFSA's chief executive officer, who also manages the daily operations of the CFSA and ensures the regional system runs effectively.

Each Child and Family Services Authority:

- assesses needs, sets priorities, plans, allocates resources, and manages the provision of services to children, families, and other community members in the region;
- ensures that children and families have reasonable access to quality services;
- ensures that provincial policies and standards are followed in the region; and
- monitors and assesses the provision of child and family services.

Development Challenges for Region 10 CFSA

Prior to the establishment of Region 10 CFSA, the Métis Settlements had never provided their own child and family support and intervention services. Rather, they had been in a position of relying on outside agencies or the Alberta government. As a consequence, Settlement residents knew very little about the nature of these services, and many held the perception that social workers came only to remove children from the Settlements.

The Settlements were responsible for providing the same level of services and supports as Alberta's other Authorities, but, initially at least, they were ill-equipped to do so. Many Settlements are located in isolated areas of northern Alberta and had little in the way of infrastructure to support communications and administration. The challenge was to provide child welfare services without office space for social workers, and with little or no technological support. In response, Region 10 embarked on a partnership with Alberta Infrastructure and Transportation on the eight Métis Settlements to create family centres, a one-stop-place where families could receive a variety of integrated services, including at least a health nurse and a social worker (Government of Alberta, 2005).

Like many other Aboriginal communities, Region 10 was challenged by a historical mistrust of government and social services. Region 10 decided to engage the Settlements in a dialogue designed to foster trust, one family at a time. To do this, it adopted values and actions designed to demonstrate to Métis Settlement children and

The Journey of the Métis Settlements CFS Authority

families the attitudes necessary for engaging people and to open doors for meaningful work. These two principle values and actions are: gaining and maintaining the trust of the community; and helping families rather than separating children from them. In this way, the Region 10 CFSA gradually built trust and demonstrated integrity.



Figure 1.
Reprinted with permission from the Métis Settlement General Council.

Another key challenge was the geographic location of the Settlements. The eight Métis Settlements are located throughout northern Alberta from the Saskatchewan border in eastern Alberta to the far northwest corner of the province. They are situated within two other Child and Family Service Authorities (7 and 8) that serve the general population (see Figure 1). This provided an opportunity to build and strengthen partnerships between Region 10 CFSA and Region 7 and 8 CFSA by establishing protocol agreements that articulate the respective roles and responsibilities among the authorities, and set out rules for ongoing communication. This written agreement is reviewed regularly to ensure continued agreement in fulfilling the prescribed roles and responsibilities.

CURRENT SITUATION OF REGION 10 CFSA

Region 10 has an office in Edmonton, and two regional offices located in the provincial buildings in St. Paul and High Prairie. The St. Paul office serves the four northeastern Settlements: Fishing Lake, Elizabeth, Kikino, and Buffalo Lake. The High Prairie office serves the three northwestern Settlements: Gift Lake, Peavine, and East Prairie. The fourth remaining northwestern Settlement, Paddle Prairie, has an office on the Settlement because it is geographically remote from High Prairie. In addition to these two regional offices, Region 10 has at least one office within each settlement to enhance its presence.

Region 10's Supportive Role in the Settlements

Region 10 CFSA supports the Settlements communities in several important ways:

- It increases community capacity-building by developing programs and services such as early intervention projects, prevention of family violence, early childhood, and Parent Link centres. Currently the primary focus is on alcohol and drug addictions. Elders tell us: Don't bring something to us that's going to hurt us; bring something to us that's going to

help us.

- It endeavors to keep children with their families and, if that is not possible, to keep them with members of their extended family. More often than not, the extended family is in the same community, so this housing option has the advantage of keeping the child in his or her home community. If that is not an option, foster homes are sought in the same Settlement. The goal is the least disruption to the child.
- It funds eight early intervention projects, one in each of the eight Métis Settlements. Region 10 CFSA has the highest investment in early intervention supports of all the Regions in Alberta. The Region not only provides funding, but mentors and coaches Settlement community service workers and early intervention staff to enable communities to successfully deliver programs. Members of the community are encouraged to provide the necessary supports to families at risk so they don't have to enter the child welfare system. For example, Elders are encouraged to teach youth about their identity as Métis people, about the history of Métis people, and about how to instill a sense of identity and pride in themselves.
- It opened a Parent Link Centre on each Settlement in 2004. All Alberta's CFSA's received \$300,000 each from the Alberta government to establish a Parent Link Centre. When that funding came to Region 10, it was divided among the eight settlements. These Parent Link Centres provide resources and workshops tailored to the needs of each community. The centres also act as referral agents to direct families to the most appropriate resources inside and outside their home communities.
- Region 10 CFSA's social workers are generalists, which helps to carry out their functions, as well as all the mandated and legislated services. This can, at times, be overwhelming because the broad range of work required includes: child protection, family enhancement, family support for children with disabilities (FSCD), administering the Child Financial Support program (financial support to families are provided to look after children to prevent them

from coming into child welfare), and the Kin Child Care Program.

