

**Brad Fraser**

Ellen McGuire has worked for the last 23 years in public service and has diverse experience working in the child welfare and income assistance programs. Prior to joining government, she worked for five years in the addictions field. She began her career with the Ministry of Social Services on the frontlines of child welfare, where she worked for 10 years. Since that time, she has held numerous Director portfolios in both the Child and Family Programs and Income Assistance divisions.

In her current role she is responsible for child protection and childcare programs and services for Southern Saskatchewan. She has oversight of approximately 180 staff located in the areas of Swift Current, Moose Jaw, Weyburn, Estevan, Yorkton, Fort Qu'Appelle and Regina. She is also responsible for on reserve services to the communities of Okanese, Carry the Kettle and Fishing Lake First Nations and works in partnership with Chief Redbear Children's Lodge on Cowessess First Nation.

Ellen has served on a number of committees over the years, most notably on the Steering Committee to establish the Domestic Violence Court in Regina; the Saskatchewan Missing Persons Partnership Committee; the Trauma Task Team for La Loche; and the Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan Executive Steering Committee. Ellen currently sits on the Board of Commissioners for Legal Aid Saskatchewan.

Ellen is passionate about continuous learning. She obtained her Master of Social Work degree in 2014 and is currently the Chair of the Education Committee of the Saskatchewan Association of Social Work (SASW). She has recently begun teaching as a sessional lecturer for the Faculty of Social Work. She is grateful to be surrounded by staff and colleagues that are incredibly knowledgeable, dedicated, and passionate about supporting the children and families of the province.

**Brad Fraser**

Ellen, I wanted to say, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Ellen McGuire**

Well, thank you for having me. I'm excited about this.

**Brad Fraser**

Absolutely. When we first approached you to potentially sit down with us and have a conversation, it was so cool to see your eyes light up with the opportunity to just engage with students and just kind of engage with a bit of the stories that you have. And so one of the first questions we were thinking about, because this is a little bit about you, what is your maybe unique perspective that would lend itself to the teaching that you do, or maybe the social work practice that you currently find yourself doing?

**Ellen McGuire**

Well, um, so I have some fairly significant experience behind me now, I have over 20 years experience in child welfare. And I've held a number of positions in frontline service delivery. So I did more than 10 years in frontline child protection. And then I moved into increasingly progressive leadership roles. I moved over to our central office in about 2009, as an analyst in our quality assurance area, and then moved into manager and director type roles. And so I've had the oversight of our provincial policy team,

our training team, or quality assurance team. And I've sort of seen the evolution of child welfare over the last, you know, quarter, quarter of a century, which has been really neat. Evolution, I would say, in terms of where we were in the late 90s, and where we are today.

**Brad Fraser**

So when you say the late 90s, and where you are today, and you talk about these policy pieces, the training and quality assurance, could you give us a maybe a peek behind the curtain of maybe one of those policies that you've looked at, or an area of focus you had as an analyst.

**Ellen McGuire**

Sure. So um,well, I'll reflect back to the, to the 90s, when I was a student, and we talked a lot about Aboriginal self government. And here we are 25 years later, and we're seeing the implications and the changes in the impact from Bill C-92. And what we see happening with Cowessess First Nation, and so I've seen the evolution of the Indigenous governing bodies, taking ownership of child welfare on reserve and the opportunity that we're getting to learn from them. And it's really, it's, it's a nice time in history, to see that evolution. And I've had the opportunity, being in the policy area, working with the First Nations Child and Family Services agencies across the province, to understand the implications of the policies that we make, because any of those agencies follow provincial policy, as they develop with their Indigenous governing bodies, they will be having their own their own policies, their own structure, their own infrastructure for each of their IGBs, as we call them. And so that's a really, it's nice to see this unfolding - finally, it's long overdue, and it's [an] exciting part of history.

**Brad Fraser**

The history that you're talking about that, really it sounds like started when you were a student, the need you were already talking about it in the classroom you're talking about is an important part of the social work degree you're pursuing. And now here we are. And you're saying it's happening now and you're a part of it. When if you could go back and talk to the Ellen then and say, Hey, this thing you're talking about in class, it's going to happen. What do you think she would say?

**Ellen McGuire**

I would have I would have said like, it needed to happen sooner. It's been disappointing, you know, to see it and unfold so slowly because I thought it was closer in the horizon. But, you know, there's been, there's been the evolution of the history from, you know, the Prime Minister's apology. The work that's been done through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls Commission's and the work that the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has done with Dr. Cindy Blackstock to move this movement forward, Jordans principle, all of these all of these policies and acts are now being implemented. And I just wish it had been several decades sooner.

