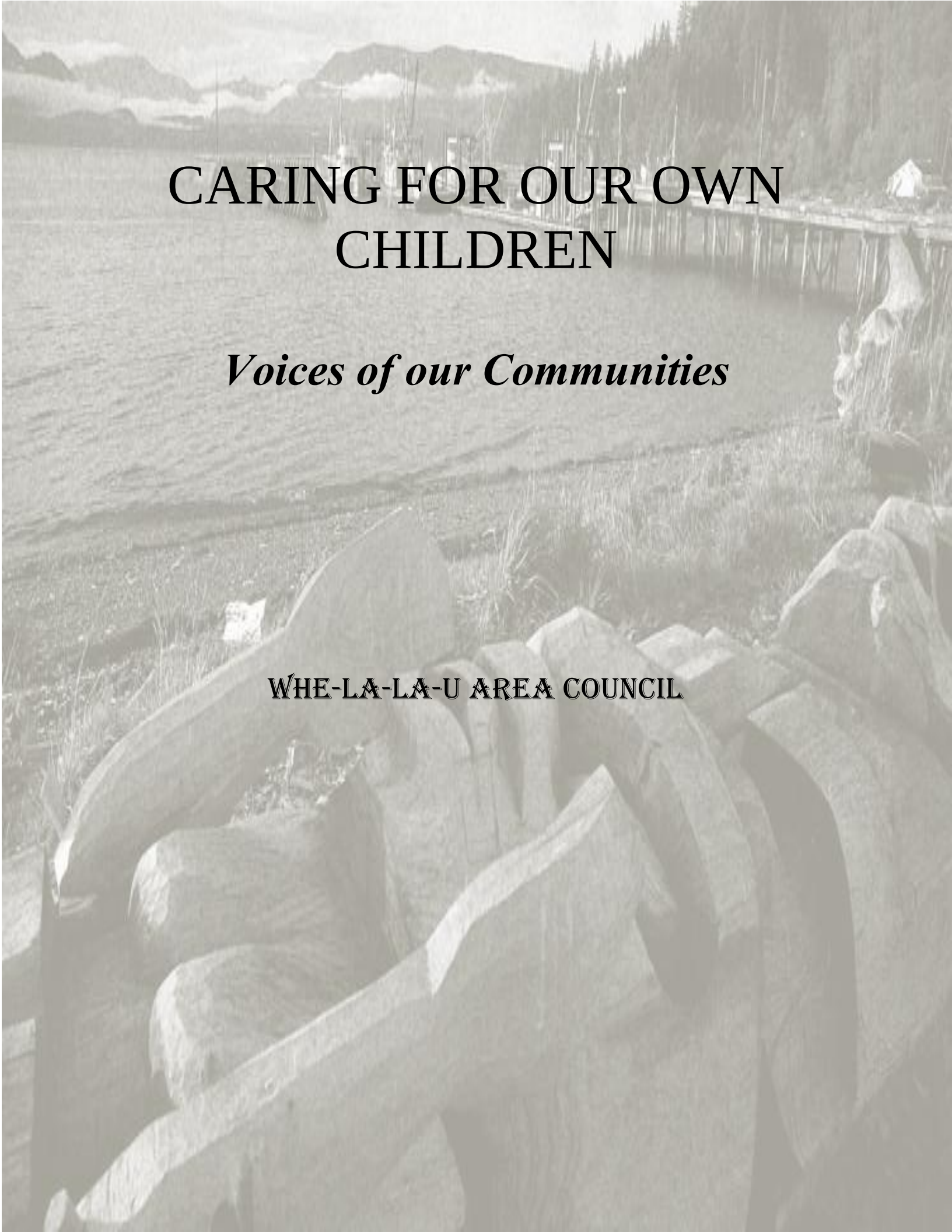

CARING FOR OUR OWN CHILDREN

Voices of our Communities

WHE-LA-LA-U AREA COUNCIL

To the People of Whe-la-la-U Area Council

Gi'lakas'la for allowing us to visit your community to speak with your youth, adults, and Elders. This document attempts to reflect your community's wisdom.

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PART 1: SASAMANS SOCIETY

Strengthening “Our Children” and families in a community-driven, culturally appropriate manner.

Sasamans Society Overview

Sasamans Society is charting new waters in providing 12 First Nations and 3 urban Aboriginal organizations on North Vancouver Island and the BC coast with the support they need to develop their respective cultural and traditional approaches with the goal of keeping children out of government care. Sasamans is committed to honouring a community-driven process to assist communities in creating their vision of a child and family wellness plan.

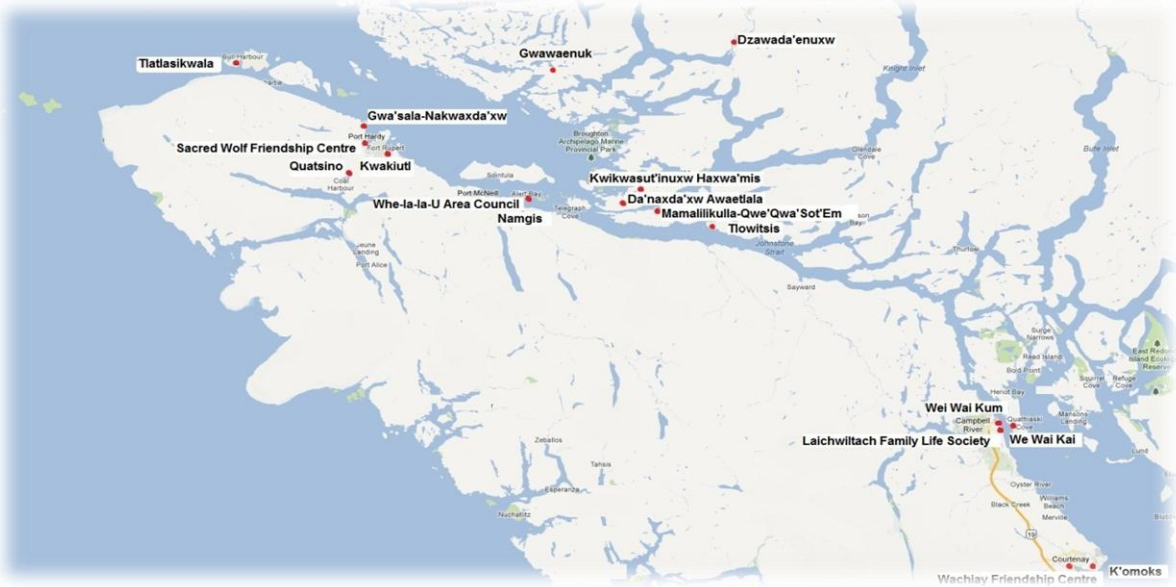
Sasamans Society's vision is to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner. In the Kwak'wala language, Sasamans means *our children*; the society's name reflects our intention to honour and listen to our children's voices and the voices of the communities we serve.

Member Nations

- Kwakiutl Band
- Da'naxda'xw Awaetlala First Nation
- Dzawada̲'enu̲xw First Nation
- Kwikwasut'inuxw/Haxwa'mis Tribe
- Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw First Nation
- Quatsino First Nation
- We Wai Kai First Nation
- Wei Wai Kum First Nation
- K'omoks Band
- Tlatlasikwala First Nation
- Mamalilikulla-Qwe'Qwa'Sot'Em Band
- Whe-la-la-U Area Council

Urban Aboriginal Organizations

- Laichwiltach Family Life Society
- Sacred Wolf Friendship Centre
- Wachiay Friendship Centre



OUR HISTORY

In 2002, representatives from Aboriginal communities across British Columbia united to demand that control of the well-being of our children and families be returned to us. In response, the province pledged to create and eventually transfer responsibility for Aboriginal children to Aboriginal planning authorities.

At that time, Vancouver Island Aboriginal Transition Team (VIATT) was established as an interim Aboriginal planning authority for communities on and surrounding Vancouver Island. However, given the region's cultural diversity and geographical challenges, when the VIATT process ended in 2008, it was determined that smaller regions would be more manageable. Consequently, the North Island Wellness Society (NIWS) was established as one of five Vancouver Island regional authorities. We recognize both MCFD and VIATT for their successful work during the regionalization process.

Formed in 2009, NIWS focused on furthering community engagement to directly influence and engage in policy setting, governance, and management authority over services that currently remain within MCFD. NIWS experienced growth in membership, support, and direction. In June 2010, society management changed along with a strategic plan that moved the organization to a new name, Sasamans ("our children") Society, and a more developed identity and direction. Sasamans Society is governed by a board of directors appointed by member Nations and participating urban Aboriginal organizations.

