

## Opening Doors through Dialogue

By Janine LeGal, Freelance Writer, Human Rights Activist, Newcomer Advocate

All too often, the words ‘Child and Family Services’ or those three letters ‘CFS’ conjure up all kinds of negative images. Some are grounded in reality, others based on stereotypes as a result of bad press, which, unfortunately, often leads in the news media. There’s no doubt that bad things have happened in relation to CFS, stories that are awful and sad and tragic. But if anything is ever going to change, we need to talk about — and hear — as many sides to the story as possible.

As mentioned, success stories have a more difficult time competing with negative ones in order to get exposure. We also know that anything involving humans is imperfect, and CFS is no different than any other agency, organization or system run by imperfect humans. But there's been a shift at CFS, the General Authority to be specific, towards evolving beyond an old way of doing things and exploring a more collective-based approach to dealing with issues facing families and children in crisis. CFS is entering into a dialogue with the communities it serves, and the conversations have started. I was commissioned by the General CFS Authority to collect the stories from this initiative and convey the views of those who shared both good and bad ones during the process.

Many new Canadian families’ first exposure to the name CFS will also have been through a negative story. There may be a tendency to associate CFS with only dire situations, with thoughts like ‘CFS is coming to take away our children.’ There is, understandably,

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defensiveness, and a lack of trust. I have to admit that I’d bought into all of the bad press around CFS myself. Since that’s what makes the news, that’s all I’d ever heard.

This perception has, over the years, swept through many communities. And this predominantly negative perception is part of what has to change if there’s to be any improvement in the system. By viewing any agency or system as the enemy, no room is left for dialogue, or healthy communication or progress of any kind in fixing the problems. First things first, the perception has to change, and there has to be an opening to get past it.

For well over a decade, I have been volunteering with, working with, and advocating for new Canadians from all over the world, getting to know them as friends, making them part of my family, and promoting the paramount importance of intercultural

understanding, in this province especially, where immigration numbers are increasing at a very rapid rate. During that time I have come to learn a lot about the many challenges associated with settling and adapting to a new country, learning a new language, new customs and ways of doing everyday things, and facing much of it without a lot of support, or understanding, from the broader community.

Imagine making a new life for yourself in a foreign land where there's no one to call if you're stuck and you don't know what to do or where to turn. What do you do if you're confused and you don't understand something? It can be scary to have to face so many uncertainties alone, and at every turn.

Being a new Canadian facing so many unknowns can mean having to re-learn some things all over again to accommodate new systems, and working through numerous obstacles because of differences. The language is different, the culture is different, and the laws are different, sometimes requiring a total overhaul in the way you see things and live your life. Feeling at home doesn't just happen immediately. And then there's the universal need that we all have: to belong, and for newcomers that can take a while to attain; for some, it can take a very long time, for others, it may never happen.

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The numerous issues and challenges associated with settling into a new life point to an increased need for more dialogue and more opportunities to learn from each other.

Now imagine arriving in a place where other people tell you stories about some things, some are true, some not so true, some based in fact, others only on misperceptions. Newcomers sometimes have enormous preconceived expectations about what life will be like in Canada. Many believe they are coming to the promised land, where things will be wonderful and perfect and they will never again have to struggle or want for anything. Many of those myths about the western world are unfortunately perpetuated abroad, so when newcomers arrive and find themselves having to deal with their new reality, things can become disappointing and difficult.

All of these things make it especially important for new Canadians to have a voice and to be understood, as all of us need and want to be.

The General CFS Authority (one of four CFS authorities), in recognition of the increasing need for (special) attention to the 'new Canadian' category, has activated a new initiative designed to improve understanding between CFS and new

Canadian families. The New Canadian Education and Awareness Initiative of the General Child and Family Services Authority began in 2009. Partners included Winnipeg Child and Family Services, All Nations Coordinated Response Network, and Jewish Child and Family Services. The process started with information-gathering from both inside and outside CFS, examining perceptions, negatives and positives, and looking at the strengths and gifts of the various new Canadian communities in Winnipeg, including those from Nigeria, Sudan, DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Philippines, Pakistan, Columbia, Argentina and Sierra Leone. Several communities in Steinbach, Manitoba also participated in the latter stages of the process including the Filipino community, the Latino community with participants from Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia, the High German community with participants from Germany, and the Low German community with participants from Bolivia, Paraguay and Mexico.

It has since then been developing and implementing strategies to improve awareness and communication. Over time there will be increasing staff and community engagement, a symposium with an interconnectedness focus on the well-being of the newcomer child, with



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the message that families, communities and everyone has a role in ensuring the well-being of the child. Ultimately there will be materials developed to facilitate these messages for new Canadians, CFS, cross-cultural communities and refugee and immigrant service providers. It's a long road but the journey has begun.

