The needs of Canada's Aboriginal children

BY KAREN ISAAC JUNE 29, 2010

WEST VANCOUVER - The situation of many Aboriginal children and their families is dire, and the increasing proportion of Aboriginal children being taken way from their families and put in government care is a clear indicator of how the situation is worsening. In B.C., recent Ministry of Children and Family Development reports show that 54 per cent of all children in care are Aboriginal.

International agencies such as UNICEF and the OECD have condemned Canada for its record on Aboriginal children. The Canadian Senate committee on poverty has decried the lack of early-childhood strategy for children living in poverty. On this measure, too, Aboriginal children and their families are among the poorest of the poor. Social workers who work with Aboriginal children and their families are appalled and stressed by the situations in which they are placed.

Well-documented evidence presented a month ago by the Assembly of First Nations at a UN human rights tribunal shows that spending on the education of First Nations children in Canada is less than that spent on other children.

Our organization's 2007 environmental scan of early childhood development and care government programs for Aboriginal children shows that fewer than one-third of children aged six and younger are accessing early-childhood programs on reserve. Federal funding for early childhood development and care programs for Aboriginal preschool children has not increased for several years, and we are hearing that cuts to on-reserve child care are likely on the way.

The federal flagship Aboriginal Head Start program has been shown to be effective in preparing disadvantaged children to succeed in school, but it hasn't increased in several years, and, according to University of Victoria professor Jessica Ball, it serves only 10 per cent of eligible Aboriginal children.

All the position papers and studies and all the international and national condemnation don't seem to be making any difference. What will it take?

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