With the development of Sasamans Society, we seek to move beyond the limitations imposed on our communities through the current MCFD system. Ours is a process of developing and implementing, within the context of our culture, our traditional laws and way of life. This effort is set within the context of moving progressively forward from the long history of government authority and control over the care and support of our children. The work of changing from a government-designed system to a system grounded in the cultural and traditional laws of our Nations will take time, effort, commitment, and a positive working relationship with MCFD.

OUR MISSION

In pursuit of our vision to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner, the Sasamans Society will respectfully:

- Appreciate and nurture the strengths and capacities of our people.
- Communicate and engage, openly and on an ongoing basis.
- Honour our traditions, customs, and beliefs.
- Involve the voices of our children and the wisdom of our Elders.
- Commit to learning from one another.
- Dedicate ourselves to achieving our short- and long-term goals.

OUR VALUES

We strive to openly demonstrate Trust, Honesty, Respect, Integrity, Values, and Empathy in achieving our goals.

We believe in practicing compassion, transparency, honesty, and accountability.

We will respect and practice equality for all.

We believe that we are all one and we strive to be inclusive at all levels as we walk and talk with honour.

We embrace and nurture the strengths and abilities of our people.

PART 2: VOICES OF OUR COMMUNITIES

Our children and our families are the cornerstone of our Nations' futures.

The Process and The Reports

This report is one in a series that presents key findings from information gathered through a community engagement process with the First Nations and Aboriginal organizations served by Sasamans Society. This particular report presents findings from information gathered from the people of Whe-la-la-U Area Council.

The purpose of these reports is to provide each community and/or agency with information that reflects the views expressed by community members through individual conversations, group discussions, and surveys. These reports will inform community committees as they engage in a dialogue with Sasamans Society to identify and design services to support family wellness and keep children out of government care.

The first focus of our community engagement process was to gather information from the youth. The following topics were developed from data collected from youth at the Painting Our Way and Maya'xala youth gatherings in March 2011:

- Community
- Culture
- Family
- Challenges
- Strengths
- Activities
- Keeping children out of care
- Other

These themes are providing the foundation for community engagement sessions with children, youth, parents, and Elders. The Sasamans team developed guiding questions about these topics to pose in individual conversations and group discussions. We developed work plans to guide the collection of information from our 15 member communities (12 First Nations and 3 urban Aboriginal organizations). This information was used to develop reports, in collaboration with community representatives, that illustrate the wisdom, stories, and concerns shared within each community.

Process Background

In July 2011, due to internal changes in the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), the work of Sasamans Society was suspended until a new work plan and budget could be developed. This resulted in a reduction in the number of communities taking part in the process,[1] a downsizing of Society staff and contractors, and a change to our community engagement process. Where initially one person was

[1] Dzawada'enuxw First Nation, Quatsino First Nation, We Wai Kai First Nation, and Wachiay Friendship Centre were selected for completion during the 2011-2012 fiscal year. Funds were sufficient to gather information from two additional communities (Whe-la-la-U Area Council and Laichwiltach Family Life Society).

hired for each community as a community-based collaborator (CBC), the new budget and work plan necessitated a shift to a team approach with one team member (facilitator) focusing on one of three groups (children and youth, parents, and Elders) in all of the selected communities.

Beginning in August 2011, Sasamans staff and the facilitators (hereafter called the Sasamans team) participated in a three-part training process, which included community outreach and recruitment strategies, an overview of ethical guidelines and procedures, culturally grounded facilitation and data collection methods, individual and group interviewing techniques, field and observation note-taking skills, and tactics for the analysis and evaluation of findings.

After the training, the Sasamans team visited each of the six communities to build relationships and invite community members to participate in providing information. In some situations, community frontline workers were engaged to coordinate events designed to connect the team with the community so that the team could provide information on the process and arrange meetings with potential participants.

One of the lessons we learned early on concerned the use of language. When we began our search for participants, our flyers and presentations often used research terms, such as ‘individual interviews’ and ‘focus groups’. We received feedback that some community members felt intimidated by these terms or were tired of being analyzed by researchers; not surprisingly, some people did not want to participate in providing information. This feedback allowed us to change our use of language through using less formal words, such as ‘chat’, ‘discussions’, and ‘conversations’. We also decided to offer an anonymous survey as another option for individuals to participate in an information gathering process.

With the participants’ permission, the individual and group conversations were recorded and transcribed. All participants received gifts of appreciation from Sasamans Society. The Sasamans team carefully read the transcripts looking for trends and important information regarding the communities’ views on the topics identified above.

In the next stages of the process, Sasamans will present the key findings to each of the participating communities at a community event. The community will assess the draft reports and work with the Sasamans team to identify their specific community needs. Ultimately, this work will result in community-owned child and family wellness plans aimed at supporting the development of healthy families and keeping children out of government care.

In the following section of the report, we present our conversations with the Whe-la-la-U Area Council community.

PART 3: WHE-LA-LA-U AREA COUNCIL

Community Summary

Whe-la-la-U Area Council is situated in the town of Alert Bay on Cormorant Island, a gulf island on the northwestern side of Vancouver Island; it has an on-reserve population of 209 people. Neighbouring communities include the Namgis First Nation and the municipality of Alert Bay, which has an annual population of 1,500 people.

Since its inception in 1971, the Whe-la-la-U Area Council has been serving the following tribes/Nations: the Mamalilikulla-Qwe-Qwa-Sot-Em Band, the Tlowitsis Tribe, the Tlatlasikwala First Nation, the Kwicksutaineuk/Ak-Kwa-Mish Tribes, and the Da'naxda'xw First Nation. In addition, people from neighboring communities, people of Métis background, and people of non-Aboriginal ancestry call Whe-la-la-U home.

Key Findings

1. The community members expressed a great interest in learning more about their Native language and culture.
2. Drug and alcohol abuse for youth and adults is a great concern.
3. Community members expressed concern around the lack of youth programs for teens.
4. Elders expressed an evident concern on the imbalance in resources for on-reserve foster parents as opposed to off-reserve.
5. Community expressed a great need for advocacy for children in care, parents and for the grandparents.
6. Elders expressed the need for First Nations to deliver their own child welfare service in their traditional ways.

Service Gaps

- Support services and housing for Elders
- Parental education and programs
- More cultural programming
- Teen programs that focus on culture
- Youth alcohol and drug and mental health counselling
- Adult drug and alcohol counselling
- Safe home for youth (receiving home)

Community Profile

Whe-la-la-U Area Council has been serving its residents for over 30 years. In Kwak'wala, Whe-la-la-U means 'a place where everyone is welcome.'

POPULATION

WHE-LA-LA-U AREA COUNCIL STATISTICS	
Ages	**Totals**
0-6	23
7-12	30
13-18	22
19-54	86
55-64	24
65+	24
Total population	209

PROGRAMS

Whe-la-la-U houses a number of programs that are offered to people both on and off reserve. These programs include social assistance, homemakers for Elders, public works, an Elders' program, a young parents' program, an after-school program, family support, drug and alcohol services, programs for life skills and respectful relationships, substance abuse management, and a restorative justice program. In addition, a number of Whe-la-la-U staff are involved with the Alert Bay Suicide Prevention Team.

Whe-la-la-U also coordinates other projects for the community, including the North Island Health & Wellness Camp and a Summer Youth Employment Program.

The North Island Health & Wellness Camp (held in a different community each year) emphasizes community wellness/safety, family inclusiveness, and various cultural activities. The camp invites, and partners with, neighbouring communities to make the event as successful as possible.

The Youth Summer Employment Program is in place to teach youth best practices in the workplace and basic work ethics. This program runs through July and August, with placements in various Whe-la-la-U Area Council departments, including reception, the youth program, public works, and the Elders' program. In working for the Elders' program, the youth work as Elders' aides (dependent on experience).

HOLISTIC HEALING

Whe-la-la-U community members endeavour to provide traditional holistic healing approaches in delivering social programs. To be sure that the whole community has a voice, Elders act as advisors in this process. Family circles are created when families are struggling and need support. These circles act as a traditional, inclusive, preventative process in protecting the community's children and youth. Holistic healing approaches have been quite successful to date.

Community Engagement Process

WHAT STEPS WERE TAKEN?

In November 2010, Sasamans Society signed a memorandum of understanding with Whe-la-la-U Area Council. The Whe-la-la-U Executive Director is a Sasamans board member, so she was able to inform the community about Sasamans' role; thus there was no need for a frontline worker information session.

Whe-la-la-U was one of several communities that were put on hold until the next fiscal year after the plans for community involvement were delayed due to MCFD funding changes. However, after Sasamans' quarterly budget review in the fall of 2011, funds were reallocated to include Whe-la-la-U youth in this year's community engagement process.