Region 10 has no day care centres or day homes on their Settlement communities but has developed the Kin Child Care Program. This program helps relatives look after children while parents are working, looking for work, or at school. Region 10 CFSA is also looking at some innovative ways of supporting single parents who have children and who need support.

The Métis Settlement and Edmonton Region Initiative

When families move from the Settlements, they tend to migrate to major centres, such as Edmonton, where they may still need supports and services. Region 10 and the Edmonton Region (Region 6) have embarked on an initiative to reconnect Métis Settlement children with their home communities. This reconnection can take many forms, ranging from occasional contact with their community of origin to give the children a greater sense of who they are, to the creation of a permanent placement. This initiative began with 27 children in November 2004, and by June 2006, the caseload had grown to 50 children. This program is staffed by three social workers and a supervisor, and is supported financially by the Edmonton Region, in recognition of the mutual benefits to Region 6 and 10. The initiative was perceived to be so successful that talks are currently underway between Region 10 and Regions 7 and 8 in northern Alberta, where many Métis children live and are served.

CONCLUSION

For the past seven years, Region 10 CFSA has worked diligently to meet the unique needs of the Settlement children, youth, and families. There are many challenges, but these are being met with a clear vision of the future, and with optimism and determination. Through unique and innovative partnerships, Region 10 CFSA has established a local and provincial voice that advocates for Métis Settlement chil-

dren, families, and communities without compromising Métis values and traditions. The family unit is valued and keeping the family together with appropriate supports is a guiding principle. Métis traditions are valued and an important focus has been to keep local language and culture intact through activities and forums that promote a Métis lifestyle for children and youth who might not normally have had an opportunity to be engaged in their Métis culture.

The future looks bright in spite of our challenges and Region 10 CFSA adheres to the motto: The future is something you create, not something that just happens.

AUTHORS' NOTES

1. The authors wish to acknowledge and honour the commitment and passion that the Settlement Elders, children, youth, and families have shown during the creation of the Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority. In addition to this, we wish to thank the past and current staff at the Authority for their dedication and hard work in bettering the lives of Settlement residents. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the Métis Settlements General Council and other community, provincial, and partnering stakeholders in working together to make our Settlements a safer place for our families.
2. For additional information about topics included in this chapter, readers are encouraged to consult Region 10 CFSA personnel, and to refer to Government of Alberta websites and other government publications.

REFERENCES

- Heritage Community Foundation. (n.d.). *The Métis in Alberta*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from www.albertasource.ca/metis/eng/people_and_communities/issues_betterment.htm
- Government of Alberta. (2003). *Métis Settlement legislation*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from http://www.aand.gov.ab.ca/AANDNonFlash/D8063F590A0F4DADA3513EBDB9B4FD33_E491566D3621405A8730FAA90A41364F.htm#first

Putting a Human Face on Child Welfare

- Government of Alberta. (2005). *Overview*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from <http://www.infratrans.gov.ab.ca/>
- Government of Alberta. (2007a). *Métis Settlements Act*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from <http://www.qp.gov.ab.ca/documents/acts/M14.cfm>
- Government of Alberta. (2007b). *Metis Settlements Act: Métis Settlements Land Registry Regulation*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from http://www.qp.gov.ab.ca/documents/Regs/1991_361.cfm
- Government of Alberta. (2007c). *Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act, 1990*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from <http://www.qp.gov.ab.ca/documents/Acts/C24.cfm>
- Government of Alberta. (2007d). *Métis Settlements Accord Implementation Act*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from <http://www.qp.gov.ab.ca/documents/Acts/M15.cfm>
- Government of Alberta. (2007e). *About child and family service regional authorities*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from <http://www.child.gov.ab.ca/cfsa/page.cfm?pg=Region%203%20%2D%20Calgary%20%26%20Area>
- Métis Settlements General Council. (2005-2006). *History in brief*. Retrieved March 28, 2007, from http://www.msgc.ca/main.php?page=about_history