**Brad Fraser**

Yeah, for sure. And it's interesting, though, how you've highlighted, there's these key kind of milestones along the way that whether they were required in that order or not, were key to getting us to where we are today with this policy. And you've had, you know, perhaps a bit of a unique experience being able to be in these different, I guess, opportunities within your career to see it unfolding. And so when you

think about, for example, Cowessess tell me a little bit more about why that's so important that they're being given this opportunity for maybe the social work students who are having that conversation you just had in the in the 90s, we're having it now in the classroom. Tell us about why that's important.

**Ellen McGuire**

Yeah, so I'm really fortunate in my current role, I am the director of service delivery for the South part of the province, which means I have the Child Protection and child care staff for the southern part of the province. And, you know, that goes from to each of the Manitoba and Alberta border, the US border, and just south of Davidson. So that's my catchment area, offices in Swift Current Moose Jaw, Weyburn, Estevan, Fort Qu'Appelle, Yorkton, and Regina. And so we have provided and we continue to provide on-reserve services to the Nations of Okanese, Carry the Kettle, Fishing Lake, and also Cowessess. So we've had the honor of walking alongside of our colleagues at Chief Red Bear Children's Lodge, who most will know are one of the first agencies across the nation to exercise their jurisdiction and child welfare. So it's really been exciting to see how they are positioning themselves to take over that responsibility, how they're going back to their ways of knowing. And I shouldn't say going back to how they are going to be utilizing their ways of knowing and the work that they've done is just incredible, and we are learning so much from them. And I am I do have the honour of teaching and child welfare practice this semester as a sessional. And I brought Eva Coles in who is the Chief Executive Officer for Chief Red Bear Children's Lodge. And she shared a little bit around how they are getting ready for this transition in their community. And most will have followed. Most of the students I'm sure will follow Chief Cadmus Delorme, and his work and it's just so inspirational. And I just feel very honored and privileged to see this work come to fruition. They are doing such a phenomenal job.

**Brad Fraser**

Wow, it's something that when you're talking about doing that at both the instructional level in the classroom and bringing these other voices in as well. But then also seeing it actually come to fruition, kind of within your career, and quite frankly, just within Saskatchewan and how important that is. One of the questions we ask our guests commonly is how can difference be helpful as a social worker? What do you think about that given this?

**Ellen McGuire**

Yeah, I think difference is crucial to social work. Certainly in understanding one another. One of the things we talk about in our class right now is challenging our own biases and assumptions and looking at things from a different lens. So examining our own ways of knowing and being open around understanding someone else's perspective and point of view and how much more knowledgeable will we become when we are open to those conversations and continuously growing and evolving as practitioners in the field

**Brad Fraser**

That need to continually evolve is something I've heard other guests speak about. And I think I've seen in the classroom and when you talk to social workers, it's such a dynamic field. Because as you've said, there's these critical lenses that we have to build that perhaps we don't naturally have, because we have our own dominant experience. And then we go out into the world, and we encounter different people that are going to have different lenses themselves. You've talked a lot about how exciting it is to

see this come to fruition. Is that part of your why of Social Work, this desire to create that critical lens? And what is your why of social work?

**Ellen McGuire**

Yeah, as cliché as it sounds, it's still about helping and supporting people, right? It's around strengthening our community. And, you know, I feel quite passionate about, you know, educating anyone who I come into contact with around some of those structural and systemic barriers that continue to exist. And so, you know, our my main goal in my role, and certainly this, the staff that I work with, is about helping to keep children safe and families intact, and to provide supports and services and connections to strengthen families, I think the general perception of child welfare publicly, probably isn't very accurate. I think, you know, a lot of people think that it's adversarial work. It can be. There certainly [are], you know, scenarios where it can be very difficult and challenging. But it can also be extremely rewarding. And, you know, we're, we're learning and changing our ways of doing things. And we don't want to be doing things to families, we want to be doing things with families, to support them to succeed. And, you know, we have to change our Western value system and be open to learning cultural pieces, not just from our Indigenous Families and leaders, but also from our newcomer families and folks that have arrived here from other cultures, right? It's a it's a very dynamic demographic. And so that is part of my why I think that child welfare has a lot of negativity associated with it. But the people I work with day to day are so passionate, are so dedicated. And they, they do their work with great empathy and compassion. And so, yeah, maybe a little bit long and rambling. But I'm just really excited to be seeing the changes that are occurring. And yeah, it's it's just an exciting time to be in child welfare.

**Brad Fraser**

So that why that you've articulated so beautifully about supporting children, families, and doing it from a place of centering their culture, centering their ways of knowing and their values. One of the questions that was put forward from a student when they heard that we were sitting down with you, specifically in the SASW education role was, what is that committee doing to ensure that Saskatchewan social workers are educated about those newcomer barriers? You started to touch on that? Could you expand, please?