Information gathering with the youth began in November 2011. The Sasamans team stayed in the community for three days. A pizza night/focus group discussion was the first event hosted, and the seven youth who attended discussed their thoughts on what is needed to keep children out of care. A graphic artist was on hand to draw the youths' stories as they were shared. Two other focus groups were held during this visit and one individual interview was conducted.

In January 2012, it became possible to add the Whe-la-la-U Elders and parents to the community engagement process. The Sasamans team made a second trip to Alert Bay where they attended a parent and tot luncheon, a dinner meeting with parents, and a luncheon with Elders. Unfortunately, many scheduled interviews were cancelled due to a death in the community. A follow-up trip was made in April to conduct individual interviews with parents.

Beginning in January, digital recordings of the interviews and group discussions were transcribed. In April 2012, the Sasamans team met and began the process of reading the transcripts to identify key themes and write the first draft of this report.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

Youth

The Sasamans team spoke with a total of 12 youth who ranged in age from 15 to 21. These conversations consisted of one individual interview and three group discussions. For the first focus group, seven youth (four females and three males) shared their thoughts on what is needed to keep children out of care. The following group discussion consisted of two males and the final group with two females.

Parents

The interviewers also had 10 individual conversations, for a total seven females and three males, ranging in age from 25 to 50. The parents discussed their thoughts on the community; their cultural activities, practices, and teachings; family; Elders; parents; youth; and obstacles that might hinder the community's ability to keep children out of care.

Elders

A discussion group was held with eight Elders (six females and two male) ranging in age from 56 to 82. The Elders shared their wisdom on community, culture, family, relationships with government, and keeping children out of care.

Community Conversations

In this section we summarize our conversations with members of the Whe-la-la-U Area Council community. To maintain the integrity of the wisdom shared by community members, direct quotes are used as much as possible. In a few cases, quotes have been slightly changed to make them more readable or to avoid identifying any of the individuals.

Building on themes identified in the data collected from youth at the Painting Our Way and Maya'xala youth gatherings in March 2011 and those that emerged at the Elders' gathering in March 2012, we have organized the conversations into three main sections:

> **Looking Back** highlights the community's traditional structure, family laws, and parenting practices.
>
> **Taking Stock** outlines some of the challenges facing the community today and the strengths that community members possess to deal with those challenges.
>
> **Moving Forward** describes what community members identified as their needs and objectives for moving forward with the goal of caring for their own children.

LOOKING BACK

In March 2012, Sasamans Society invited the Elders from all of its member communities to gather and discuss what they think is needed to strengthen families and communities and keep children out of government care. At the gathering, the Elders talked about the old way of life, including the traditional laws that were passed down from one generation to the next through teaching children by example. The Elders explained that these laws were a way of life rather than a list of protocols. Everyday activities like trading, sharing wealth, and raising children represented the traditional laws.

During our community engagement process with the Whe-la-la-U community, the Whe-la-la-U Elders also talked about traditional laws and practices. In particular, this group of Elders talked about *traditional ways of teaching children and youth*; *the importance of ceremonies*; *how the community looked at death*; *the practice of family looking after family*; *traditional food and food practices*; and *traditional values*.

Teaching the Children

An Elder reflected that when she was young,

> *the families were still complete ... uncles and aunties were still around, you know, so we picked up the language – Kwak'wala language.*

Another Elder shared what her mother had told her about how the community's children were educated:

> *My mother said, 'We didn't have schools to go to when we were children, but that didn't mean that we didn't learn; we're always learning. The girls were always taught by their mothers, aunts, grandmothers what they were to be, what they were to do, how they were to conduct themselves. And the boys were taught by their fathers, grandfathers, and uncles. So they were learning all the time.... Learning doesn't just start when you go to school, it starts right from the time they were born.*

This Elder's mother had explained to her that caring for a new baby began even before it was born:

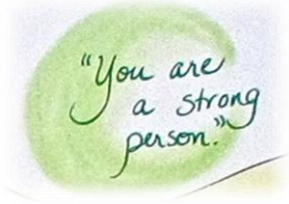
> *And the old people started teaching, started being mindful when my mother became pregnant. So they started in being careful around her then, make sure things were calm and things were comfortable and pleasant for her because whatever she's affected affects the baby that she's carrying. So they had to ... be that way. And then my sister was quite a bit older than us, and when she was pregnant we had to treat her like a queen. You know, my mother says we're not to make them unhappy or uncomfortable 'cause it's supposed to keep things calm, cool, and collected for them. So that's the way the baby will be.*

As soon as the baby was born, the Elder's mother had explained:

> *[T]he first person to greet you is your grandmother. And grandmother greets you and gives you a message and tells you who you are and what you're going to be. The good things you're going to be. And ... [my mother said] you never ... tell your children 'you're bad, you're dumb, you're stupid.' ... Those messages get stuck and what are they learning?*

Just as another Whe-la-la-U Elder said that her cultural practices were *"talking to my children and my grandchildren; teach[ing] them what I can,"* this Elder's mother had described the traditional practice of talking to children from the time they are *"little tiny little babies"*:

> *You always talk to them. You know how children learn? How anybody learns? It's listening, yeah. If you don't know how to listen, you won't learn anything. And that's ... how right from the time they're born, you talk to them and they listen to your voice and they get into the habit of listening.... That's what the old people did.*



The Elder's mother also said, "*You have to teach them right from wrong. Don't let them do anything wrong without correcting them*."

Ceremonies

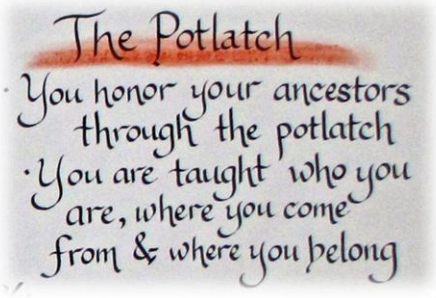
Ceremonies were an important way for cultural laws and practices to be passed down. As an Elder had explained at the Elder's gathering, everything important in the life cycle centered on the Big House. There were ceremonies held to name children, ceremonies for cutting hair, and ceremonies for coming of age, marriage, and death.

One of the Whe-la-la-U Elders talked about the sense of belonging children felt when they were given their names at a potlatch:

> *I couldn't believe how happy the children were when they got names. They didn't have names before, so when they got names it made a big difference in their lives. So I thought, 'Yeah…. They belong.'*

Another Elder said:

> *I really think that our children need to know who they are and where they come from ... and I think that's what the potlatch teaches us.*



Death

An Elder reflected on what she had been taught about death:

> *I was taught as I was growing up that death is a part of our lives. None of us are made to live forever. Sometimes it comes early, sometimes … sometimes we'll come in and out – it's like when babies die – and some of us live a little longer and some of us live to be old. It's not in our hands.*

"Family Looking After Family"

At the Elders' gathering, an Elder explained that "family is the most important thing." Many of the Elders echoed this idea and described how relatives would take children in when parents could not care for them. Numerous people shared personal stories of being raised by grandparents, aunties, great-aunts, and older siblings. While adoptions were common, the Elders emphasized that children were always reminded of where they came from.

The idea of "*family looking after family*" came up in many of the conversations with the Whe-la-la-U Elders, as well. One Elder talked about her mother, who had looked after many children in addition to her own.

> *My mother used to take children in and … look after them, and she never ever asked for funds for looking after these children. They were relative's children, it was her job to look after them and she did. There was many*

children that she took to care for, and there was never a time we ever got a cheque from an agency for these children. It was her job to do it because they were relatives.

An Elder explained the traditional ways of caring for children within families:

The older brother became the father to those children. That's the way the old people did, so that that child wouldn't be fatherless or motherless. And then if they were very young, then she said about a year later they would arrange a marriage with one of his brothers. So … it's family looking after family. So that's the way they did it just to keep in care of the children. Yeah, that was a consideration to care for children.

Another Elder cautioned, however, that there are some people who are not suited to caring for children:

Only people who love children [should] care for them; they should be careful of people who don't care for them.

Traditional Food Practices

Several of the Whe-la-la-U Elders talked about traditional foods. One Elder explained that food was an important part of culture and everyday life. Fish was the primary food, and it was eaten daily:

They always offered food to anyone who came to visit. And, of course, when I was growing up, we were lucky we lived on our Indian food because that's what was available.... We never ever said, 'Ah, fish again.' We were just happy with what we got.... We had fish every day, but it was different. It was salted or fried or boiled or something.... When we used to do fish with my mother, no part of the fish was wasted. The only thing that she would throw away was the guts. The fish heads were saved and ... if they cut the bones then she saved the bones and used it to make soup. You know. Never wasted any of it.... Although fish was the staple, there was all kinds of other sea foods to eat. We have all kinds of different things to eat when we were young that we don't now. We don't … we used to eat abalone, it's not something we ate every day but we used to eat it. We'd have … I don't know, it's a sea grass or something, we would get that and we would take it and we would eat it.

