

'It's a way of moving forward': Innu leaders praise announcement of inquiry into children in care

Province, Innu leaders sign MOU Wednesday, promise to set terms of reference by end of July

By Marilyn Boone, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jul 06, 2017 1:05 PM NT Last Updated: Jul 06, 2017 6:12 PM NT



John Nui, band chief in Natuashish, and Anastasia Qupee, Innu Nation Grand Chief, talked Thursday about their hopes for the inquiry. (Eddy Kennedy/CBC)

The government of Newfoundland and Labrador and Aboriginal leaders have agreed that an inquiry will be held into the treatment of Innu children in the child protection system.

A [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU) was reached during a four-hour meeting in St. John's on Wednesday, Premier Dwight Ball said.

The announcement follows an investigative series by CBC News in June about suicides, addiction and being uprooted in the Labrador community of Natuashish.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/inquiry-innu-children-care-newfoundland-labrador-1.4192763>

- **'People are broken': Innu social worker says Angela Gregoire story a familiar one**
- **'Killing our youth': Natuashish leaders call for crackdown on bootlegging**

In a news release Thursday, the province said it hopes the inquiry terms of reference will be set by July 31 and that the person or body to lead the inquiry should also be announced by that date.



Almost half the people who lived in Natuashish are under 19, and 60 children from the town of less than 1,000 are in the care of provincial agencies. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

The goal is to have the inquiry started by September 30.

"I want to get to the root problem of why it is Indigenous youth in our province right now are having disproportionate numbers receiving care outside of their communities, why suicide rates are extremely high, are staggering numbers," said Ball.

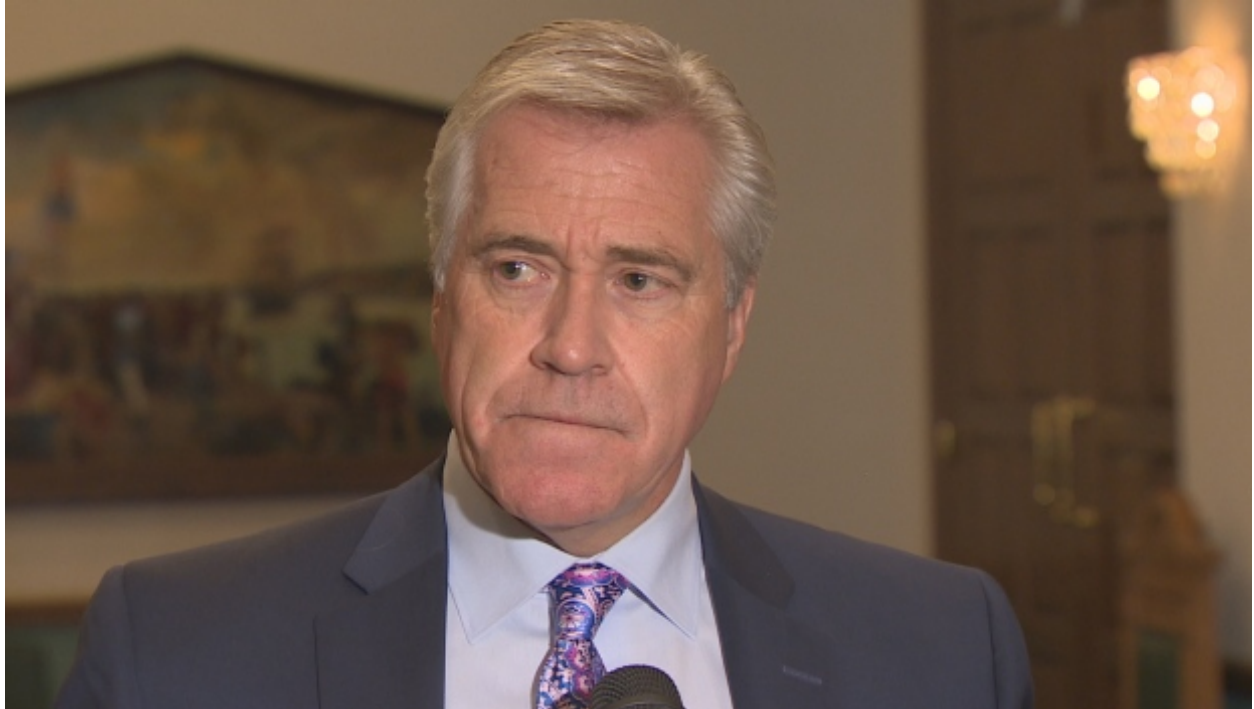
"This is about preventing children and youth from going into care and making sure we have those wrap-around services within Innu communities that are culturally appropriate."

'It's a start'

Anastasia Qupee, grand chief of the Innu Nation, said it has been "a long road" pressuring government to listen to concerns that children sent away from Labrador find it hard to reintegrate.

"It's a start for government to work with us," Qupee said.

"I think it's good. It's a way of moving forward because for so many years, the concerns that people have brought to us, the families, about their children being removed.



Premier Dwight Ball says the inquiry will try and determine why Indigenous youth are 'having disproportionate numbers receiving care outside of their communities.' (Bruce Tilley/CBC)

The band chief in Natuashish, John Nui, said it will be important to hear from children in care.

"We know they are losing their culture, their language, their identity when they are apprehended," he said. "It's going to be a very difficult process for the parents and for the child to be connected again."

Alarming numbers

Calls for an inquiry have been led by Simeon Tshakapesh, deputy grand chief of the Innu Nation, whose 16-year-old son Thunderheart, died by suicide in May.

- **['They killed my son': Innu leader calls for child services inquiry following son's suicide](#)**

He had just returned to Natuashish — "a different person," his father said — after spending two years in a youth treatment centre in central Newfoundland and a rehab centre in Saskatchewan.



Simeon Tshakapesh (left) and his family called for an inquiry after the suicide of his teenage son in May. (Danny Arsenault/CBC)

Innu leaders say there needs to be more of an effort to keep troubled Aboriginal children in Labrador, with treatment that includes a focus on their culture and roots.

The removal of children from their homes in Labrador has also been flagged by the province's child and youth advocate who has called for a new community-based approach to child welfare in the region.

In March, CBC News reported that 265 children from Labrador were living in foster care — including many from Inuit communities who had been sent to foster homes on the island of Newfoundland.

- **Uprooted: Why so many of Labrador's children are in foster care so far away from home**

In Natuashish, a community of 963 people, there are 60 children in care of provincial government agencies.

Sheshashiu, the other Innu community in Labrador, with a population of 671, had 90 children in care.



Innu youth who spoke with CBC News in June said they would like to see more activities in Natuashish, and more support from parents and other adults. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

Ball said there will have to be different conversations with other Aboriginal groups such as the Nunatsiavut Government and Nunatukavut to see if they want to take part in the inquiry.

But he said there may not be a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

The federal government will also be asked to take part.

"We realize they have a role to play. I can't think of a circumstance where they would not participate," Ball said.

Innu chiefs who [**gathered at Confederation Building in St. John's**](#) in early June released a three-page letter detailing their concerns, and calling on the federal government to "reduce risk" to Innu youth in Labrador.

Tshakapesh also [**confronted the federal minister**](#) of Indigenous Affairs at a Canada Day event in Toronto.

"This is unacceptable that your children are being taken from you," Carolyn Bennett told him at the time. "We are going to change it."