To begin the process of making this change, the New Canadian Awareness and Education Initiative (NCAEI) of the General Child and

Family Services Authority held a series of community cafés last year where members from several ethno-cultural groups were invited to engage in dialogue in the hopes of moving past some of the negative stereotypes. These cafés went a long way to building trust and a better understanding and provided a much-needed and comfortable venue for people to air their fears, worries and thoughts about how to better work together to build stronger healthier families and communities. It's a start.

Martin Itzkow is an associate responsible for the lead design and overall process facilitation of the New Canadian Awareness and Education Initiative (NCAEI) of the General Child and Family Services Authority. To this initiative, Itzkow has brought his reputation for working with new Canadians, and his skills and expertise on using dialogue and dialogue process as a mechanism to make positive social change.

“The General Authority is taking a risk to look at building a relationship of trust and respect with multiple communities and asking them to help,” says Itzkow, adding that the GA knows there are issues, and they’re willing to start to figure out how to work together and look at the possibility of making long-term changes, step by step.

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“It’s a change management process for a very complex system, complex relationships, and complex laws,” explains Itzkow. “Now it’s about building strength, strengthening families and communities. People are much more engaged. Change is taking place.”

“I’m working directly with Jay Rodgers, Chief Executive Officer, who’s leading a change agenda for the GA. I’m quite happy that he’s been able to risk and take root, a process of discovery and exploration. He’s comfortable with that. He and his board of directors have been very supportive, allowing the process to continue as we mutually learn from communities, building connection with

community organizations, partners, friends, colleagues. Without their trust, this would never work,” says Itzkow, emphasizing the need for people to suspend their assumptions and judgments and open up to learn through dialogue.

“There is a need to debunk the myths around CFS,” Itzkow says. “Children should be with their families, CFS believes this!”

“Our emphasis is the importance of family and the importance of children being with families,” says Patrick Harrison, Supervisor for the Newcomer Unit of Winnipeg Child and Family Services. “Children should be with their families. We’ll provide whatever is needed so they can stay with families. The focus at CFS is to maintain families but we have an obligation to protect children.”

Arlene Elliot is the Coordinator of the Mount Carmel Clinic multi-cultural program, Strengthening Families, which has been encouraging the work being done with communities and CFS. The Strengthening Families program engages community, uses an engagement model, a community development model, provides community-based educators and, most importantly, gives hope to the new Canadian populations.

Elliott points out that culturally the new Canadian communities are very much collective societies, as opposed to the individualistic systems here. “There tends to be a family response versus individual response to any situation,” she says, and this difference in life approach can and does lead to conflict at times in a new context that is life in Canada.

“But at the end of the day, we all want healthy children,” Elliott says. “Family is the core of our existence and survival. There needs to be an understanding of culture, a recognition of values, a vision about respecting and supporting families, a statutory responsibility. Creating allies, nurturing allies, building on strengths of all, making it safe for everyone. We need to raise consciousness, help people understand legislation, help parents have dialogue so they’re able to talk about taboo subjects, give them the support they need in a cultural context that is respectful of their values. The GA is more focused on building on strengths. This is a significant change,” adds Elliott.

Itzkow agrees. “They (CFS) have a new understanding of what many New Canadians face and what they are bringing with them in terms of child-rearing skills and parenting, and how their cultural communities can collaborate with child welfare. This is a sea change for the General Authority.”

Itzkow’s work resulted in identifying three key messages that would be used repeatedly in various settings to continue to build trust and openness between CFS and the new Canadian communities they serve.

- Recognize that immigrants and refugee families have valuable and positive experiences and skills in raising children. Recognize their context of life, their strengths and the adaptation process they’re going through as immigrants and refugees.

- Canadian society is interested in the well-being of the child and CFS has the

mandate to support families and ensure safety of child. Recognize that everyone has the responsibility for the well-being of the child.

- CFS strengthens families by providing a range of support services to ensure the well-being and safety of the child in collaboration with parents and community.

Al Benarroch, Clinical Director for Jewish Child and Family Services emphasizes that several steps are required to ensure collaboration and trust. “It’s about an open-mindedness, engaging in a two-way dialogue, using non-oppressive language, being reflective, and being conscious of the fact that language can re-traumatize.” Referring to a gathering with new Canadians early on in the initiative process, Benarroch remembers the initial reaction from some in attendance. “You could cut the tension in the room with a knife. ‘CFS comes to take away children, it’s a big bad machine.’ There was a real defensiveness, ‘we don’t trust you, don’t exploit us,’” he says.