An Elder talked about the traditional foods that people are not eating much anymore, in part because they don't know how to harvest them and in part because they are too busy doing other things. This Elder said, for example, that she never learned to harvest seaweed because no one taught her:

Of course, I wouldn't know [how to do] it because I haven't been out there to do it myself; they didn't tell me to come along with them. They didn't prepare us for the time when they won't be around to teach us how to do it. Now a lot of us don't know how to do it [and] we don't care. We'd rather go and buy chips. (laughing)

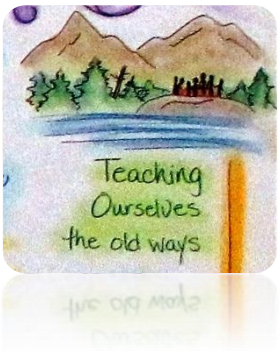
She said that good was an important part of culture and everday life. Food was a central part of community relationships and families always offered food to anyone who came to visit their home. Fish was the primary food and was eaten daily; it was available, appreciated, and respected:

> *And of course when I was growing up we were lucky we lived on our Indian food because that's what was available.*
>
> *We ... never ever said 'Ah, fish again.' We were just happy with what we got. Yeah. It was we had fish every day but it was different. It was salted or fried, or boiled or something.*
>
> *And I was telling them too when we used to do fish with my mother no part of the fish was wasted. The only thing that she would throw away was the guts. The fish heads were saved and the ... and if they cut the bones then she saved the bones and used it to make soup. You know. Never wasted any of it.*

Traditional Values

Many of the Whe-la-la-U Elders talked about traditional values like respect, responsibility, and self-sufficiency:

> *I've learned a lot from my grandfather about our culture.... Most of all he taught a lot of respect, how to respect myself and respect others.*
>
> *Old people like my parents, my father, he didn't depend on band council to build a home for him; he built it himself. He saves his money up and when he got enough money he bought all the lumber he needed to build our home. And that's the way all the old people were. All the old homes on this reserve were built by the people who lived in them. And young people don't do that. [They say] 'the band council won't do this one, the band council won't do this one there.' ... And if they're able they should do it themselves or make an attempt.*



Other Elders talked about how the community worked and celebrated together in earlier times:

> *I remember we used to [get together] in the parish hall and the parents used to be there with their children. You know, they'd do dances ... not Native dancing ... but they're dancing, playing all kinds of games, you know, stuff like that. Doing things together.*

In earlier days, an Elder said, the Chief was responsible for the well-being of the people. She talked about the legend of the two-headed serpent and what it represents to the community:

> *I asked an Elder ... why did they have the face in the middle on the serpents, two-headed serpents? And the old man said, 'It's to keep you*

balanced.' He went like this. He said, 'You're too much of the good, too much of the bad. You've got to keep yourself balanced and that's you in the middle.'

The Elder went on to explain about the importance of balance:

In the olden days, the Chief's duties was to look after the community the best way he could, him and his family, women and men both to keep him balanced.... Yeah, and of course we have to keep our balance too. That's what this issue is about – the balance [of] the community and one's self.

TAKING STOCK

The arrival of the European fur traders, missionaries, and white people disrupted the traditional way of life and upset the community's balance. Several of the Elders talked about how devastating these disruptions have been to the community:

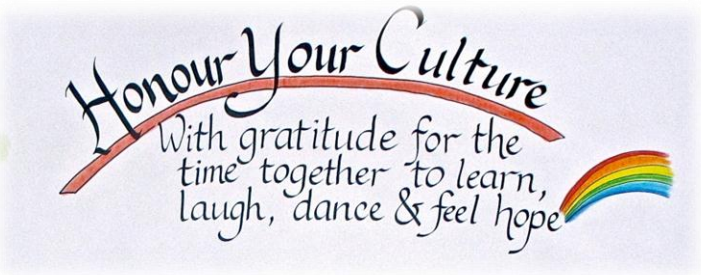
Our ancestors had the abundance, they [had] more riches there than non-Natives [have now] by having the water, by having the fur, the gold, the silver, the mine. Even though we had this ... our ancestors never got greedy to strip Mother Earth. Now she's hurting.... Everything, everything in earth we had experienced and preserved and looked after ourselves in the big wide diversity of the land that we had deer, elk, moose, you guys buffalo. You know you name it we had it, all those, yeah. And it hurts me today. I cry each time I see that news when I see a deer, a cougar, a bear you name it that's going into the city and they can't stand them. And you know why I cry? It's because I see us in that, going in that…. Those animals are us. That the white people can't stand us going into their garden and feeding ourselves. You know, that's what I see.

For me it was ... there was [no cultural practices] going on because that's when it was against the law. I was an adult before I ever saw our people dancing when they finally allowed to. I never ever saw them dancing. I know that my mother used to disappear now and then and we didn't know where she went, and when I grew older and I thought she must have gone to a potlatch. But she didn't tell us because she was afraid we were going to say something 'cause children repeat things, so we never knew and she never said…. And that was a devastating thing for our people because my grandparents – my father's mother and father – went to [jail] for that. They were among the people that were jailed, yeah. They were really, really trusting and law-abiding people, and they would never do anything that they shouldn't do, but that was against the white man's law for us to potlatch. So they participated in the one that they got arrested for. Yeah. And I think that was a big wrong thing to do.

Residential school changed things.... At my time it was a really good time growing up when I lived in the village. Everybody got along; everybody loved one another; like, everybody had respect for each other; everybody would help, you know, if they need wood, we'd go out and help them. You

don't see that anymore. You don't. These young kids have to be paid to do something. I never had to do that. I respected my parents 'cause they, my grandparents taught me that.... That's out the window now. It's been out the window for a long time. Ever since we went into the residential school, things changed. We lost ... what we had and that's respect, 'cause they took that away.

When I grew up I was taught how to parent; my mother taught me. And so that's what the old people taught. But the residential school changed that, so there's probably about three or four generations of people who were not taught how to parent their children.



CHALLENGES

The community today is struggling to regain its balance. Community members describe it as a "*good community*" where "*everybody helps each other out.*" At the same time, they identify a number of issues they would like to see changed, including *housing problems*, *littering*, *alcohol and drug abuse*, and *depression and suicide*.

Housing

Several of the youth mentioned problems with mold in their houses:

I don't like all the mold and all the stuff 'cause you don't know…. I have allergic reactions to them.

I am one of those people that can't handle mold…. I was wondering why I was getting sick for the last like month … sick on and off.

Another youth commented on the process of re-building houses, and would like to see changes happen more quickly:

I think it'd be better if they tear down all the old houses and built them faster than they do…. Like that one's been teared down for like five years and they haven't even started rebuilding yet.

Littering

Several of the youth would like to change the "*garbage*" around the community. When asked about the litter in their community, a common response was:

I don't like it at all.

They suggested having more garbage cans or bins "*built into the ground*":

Just put more garbage cans around here … on the boardwalk … like in random places.

One youth suggested adding signs telling people not to litter. An Elder, however, suggested that if youth don't like litter, "*they should do something about it*" and lead by example:

When we were children, we used to. We used to go and pick garbage up off the road. Also, we didn't get paid for it, we didn't expect to get paid for it either because they asked us to do it so we did it. I think a lot of things people could learn to do for themselves. Some things can't be helped, but whatever you can do for yourself, you should do.

Another Elder talked about wanting the reserve to be clean:

It's just the cleanliness that we should have on our reservations because once the kids see that, how it's like right now, they're just going to grow up the same way. Yeah, and somebody should teach them how to … you know, even when they're having their little groups downstairs they should all get a bag, take the kids for a walk, give them a pair of gloves and pick up things in the reservation. Yeah, it would be really nice.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

One of the community's most devastating problems is drug and alcohol abuse; this discussion topic came up in many of the conversations with Whe-la-la-U community members:

I think that the drug is really a big thing. It's devastating.

There's a lot of drugs here. I'm really against that heavy drug. The coke is the one that is killing our own people. I don't know what can be done about that. I don't know why [we] make it [hard] … it's not hard. All we do is get rid of [the heavy drug users] – tell them to get off the island and when they smarten up they can come back. You know, go to treatment, get help.

I'm always hearing people blaming the band council, blaming the RCMP not doing anything about the drug dealers. I told them that I think it's our job to do something, too. And our job is to – We all know somebody that uses drugs and we all know somebody who sells drugs. And they're our relatives and we love them, so we could talk to them, we could talk to somebody who's using drugs and tell them not to do it.... And then hope ... once they stop doing that [the drug dealers] will go away because they won't have any more business.