**Ellen McGuire**

Yeah. So in terms of what the education committee is doing, we're doing some work around how we can help support the faculty and the students better and what that looks like, which is what kind of led me to chatting with you, Brad. We're also taking a look at Speaker Series, and bringing some speakers to talk, whether that's a lunch and learn presentation or webinars that people can access at any time and to have some of those discussions and provide some of those additional learning opportunities for the membership. And then we are talking about also doing some research around practice credentials and accountability in private practice, so you know, we are a volunteer committee with the SASW. We all have full time jobs, and sometimes extra jobs. And so we do this off the sides of our desk. But these are some of the things that we're working on this year. And that whole piece around structural and systemic barriers, and, you know, incorporating different ways of knowing and being open to learning those, I mean, those are all sound like great opportunities for Speaker panels. So at some point, we'll

be probably calling out for ideas for those speaker panels and be connecting with the students societies around things that you would also like to hear.

**Brad Fraser**

Absolutely, that opportunity to connect with members that are in the fields such as yourself, to connect it to the curriculum that we're learning that, you know, oftentimes, no matter how hard, for example, instructors like you make, and it's still theoretical, it's happening within the safety of the generally four walls of a classroom [or] the pixels of, you know, a zoom screen. So I think it's so key that we allow our students and our instructors and our members that opportunity to connect, because it's it's kind of like a circle of communication that allows us to do that continuous learning with each other and continue to renew that. And so with that in mind, Ellen, is there maybe a particular resource that you would recommend to students, or maybe fellow social work colleagues that want to learn more about these topics?

**Ellen McGuire**

Yeah, for sure. But before I go there, I probably even add, like, when you talk about that continuous learning, that's what keeps me I don't know about others, but that's what keeps me motivated, and engaged and interested in it's part of what intrigues me about the SASW is that opportunity for the continuous education, that connection with a community of practice, and people in our profession and all types of disciplines. And, you know, I was I was a late bloomer, I went to university, as a single mom with a couple of kids. And then I, because I loved university so much, I went back and got my master's. And so I'm, that's why, and that's what how I ended up being with the education committee, because that continuous learning is just so key for me. But when we're talking about particular resources, a couple of resources I've been using, and my resources are typically Child Welfare focused, because that's my area of passion. But some of the resources I have used this fall was the study called 'Denouncing the Continued Overrepresentation of First Nations Children in Canadian Child Welfare.' So that is findings from the First Nations Canadian incident study of reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2019. And it does a really good job of describing all of the structural and systemic barriers out there and describing how you know, the majority of kids that we've come in contact with, or we're coming into contact with neglect. So what is the difference between a caregiver that neglects a child and a caregiver, where through no fault of their own are facing challenges such as poverty, such as racism, such as housing barriers, so it does a very good job of identifying those structural systemic factors that are leading to the overrepresentation of First Nations children in care, and really challenges agencies and governments and caseworkers to do things differently, and to educate themselves about that, because the findings are really astounding. Actually - maybe a better word is disturbing. It shows that the racism that continues on it shows the perpetuation of the colonial lens that still exists that we are trying to change. So I think that's a must read if there is thoughts about or interest in the child welfare area. And then there's a follow up report to that. That was done by the Canadian Child Welfare Research Team. And it's called 'Moving Beyond Neglect: Recommendations and Future Directions for Child Welfare Policy and Practice.' And so that was prepared by the Child Welfare League of Canada and released in March of 22. So it's very recent. And then the other thing I'd add is I follow Dr. Cindy Blackstock's work quite a bit. And she is the Executive Director of the First Nations Caring Society. And she did a webinar for us for the SASW in the spring of 21. And it was called 'Wanted Moral Courage in Social Work,' so anybody who is a student member can access that through the Canadian Association

of Social Work website, but it can also be found on YouTube. So Cindy does a really nice job of in an honest and respectful way challenge people to step up where they see oppression occurring and to challenge the systems to challenge policies. And I just think she is such a phenomenal speaker. And so that would be something I'd also recommend people check out.

**Brad Fraser**

Absolutely. And each of those resources, we'll put in the podcast notes. So for those of you listening, you can certainly check those out and dig into them deeper. So Ellen, before I leave you today, is there anything else that's coming to mind you'd love to share with students who are listening and perhaps other social work members that are, you know, curious about your role or that of, you know, child welfare?

**Ellen McGuire**

Oh, well, you can just Google my name, and you'll find my contact information. So anybody, anytime has any questions, you're free to shoot me an email, I'm in the government email system. I can be reached also through the you know, the SASW channels. I just, you know, I'm I'm excited about the field of social work. Like I say, I'm passionate about the area of child welfare. No matter what discipline the students choose to pursue. I hope everyone stays open to continuously learning. You know, critically analyzing our practice being open to hearing the feedback, being mindful that our Eurocentric Western way of thinking is not shared by all and that we need to be open to learning and understanding other points of view that may be different than our own. So I think that would be what I would leave you with today.

**Brad Fraser**

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Ellen.

**Ellen McGuire**

Thank you