“We have to build relationships. That’s the core of being respectful. Personal relationships, they also bring reparation. People at the cafés were very open with their stories,” Benarroch recalls.

One of those community café participants was Shade Gesinde, from the Nigerian community.

“It’s important for communities to be brought in. It’s a start,” says Gesinde. “There isn’t enough information out there. Mistrust results from lack of information. You want to see mistrust – don’t talk. The need to open up dialogue is very urgent. It has to cover a wider community. The impression that people have from what we learned is quite different,” adds Gesinde, noting that the community café process was immensely valuable.

“I’m hoping that it goes past the level of discussion. That will go a long way to put people’s minds at rest. That it started at all, that’s big. The issues are: we’re coming from different backgrounds, upbringings. You didn’t expect to be told how to live your life. You didn’t think you’d done badly. There was no risk of being arrested. It’s a new environment, they’re expected to drop everything they’ve known for 30, 40, 50 years,” she explains, about the pressures newcomers are dealing with.

“You can’t help a child if he feels he does not have to respect you. If the authority of the parent is undermined, that’s the end of that child. The same voice should say to them, you have rights. Yes you have a voice, you have rights but you have responsibilities, you have to respect your parents. I’m hoping this dialogue continues. We have to keep lines of communication open and incorporate other people’s values, respect parents, and keep children respecting parents,” Gesinde explains.

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Several themes and recommendations came out over the course of the community cafés and other conversations resulting from the initiative.

Some of the findings include a need and desire for more education and training for both new Canadians and for CFS staff, the continued use of a strength-based and holistic approach that will balance wants, needs, and expectations of everyone involved, a need to work collectively, in collaboration, and always with a two-way dialogue. Keep dialogue going, build trust, respect, and dignity, build relationships, and build bridges. Organize a conference. On-going information sharing was deemed as particularly important in terms of empowering people to work together and continuing to build trust where it is desperately needed.

The sharing of stories and personal experience is a powerful way to build understanding and CFS is openly committed to this process. Collective stories, hearing the voices of the people, community conversations, this is what the people want and it's the only way to ensure a healthier rapport among everyone involved.

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Co-facilitator of the Winnipeg conversation cafés Catherine Biaya helped bring community participants together for the five community cafés held in December 2010. The goal was to begin a dialogue that would lead to increased understanding and trust between CFS and the ethno-cultural communities they serve. "We are the key to the transformation of our communities. Their obligation is for care and protection of our children. We can be the channels to build that trust between community and CFS."

"Most people at the café wanted education. People wanted to continue talking, there was enthusiasm," says Biaya, who was happy to have been part of the process. "We talked, we did the café not understanding what the GA wanted. They explained its role. CFS is not only about apprehension but it's also a support program."

This was a beginning step of what will be a continuing and long journey. Any significant lasting change requires time, effort and commitment. The GA and some members of the communities are committed to this long-term process.

Biaya notes that everyone from the newcomer population has the same goal, which is to see improvement within communities, and the community cafés were an opportunity to begin a conversation that will lead to stronger relationships. "The questions were very powerful and helped the conversation to go nonstop. People wanted to speak. The environment was trusting. It was about conversation, building trust through dialogue. We came through oral traditions, we want to talk."

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For former refugee, parent and community member Ghezze Hagos, there needs to be recognition that newcomers face unique settlement challenges. "They have to balance expectations, the family structure that they know, trying to integrate with the family system, is the main problem. All families have their own problems. For example, the laws in Eritrea are communal. Physical discipline is encouraged, here it's prohibited. It's stressful," he says, explaining that parents are often contending with several jobs, and juggling numerous problems

that include differences in child discipline and rearing practices.

“The community café brought these issues out, and addressed these concerns. There needs to be a cultural sensitivity approach from CFS, to increase awareness and information to families,” says Hagos, noting that even within communities there are differences. “In the Eritrean community, there are differences in politics, in language; some are religious, some not. With the empowerment of community, everybody benefits. There’s a great degree of anxiety and ignorance about CFS. We have to break that cycle through education and empowerment of family where people feel at home,” Hagos says, suggesting more information and knowledge sharing.

“CFS is conscious of our concerns but goodwill is needed.

We need a persistent goal-oriented framework to happen. We have to do this (cafés) again and again. We have an extremely big number of refugees. There needs to be consistent outreach engagement with groups to raise awareness of CFS, devise strategies to reach families. The café was very valuable, and tried to address main concerns but it’s a very long, very important commitment,” adds Hagos.