An Elder worries that drugs are keeping youth from learning about their culture.

Well, I don't know if they're interested in our culture or not.... That's a very tough one 'cause they – a lot of them, a lot of the drugs is in the way.

All of the parents we talked to feel that partying is a big issue for the community. Some of the situations they thought might happen at parties included "*alcohol poisoning"* and *"overdosing", "fight[ing]*", "*killing themselves*", and "*rape"*.

A parent talked about growing up in a home where the adults partied:

> *I know what that was like ... for me growing [up] ... in fact it was encouraged…. And when I start to hear ... even some parents say that: 'I don't want my kids to drink' and my automatic response is that then don't drink.... I mean, when I was a kid I was right there smack-dab in the middle of a party, growing up, cracking beer open for everybody.*

Youth are aware of the way adult drinking influences their choices:

> *Basically kids are just following in ... the adults' footsteps and they think it's cool ... when they see an adult smoke or drink or do drugs.*
>
> *Yeah, basically it's just 'cause our adult families are just teaching us how to drink and that, and not telling us it's wrong. They just let the kids go and do it and let them learn themselves, which is a bad way of explaining it. 'Cause you can lose a child by drinking and all that ... and to drugs. And, yeah, 'cause normally when kids drink they do stupid things like commit suicide.*

Some of the youth also linked drinking with suicide and violence. For example, one youth, responding to another who talked about losing family members to suicide, added:

> *That's what happened to my brother, too ... because of drinking and thinking really stupid.*

A parent believes that families have to take responsibility for drug and alcohol abuse in their own families:

> *Everybody drinks but how can you stop it? ... We're all human and we've all made mistakes…. Kicking the drug addicts is not going to change it. What's going to happen is that these families got to own up to the responsibility and say 'Hey that's wrong. 'Cause you're poisoning my kids. You're poisoning my community. You got to stop it. There's something wrong with your heart. Where's your heart?'*

Depression and Suicide

Some community members either struggle with depression or know someone who does. One parent thinks that youth may become depressed from dealing with family conflict and abuse:

> *Verbal abuse ... physical abuse. And depression ... it comes from our parents. I mean, I'm not saying parents are the ... reason why, but that was definitely the reason for me when I was a teenager.*

Another parent said they could empathize with youth who experience depression:

> *Been there, done that. When I was young … I call it a big black hole when I go into depression, and it's not a nice place to be. So I would have a great concern if I ran into somebody and they told me there were in that situation.*

As well as depression, many of the Whe-la-la-U community members' lives have been impacted by suicide, as indicated by some of the comments above. One of the Elders noted that, in earlier times, suicide wasn't an issue in the community:

> *Suicide is something that – when I was talking to one of the Elders … and she said 'It wasn't anything we heard.' She said 'In my life, I know of one.'*

This Elder believes that to prevent depression and suicide, it's important to spend time with children and youth and make them feel like they belong.

> *I think again that it has a lot do to with the family system.... I think some parents just don't spend the time they need to with the children and make them a part of everything they do. And make them feel like they belong.*

Traditional Cultural Knowledge

Whe-la-la-U community members of all ages expressed concern about the preservation of cultural knowledge. From the conversations, it appeared that most of the parents did not have much experience with cultural activities:

> *I haven't really learned it since grade 7.*
>
> *That just goes back to my upbringing and I get very emotional when I go in the Big House, so I tend to stay away, yeah.*

One parent admitted that their own drinking and drug use got in the way of their cultural participation:

> *I'm just gonna be honest with you – I do drugs and I do drink and … I don't like to go into the Big House knowing that I'm into that stuff…. I wanna be clean … and I wanna be like full of life … in order to walk in a Big House like that.*

A parent talked about their mixed feelings about culture; on the one hand, they are deeply sad about losing cultural knowledge, especially their language, and would like to relearn it. On the other hand, they are afraid to attend language classes because they don't know enough:

> *The biggest one would be my language again – it was beaten out of me in school. It scared me and my cousin…. I even lost the understanding of it…. I want to learn and … they always invite me up to … they have it every Thursday. I believe they started again. And for some reason I have this – I don't know – fear or something about it 'cause they say that you're not allowed to speak English in there, and I'm like, 'Well, that's all I really know how to speak.' Like I can't just go … up there and say 'Yo 'wiksas?' You know, what else can I say? Just to go up and be there for an hour.*

An Elder talked about how cultural learning stops once young people leave school.

> *When they leave the classroom it's not there anymore unless they're doing it in the Big House. Like dancing and all that stuff. The Native tongue is mostly gone unless some of them carry it right through. You know, some of them are very good at it that, you know, they should learn how to speak the language 'cause it's so precious, eh?*

Other Elders worry about losing the language and would like more opportunities to speak it:

> *I need to learn more about language 'cause I'm losing it now. We need most of all I want to, I got to try to find some Elders I can talk to, I don't want to lose it.*
>
> *I'm finding less and less opportunity to speak Kwak'wala with anybody.*
>
> *A lot of our tradition is slipping by. Slipping down … totally slipping out of our fingers.*

CHILDREN IN CARE

An Elder observed that although the federal government apologized for taking Aboriginal children away to residential school, the government continues to take the community's children away:

> *I seen on APTN or … yeah, there was a … what do you call on it and this guy says 'Yeah, where's Steven Harper' – is that his name? He apologized to all the young children that were taken from their home and put in the residential. You know what, he apologized and what are they doing? They're still taking our children away, but they there's no residential to put them into, they put them into [foster homes].*

Another Elder pointed out that the standards that the government uses to judge the quality of a foster home do not reflect the values of Aboriginal people:

They put standards up for us. You know, like if you don't have a private single room for that child, they won't put that child in your home. But that's not how we grew up; there were sometimes two or three of us in one bed. And we slept well. Because my mother would never ever say 'No, you can't come to stay with us, our house is full.' They took in whoever came.

Two Elders talked about their experiences in trying to make sense of social workers' decisions when their grandchildren were taken by the government. No explanations were given and they were not allowed contact with their grandchildren.

[When they took]… our great-grandchildren away from their mothers, we never got no contact or anything. They never phoned us or nothing, and I can't understand why.

These grandparents had made themselves available and had tried to contact the social workers, but the social workers did not bother to call them back.

We could have had them for a day. We were open to everything, our time was open to anything. We answered any questions they wanted and that never happened. Never. I left a message on the machine, told her who I was and to phone me as soon as she could. I never got a call or heard from her at all.

Elders want to see children placed in a relative's home instead of with foster parents. One Elder criticized the child welfare system for not doing "a proper job" of communicating with the family and for placing the children in homes that were not safe:

I said, 'What are you doing?' I says, 'You're taking my granddaughter out of her mother's home and putting her in the same situation.... Maybe it might not be every day, but she does the same thing my daughter's doing.'

Another Elder talked about the need to support parents who have been reported to the Ministry, particularly single mothers, who are vulnerable. She feels that a parent may be judged for a "spare moment" and the children taken away when it isn't necessary:

It's just that spare moment thing, right? The upset, hey? So I think a circle of the individuals coming together and talking about it rather than taking the child. What they do is they … the cops get involved…. I guess what I'm saying is what I see is the mother – most of the time it's always the mother that's got them; it's not very often it's the father. It's very few and far between. But the mother seems to get picked on, bullied. Feel bullied, you know? She's lost her self-esteem and emotions right there and then when the kids get taken away. And get her point of view, help her with support one on one.

The Elder went on to suggest that the parent be given options for counselling and should have some say in finding a supportive counselor:

If she wants to have a one on one with a counsellor, we have a dry out center there. And ask her, give her the names of the counsellors around there and ask her, 'Would you prefer one of these to go one on one with?'

You know, and I think it would be better if she had the choice of that person. Yeah, because there's just mainly a small community, you know, everybody knows each other. They might put her with somebody else that just don't see eye to eye to just push her away. She needs somebody [she can] embrace and say 'I need help. Yes, I do need …' … And ask her, 'Do you know any relatives here that you would like to see the kids with?' Yeah 'cause a lot of times they just get taken over to Port Hardy for three weeks to a month or whatever time before the judge finally has time for you. You know? And she's at loss. It's almost like a death. She's left alone. The cops have come and done their job. The welfare came and done their job and this one is just standing alone. She's lost.

STRENGTHS

While the Whe-la-la-U community has challenges, it also possesses many strengths and assets, including Elders with rich knowledge and the time and desire to share it; strong role models, including people who have battled addiction and regained their balance; close-knit, supportive families; and youth with talents, dreams, and goals.

