



Loon River First Nation, Lubicon Lake Band, and Peerless Trout First Nation celebrate passing of the *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin Act*

Alberta First Nations Working Together to Transform Child and Family Services Delivery

Red Earth Creek, AB, November 25, 2021 – This past weekend, First Nation Members from Loon River First Nation #476, Lubicon Lake Band #453, and Peerless Trout First Nation #478, voted overwhelmingly (616-70) in favour of a new, Member-driven, and collaboratively developed law - *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin* (Cree for Children's Law) – which sets the stage for the transformation of child and family services delivery for their Nations.

The Act focuses on prevention, ensuring that culturally appropriate, wrap-around, community-driven supports and services are available, including prenatal care for expectant mothers, so that children can stay with their families and their communities. Terms like 'apprehension' and 'foster homes' are replaced with terms like 'taken into care' and 'care homes', setting the tone for a renewed system that prioritizes health and wellness, and family, cultural, and community connections.

The Act creates the Office of the Onikanew (he or she who leads), to contract with and supervise an agency to run the new child and family services program under the new law. It is expected that KTC Child & Family Services, currently a delegated agency under provincial law, will be contracted to run the program. The Act also creates a Dispute Resolution Tribunal, with representation from each community, which will take an inquisitorial rather than an adversarial approach to disputes and replace the need for children and families to go to court.

Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin is a Member-driven initiative. For over a year, hundreds of Members from each First Nation participated in community engagement and consultation processes to outline their priorities for child and family services delivery and the principles that should govern this new law. Community engagement teams, a research committee, and a law development committee with representation from each community dedicated countless hours to support the Member-driven process. Members were also invited to participate in First and Second Readings of the Act, providing feedback that contributed to 17 improved drafts prior to the final version of the Act passing at its third and final reading.

Pursuant to Section 20(1) of *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, on August 13, 2021, the three First Nations provided official notice to the Governments of Canada and Alberta of their intention to exercise legislative authority in relation to child and family services. Pursuant to Section 20(2) of the Act, Canada and Alberta have been requested to enter into a coordination agreement with these First Nations collectively. Discussions have been productive and are ongoing.

Under the provisions of the federal Act, *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin* will replace the Alberta *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*, and other child and family services Acts in other Provinces, and will have the force of federal law.

This initiative delivers on the top "Calls to Action" of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission.

The Councils of the three founding First Nations will set the date that the Act or sections of the Act are to come into force. Children of other First Nations can receive services under the Act by agreement with the three Founding First Nations, but they would have to adopt *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin* first.

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Quotes:

“Passing *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin* into law represents an historic step forward for Loon River First Nation on our path to reconciliation, self-determination, and a better and brighter future for our children and families. I give thanks to the Elders, Members, leadership, and experts who have provided wisdom and guidance, contributing so much to the development of a law that truly reflects the history, unique circumstances, and priorities of our Nation.”

- Chief Ivan Sawan, Loon River First Nation #476

“Through every step of this process, we have been guided by the principle of working in the best interests of our most precious assets, our children. In the wake of recent discoveries of unmarked graves and the reliving of so much trauma caused by residential schools across Canada, we are reminded of the importance of this sacred duty. Peerless Trout First Nation will benefit for generations under a new law that ensures that children – including those yet unborn - are surrounded by love, care, the support and services that they need, and a connection to their families, communities, and cultures.”

- Chief Gladys Okemow, Peerless Trout First Nation #478

“Having the authority to make decisions that are in the best interests of our children and families is an inherent right, and an existing constitutional right, that Members of the Lubicon Band never rescinded. Through *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin*, we are exercising that right and asserting our jurisdiction to ensure that no children are ever left behind. Our Nation and our ancestors had traditional systems of culture, law, and knowledge that ensured the well-being and effective protection of children for thousands of years. Today, we have taken an important step to carry on that legacy.”

- Chief Billy Joe Laboucan, Lubicon Band #453

“The endorsement of the *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin* law is a meaningful step forward in creating positive change for the children of Loon River, Lubicon Band, and Peerless Trout First Nations. The Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth, and Families, empowers Indigenous communities to exercise their rightful jurisdiction over child and family services. Indigenous laws such as *Awas'ak Wiyasiwewin* focus on helping families stay together, restoring capacity for families to stay healthy and immersed in culture, leading to better outcomes for children, families and communities. Congratulations on reaching this milestone, and our government will continue to work with you and your communities through the important steps ahead.”

- The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services, Government of Canada

“The Loon River First Nation, Lubicon Lake Band and Peerless Trout First Nation have worked incredibly hard to collaborate with and listen to community feedback, showing exceptional dedication to ensuring the priorities of their members and community are represented. They have also championed the protection of family and cultural connections, health and wellness. I look forward to our continued collaboration.”

- The Honourable Rebecca Schulz, Minister of Children's Services, Government of Alberta

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