For Rwandan community member, Mwumvaneza Azarias, the community cafés were a positive start to improving a situation greatly in

need of improvement. “Talking with CFS we started building trust; there was no trust before. The impression we had of these people was that they are stealing our children. We really appreciate the effort of CFS to talk with the community. The children have to be protected.

“The expectation is to build trust and community with CFS, a good relationship, understanding people so they will feel free to talk about CFS and its role. What we have appreciated most is CFS coming to the ground talking to us, talking to us to hear our views, not sitting in the office implementing their policies. The negative perception and image from before changed. The role is not to steal children. They have community-based educators, training, workshops on parenting, conflict, dealing with problems at home, money management, domestic violence, how to raise a child in a new culture. We have to appreciate the effort started by CFS, they are determined to change their vision, their mode of work, this is what we want, this is what is important, building trust,” says Azarias.

For Odette Mukole, of the Congolese community, the community café was a positive experience overall, but many issues remain of concern. “It’s good to seek out public opinion but CFS does not understand the cultures of the people.

Regarding the discipline of children, if family disciplines a different way than what is expected, what discipline model should be followed? There

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needs to be a model to help the people understand (what is expected). You take something away from us, what will you give us in return? What are the tools that you can give us?"

Adds Mukole, "There needs to be an orientation for parents when they arrive, but not right away. They already have so much information to absorb when they first arrive. Parents should be informed after a period of adjustment, three to six months after arriving. Parents need to feel at ease about gang awareness, child discipline, and other issues related to settlement.

"Newcomers are brave, they come with all of their baggage, learning a new language, and some have never had an education or even a chance to have one, yet they still nourish their families. A humanitarian approach should be used before bringing in police and other systems. Workshops and orientations should be held in and for all communities more often. All communities have a right to information. With learning, lives are transformed," Mukole says of the need to continue the dialogue.

"It's a positive approach, a good thing for people to express their opinions, there must be more connection and outreach. Being closer to each other, we would avoid problems and misunderstandings in the family, says Abdirizak Adam of the GA's initiative.

Adam is from the Manitoba Somali Association and believes that community

leaders and volunteers are needed to work on changing the perception from the community towards CFS and stop seeing it as a threat. "Work with them, they'll work with you," Adam says.

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"There is a need for people to learn, a need to know, identify a few organizations to work

with communities, develop some sort of training for families, bring people together, discuss rights, obligations, parents, educate them, provide them with information, have someone available that they can call," suggests Adam.

"Relationships should be established with Welfare, settlement, Immigration, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. There are mental health issues that are not talked about. There is a need for an inter-departmental task force to discuss these things. Why not have a two-day conference in an easy and understandable format, reach lots of people, and work with as many ethno-cultural groups as possible. Advocacy is lacking in Immigration. The immigrant community is stressed out, there's depression. Immigrants thought things would be great and when they start seeing the challenges, they start to attack those closest to them out of frustration," explains Adam.

"This agency is not out there to apprehend kids. Their mandate is to ensure welfare, security and safety of

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your kids. Work with them and the outcome will be positive. The credibility of family can be at issue. Be honest,” adds Adam. He recommends a preventative approach that involves training families and giving them the skills and knowledge to avoid problems before they happen.

Emmanuel German, on behalf of the Manitoba Sudanese Association, agrees that education will go a long way towards bringing people together. “Children know their rights, here children confront parents. Parents are threatened with words. Children are no longer obeying. It becomes really frustrating for the parents, and can lead to violence.”

Adds German, “For me, the community café was very informative, and educative. People came closer to each other. We need to know the culture of the people and their beliefs. To reach them, you need to understand the culture of the people. CFS are not evil people, they’re people that want to help, to help us adapt to this culture, so everyone can live peacefully.”

It’s clear that the road is long. But the effort is there. CFS is committed to increasing communication with new Canadians to build a better understanding of the role they play in the community. There is awareness that more needs to be done to clarify parenting expectations and child welfare laws in Canada. The evidence is there, that there needs to be more knowledge and sensitivity to the culturally diverse populations in Manitoba. And there is a need to move past the negative perceptions that have kept people from trusting anything associated with CFS. There is consensus that more information-sharing is a must, in order to empower everyone involved in working together from all sides on improving relationships between CFS, new Canadian families and communities.

The process of understanding is complex, and it is time-consuming. And it will happen over many years. But the process has begun, in breaking through the obstacles to a better understanding. And for that, it seems that there is agreement among new Canadians and CFS staff. There is newfound reason to see hope in continuing the conversation as a means to better understanding and more compassion for everyone who cares about child welfare through intercultural awareness and education in the province of Manitoba.