Family

Many parents who were interviewed had something to say about the many helpful things they had learned from their family, including respect and dedication:

Knowing who my family is, like going down island with my grandparents all the time – 'This is your family, and this is how we're related' … and you gotta show them respect … give them hugs, tell them you love them.

[I] was basically raised by my aunty. She taught me that whatever I want in life I need to get in life for myself.

Many of the youth in the focus group said they don't relate to being alone because they are very close to their families:

I don't really have that problem … [we] are all really close.

I say the same, too. With my sisters, my dad, and my younger brother, 'cause we're all close to each other…. My younger brother, I have to teach him what's right and wrong … show him how it's done. Teach him to trust … learn to be one.

Role Models

One of the community's many assets is its members who have sought treatment for their addictions and regained a healthy balance in their lives. One parent, for example, reflected on how her recovery has made her a better parent:

> *It comes back to taking the time to teaching your children … the values and using my own story again. I was an addict, I was an alcoholic, and today my daughter just finished doing a treatment program here, and before she left home she came and she gave me a hug and she goes, 'You know mom, I thought you were real anal. I thought you thought you knew everything, but I now know you only know what you know because you were an addict, you were an alcoholic, you were an abused person.' And I said, 'Thank you.' And I was telling my daughter that even as hard core as I went through … I take it as a teaching because now I know I broke the chain. I said, 'Not once have I ever spanked you guys. I always made you be responsible. Send you away, make you think about what you did, make you come back and apologize.'*

Some of the parents spoke about role models and most who did find them in their immediate families. One parent, if they needed someone to talk to, would speak with their "godfather … Elder in training." The person who inspired one parent most was their sister:

> *[S]he just … takes a lot of kids and she's been doing it for a long time. She kinda reminds me of my granny. Just takes anyone in and doesn't care where you come from, who you are … she just takes them in and just loves them.*

One parent looked up to a teacher who *"always took time out of his day … it was one-on-one practically … he was always … respectful and loving."*

In discussing the qualities of a positive role model, one person mentioned that communication is easier when there is someone who will openly listen.

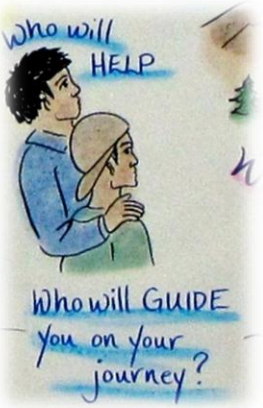
Many of the youth listed Elders and family members as role models: "*my mom … she has always been a hard worker*"; "*my dad … my grandpa … my sister – she acts like my dad*." Some of the youth talked about an Elder who is about 70 years old and still jogs the boardwalk daily – "*that's pretty cool*," they thought.

When asked what qualities Elders have that a youth admires, the youth replied:

> *The way they talk about our culture … the way they talk our language … and the way they teach us.*

"*My grandpa*" inspired one youth the most:

> *When [he] played with a broken arm and still won…. That was pretty good. My dad told me that once … he played basketball once and he's like the shortest guy in that team. And he's like … he can actually hit … the backboards.*



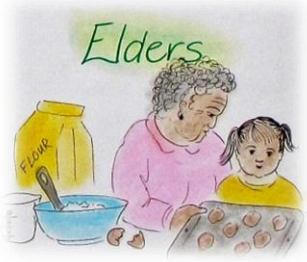
One youth said, "*My dad and my sister got me through school*." Another said a brother helped out:

> *He's pretty much there for me and my little brother.... He would take us out to eat, bring us swimming, buy us a little bit of clothes here and there … tell us what is right and wrong … and what we can do in our lives … how to finish school.*

Elders

The Whe-la-la-U youth had many positive things to say about the community's Elders:

> *Being First Nations, we learn a lot from our Elders and that. And they teach us a lot of stuff that we need to learn about our culture. 'Cause you can go up to an Elder and ask them who your family is and where they're from … and they'll tell you off the top of their head, without even looking in a book or anything.*



> *They're never too busy, either…. I can remember going to see my gran at 2 o'clock in the morning and just chatting with her until 5:00 a.m. That is just the way I see it, is our Elders are … no matter what they're doing, they'll just put everything down in that instant to help us.*

Another youth said that the Elders teach through their stories:

> *The good and bad stories that we hear…. It's good for us to go through it … so we know what's right and wrong … what to aim for and what not to aim for.*

Some of the main things that parents have learned from Elders include "*being humble*" and "*just to be myself*." Another parent shared that the most valuable teaching they had learned from the Elders is to "*believe in prayer*." Another parent discussed teachings about respect and unconditional help:

> *[D]ay-to-day stuff about respect and … helping if you need it, if you're needed…. It's kind of like with some of the Elders … an open door policy. They're always there.*

One parent likes that the Elders

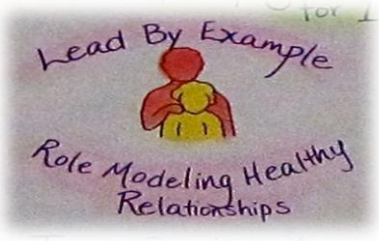
> *always have time…. They're not afraid to tell you; they're not afraid to hold anything back … they're not too proud … and they'll give me the best answer to their knowledge.*

Many of the Whe-la-la-U Elders expressed a willingness to help and support the community, including community members who are struggling and who feel alone. One Elder, for example, said:

> *I'm strong today. I help others that try to commit suicide I say, 'That's not the answer, you just need to love yourself. Respect yourself. Ask for forgiveness. Ask for healingness. It's right here in your heart.' … You know, they hate themselves because of what … it's just 'cause of what happened to them, some certain issue, either they got molested or raped or whatever it was, or called down. There's something they're ashamed of that they're not talking about, they need to get rid of that. That's what … a lot of them here – they need to deal with issues.... We can help them, we can.*

A clear strength of this community rests in the cross-generational teachings that continue to occur on a regular basis; the Elders have taught the younger generations many traditional values, such as respect and the importance of family. Most of the parents, for example, mentioned respect as the main cultural teaching they learned from their families and Elders. One parent said they had been raised by a grandparent who "*really pounded my head that respect was the biggest thing to have*." Another parent similarly remarked on these lessons, which they have also passed on to their own children:

> *I'm not sure if it's … my culture's teachings, but I grew up [to] learn respect for others, using your manners, those day-to-day things. Yeah, and I've taught my children that.*



Another parent was taught to show respect through honouring Elders:

> *Honour [Elders] as leaders and let them know that I'm here because … you helped me get here in a way … by their teaching…. And it's keeping our family strong – that's one of the main things that [the Elders are] to do is always remind us who we're related to.*

A parent talked about describing First Nation culture to non-Aboriginal friends:

> *Because some people – some of my … non-Aboriginal friends that asked, they're like 'What's it like, man?' I say respect – we do our best to show it in every way possible, inside our culture home and outside our home…. We respect the little kids because they're our future, we do our best to keep our Elders involved – they're our treasures. We … look to them with great respect. We don't … do anything to harm them.*

Youth

The youth enjoyed answering questions that pertained to their future. Some of them have dreams to "just to finish high school", while others want to go to university or college. Some of the youth also harbour specific and unique dreams, such as:

> *Getting my red seal in cooking.*
>
> *Art school … visual arts program.*
>
> *To have a job, and have my own family, my own home … living my life.*
>
> *To get a job that I like that earns a decent amount.*

One youth said:

> *The way I'm growing up right now is that I wanna learn how to take care of … like your own. Learn how to … get an education … go back to school … how to get an actual job – like a real job … start living normally.*

When asked how their community can help them achieve their dreams, the youth said they would like support with their "*graduations*" and to have help with university or college. Once they finish high school, they think it would be helpful to have a "*living allowance*" to be able to pay rent and "*stuff*."

The youth said they get their strength from many people in the community, including grandparents, parents, family, "*Mom*," "*aunties and uncles*," "*Dad*," and Elders. One youth also said they get their strength from "*basically like our history, too, 'cause it helps strengthen you*."

MOVING FORWARD

The Whe-la-la-U Elders talk a lot about the old ways and offer much advice about how to improve life for the younger generations.

Examples of what the community wants:

- Community meetings
- Communication with the government
- Children to learn cultural knowledge, including their language and traditional practices like food gathering and preservation
- People to love, respect, and care about each other
- Community members to be responsible for their behaviours and to do things for themselves instead of relying on others
- Drugs and alcohol out of their community
- Education and opportunities for youth
- Parenting courses and community involvement in community activities
- To take care of the children

In the sections that follow, we highlight community members' thoughts on what the community needs to support individuals and families. These ideas are organized into the following sections: *education*; *activities and facilities*; *programs and services*; *strengthening cultural identity*; *strengthening families*; and *keeping children out of care*.

Education

Almost everyone in the Whe-la-la-U community recognizes the value of education. Two Elders talked about the importance of higher education:

> *I would like to see a lot more of our people to being groomed to be ... professionals in this world. Like doctors, lawyers, and, you know, anything like commercial accountant where you have to go to university for specializing.... If other people are capable of doing it then the Indians are just as capable of doing it.*
>
> *Education is what I think. I think that's ... what we need and ... our children need to be well educated because we got the land claims going on. And ... if and when they ever decide to give us back our land we will need to know how to look after it. We need young people who will be looking after the forestry and the fisheries, we need business people. But... we need all those things. Right now we don't have any so we still got white people working for us.*

Activities and Facilities

Through both focus groups and individual conversations, all of the youth expressed that they would like to see more physical activities such as soccer, basketball, volleyball, baseball, football, rugby, and more "*tournaments where families could all be a part of*."

Parents and Elders agree that physical activities are important for children and youth:

> *[Playing sports] keeps their bodies moving and their energy building up and they use it in a good way.*
>
> *It's the same as me as an adult. If I don't keep busy it gives me time to think of stuff that … even though you don't want to, sometimes the negative stuff comes in.*

Currently there is a family night at the recreation centre every Friday, but one youth thinks that more family nights would make families stronger:

> *I'm kinda thinking that they should do more of those … instead of just doing teen stuff … so families stay together and they don't go out and drink and do whatever.*

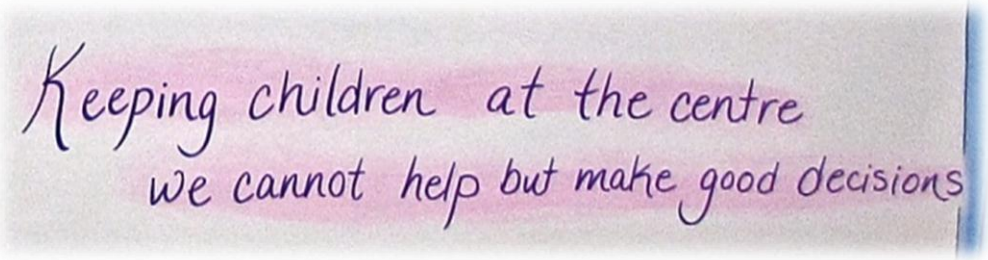
A lot of people used to attend a family night on Saturdays as well, but this no longer happens because the recreation centre is closed on Saturdays. The youth would like to see this change:

> *There used to be a lot of people. There used to be at least over 100 people that'd go up there with their kids, and the adults just let the kids play in the gym and do whatever. I think being open an extra day on the weekend would be pretty sweet.*

Several of the youth said they would like to do more cultural activities, and a parent suggested "*dinners. Dinners catch everybody*."

Another parent stressed that the whole community should be involved in family activities:

> *It just takes an event where it brings parents together and not to try to be so segregated, but just come together and 'hey, let's be open about one another and have some open thoughts about what we can do … to enhance our community and teach our children where they're from.*



Services and Programs

Community members noted many service gaps, including services and housing for Elders, parenting programs, youth programs, counselling for youth around alcohol and drugs, and a safe home for youth.

> *Like they don't even have a safe home anymore. They used to have a safe home where as a child is getting abused…. Who wants to go off the island?*
>
> *[The community needs] more one-on-one workers … because you can't change people here … they gotta do it on their own…. Right, so more one-on-one workers, as in just getting to know what they want, you know, what the kids want.*

Other parents discussed the lack of resources and programs for youth drug and alcohol addiction:

> *Now it's just the alcohol and drugs. A while back it was suicide. We never had any full committed [suicide] but there was calls in. And it comes back to a place of belonging…. I was saying the kids, the teens need a place to go.*
>
> *Yeah, and [the youth] need good counselling place for them you know at night, you know if they need to.*

Several community members noted service gaps and a lack of housing for Elders. One person suggested a seniors' complex with varying levels of care. It would include independent living units as well as a nurse or medical care for those who can't care for themselves.

Strengthening Families

As noted above, most of the Whe-la-la-U community members love their home and think that it's a good community.

For a parent, a healthy family revolves around strong values, including:

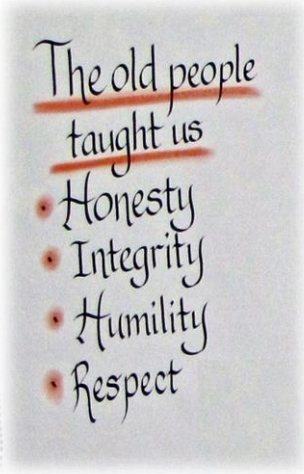
> *[A] lot of communication, a lot of respect … [and the home is] definitely drug free.... If you have that, everything else falls in place.*

One Elder talked about the importance of encouraging children:

> *And every time I see a kid that's 10, 11, and up, I always say, 'It's so nice to see your willingness to work. I am so proud of you.' There's too many times the kids that get unnoticed when they're doing a little bit work or trying to do work and they don't get appreciated.*

A parent also shared a story that illustrated how this kind of acknowledgment makes children feel that they belong and are valued:

> *I remember one meeting ... we got an Elder to ... grace for the food…. And you know how it is, is when we first eat it's Elders first, then guests. But the Elder that did the grace ... she said grace, [then] "Okay, kids, you go first. Elders we'll ... get our serving ... but ... these guys are the reason why we're here. Let's have them eat first.' And like all the kids are like, 'What?' And she's like, "No ... no, this is your guys' dinner, go ahead.' ... So they all jumped up and then once they heard that second time they all ran up there, right? So I think more lunches, dinners ... because ... even that little ... grace there, the kids probably gained more respect for that Elder lady than ... any other time.*



An Elder's advice to parents is to spend more time with the children and make sure they get enough sleep and nutrition.

> *[Parents] need to care a lot more, to spend a lot more with their kids to prepare them for ... what has entered into our country. We have to live, live their lives the way they live in order to earn money, in order to stay on top ... health wise [and] to provide for your own needs, you know? ... But that's not enough. There needs better preparation when they're younger so they have a better foundation in school. And not miss school. That's one of the main things is not to miss school and for the parents to help them, you know. And not ... be drinking or something and maybe kids lose their sleep.*

Strengthening Cultural Identity

Many of the Whe-la-la-U parents believe that cultural programming helps the youth to establish identity and a sense of belonging in the community.

> *To show your kids where you come from and what language you come from. I think [it's] very important ... to keep our culture going, because ... one day it's not gonna be here…. It's just gonna be taken away just like what happened to our grandparents…. Just slapped right outta your hands. And I think it's very important to keep our culture running ... the language, everything ... dancing…*

A parent talked about how dancing strengthened her daughter's sense of identity:

> *My daughter was initiated into the ... dance. And she came off and she was, 'Oh Mom, I can't believe it. I can't even explain it.' I was like, 'What did it feel like?' She said, 'I was a total different person. It wasn't even me. I was flying like a butterfly.' And that's our family crest, right?*

An Elder noted that cultural activities have many lessons:

> *When giving a potlatch, youth can be encouraged by asking them to do a job for the potlatch. [Boosts] … your self-esteem, and teaches you to be respectful, and teaches you [about] family ... that's the thing, 'cause the families get together, they work together, they do things together, which is something that is really important. And I think those families that haven't done it need to for their children.... Yeah. By inviting [youth] and giving them tasks to do towards the cultural event. And telling them who they are and where they come from so that they know.*

Another Elder suggested including children in potlatch preparations as a way to encourage them to become more involved in cultural activities:

> *By including them in what we're doing. Like going and any thing, I always make it a point to go and in the summer they pick berries and when they have the cultural event they give away the little jars of jam that they make. I think they're proud of that.*

A parent talked about encouraging youth to make healthy choices through *"leading by example"*:

> *I believe it comes back to the honour system as honouring our Elders and put them in first and forefront in our lives and allow them to lead…. So that's the thing that I see that's needed is for our Elders just to have that voice again and a respect that they so well deserve.*

Many of the community's Elders talked about the need to revitalize and preserve the language before it slips away. One Elder said that it's not enough to teach the language; there has to be opportunities to speak it. Another Elder worries about losing the language and wants to speak it more.

> *I need to learn more about language 'cause I'm losing it now. We need, most of all I want to, I got to try to find some Elders I can talk to; I don't want to lose it.*

An Elder talked about the importance of acknowledging what the old people did by continuing to practice their culture even when it was against the law, at great risk to themselves:

> *You know your grandparents, my great grandparents went to jail and we need to do things to acknowledge what they did. Because what they did helped to keep our culture alive.*

A parent made the important point that cultural learning involves more than singing and dancing; food gathering and other life skills are essential, too:

> *It's like for art and like a lot of the stuff that they do ... like the singing and all that, I caution them in that area because I said that's not really an*

upbringing. Life as they need to learn are life skills to doing like cleaning plants, learn how to clean salmon and barbeque, smoke and go hunting. Like when I was young, growing up, I mean, I didn't have a choice in the matter. My grandfather just said, 'Come on, we're going fishing.' Okay, and away I went and learned it.

Keeping Children Out of Care

For some of the Whe-la-la-U Elders, what's needed to keep children out of care is simple:

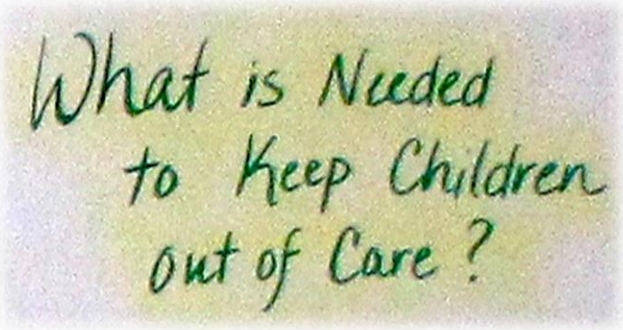
> *Oh, is the young person to quit the alcohol and drugs then, that's what's needed.*
>
> *Parents sobering up and getting anger management and just taking good care of the children, you know, bringing them up to be good citizens.*

Youth also mentioned that parents should be present when caring for their children:

> *[They should] not leav[e] them at home by themselves and … stop drinking while their kids are at the house.*
>
> *If you wanna go out and like have time to yourself, just make sure you have someone there that can watch your child for you, instead of leaving him or her home alone … like, by themselves.*

Several people mentioned parenting education, beginning with the youth:

> *If we could educate parents and youth at the same time, I think there will be a big, big change…. If we could come to a place where we could teach young moms or even parents, partners – I mean, really educate them and not have to go through the hardship I went through. I mean, imagine how many stories … different stories are out there.... If we could come to a place and share those stories … that's educating…. If we could do that, then I think we could come to a place of healthier community.*



Beyond support for individual parents and families, many people shared strategies for caring for children as a community. A youth, for example, noted that young parents "*shouldn't try to do it on their own*," and another youth added more suggestions:

> *[They could] move in with their moms … their parents. So they could help them out.*
>
> *Getting help, like ask somebody to move in with you or ask somebody that you trust that can help you with your life, that you might need help in.*
>
> *Going to see a counsellor, and daycare probably helps out quite a bit for young parents.*

A parent who currently has a child in the care of extended family agrees that parents need more child care support:

> *Like, helping the mothers that need help.*

In crisis situations, rather than the Ministry apprehending the children, an Elder would like to see:

> *A meeting with all that are involved, I guess. The most of the time it's the cops that are involved at first.... But I guess talking to like the person that phoned in the mother, the cops, the social workers – have a circle that give the benefit of the doubt for the mother and the father to voice their voice, because sometimes a lot … sometimes I have seen that this person phoned because they got into an argument with this. And yes, she drinks, but she looks after her kids and stuff, you know?*

Another Elder said that First Nations have to take control of their own child welfare services:

> *To look after [our children] ourselves. We had a social worker ... one of our own people and she did an excellent job.… I remember one family – instead of taking the children away, she put two people in their home to teach her how to do things at home. To teach her how to go shopping for healthy food. They weren't … they were instructed not to do the work for her but to show her how to do it.... And if there was a problem with a family and a child, she would go and bring all the family together – and extended family – and they would meet and talk about the problem.*

The same Elder noted that her mother had told her that, in the old times, there was a high level of community autonomy in relation to child care:

> *The old people were very, very … fussy about who was looking after the children. And they were not allowed to go anywhere but family. I think … it's mainly that we take charge of their care.*

Another Elder suggested that training be offered to people in the community who want to become foster parents, and added that they should be paid adequately for looking after children:

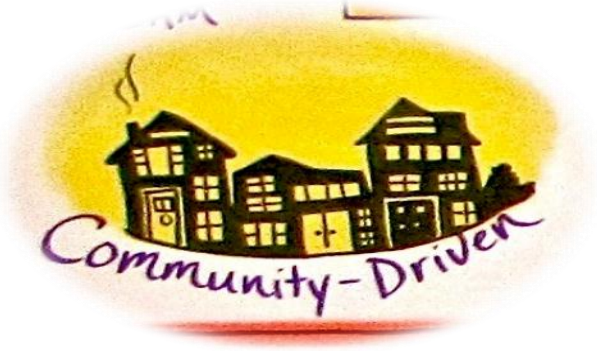
> *So long as they trained before they do it and then be paid adequately and that someone would check up on them every now and then. Seeing how*

well the kids are being taken care of.... A lot of folks they may have the ... desire to be foster parents, you know. How to be foster parents. I think a lot of people kind of scary, it scares you – what kind of kids will there be and all that, you know. But with less and less people, less and less jobs, they might ... take an interest in it if there's proper training.

A parent cautioned, however, that anyone thinking about taking in a foster child should ask themselves, "*Do I have what it takes to help that child? ... It really takes a big heart.*"

In our summary of the conversations that took place with the Whe-la-la-U community, the last words go to a parent who said:

We can't keep dwelling on things that happened yesteryear and wishing and hoping that we can fix it…. It's about taking action, and that's love…. It'll never change if we keep ... sweeping under the rug.... The only thing we got to know [is that] we love each other, and then we have this same dream, the same idea for our people – for our people and for us to have a good, healthy community.



Part 4: Closing Remarks

It is clear from our conversations that many of the challenges our children and communities face are rooted in ongoing colonial impacts that have caused immeasurable harm to our people and disrupted our traditional way of life – a way of life that we view as key to rebuilding healthy families and communities. This broader content must be considered in moving the discussion of keeping children out of government care beyond the individual child and parent and toward an inclusive, community approach. As our Elders emphasize, our children can only be understood as part of a whole that includes their family, community, culture, and the natural environment.

The Ministry has publically stated that the child welfare system has failed to serve the best interests of Aboriginal children and families; in many ways the welfare system has also weakened the ability of families and communities to care for our own children. Many positive changes have been made in recent years; still, our communities must take the lead in developing holistic systems of care for our own children and families. As a first step, child welfare policies and procedures need to be changed to recognize grandparents and other relatives as the preferred caregivers for children at risk of being taken into government care. Further, our community leaders need to have a voice in any revision or development of culturally relevant policies and procedures that impact our children and families.

The conversations that took place through our community engagement process have made it abundantly clear what our people need to keep our children out of government care: stronger families, stronger communities, and stronger support networks.

APPENDICES

Youth Survey Summary

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learning my culture is important	5	4			
I am able to do lots of activities on my reserve	2	4	3		1
I feel accepted by others.	3	5	1		
I am learning from the Elders	1	5	1	1	
I get enough support in order to succeed at school	4	3	2		
I feel safe in the community	7	2			
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	1	4	1		2

QUESTIONS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I participate in cultural activities.	2	1	5		
I am learning my Native language.	2	1	4	2	
I am learning about my culture	1	3	3	2	
I participate in activities on my reserve	1	3	4	1	
I feel safe on my reserve	2	6	1		
I worry about life	2	2	2	1	2
I feel successful		5	4		
Drugs and alcohol are having an impact on my life	1	1	2	3	2

Survey Analysis

The survey results suggest that learning culture is important to the youth; and while they are learning some culture, and would like to learn more. The youth feel accepted, and feel they receive enough support through activities, support in school and feeling safe in their home and in their community. While alcohol and drugs are not a huge factor in their lives there were two youth who feels an impact frequently. The youth often feel successful in their daily lives. This may be contributed to the support they receive from their community.

Parent Survey Summary

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learning my culture is important	5	2			
There are enough cultural activities for families in my community	1	2	2	1	1
There are enough activities for youth in my community		4		3	
I would like to spend time supporting the youth of my community	6				
I feel accepted by others	1	4		1	
Adequate support is available for adults/parents	2	3	1	1	
I have adequate, safe housing	4	1	1	1	
Adequate support is available for youth		5	1	1	
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	2	2	2		

QUESTIONS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I participate in cultural activities	1	1	3	1	
I am learning my Native language	1	1	1	2	1
I participate in activities in my community	2	4			
I spend time supporting the youth in my community	2	1	3		
I feel safe in the community	1	1	2	2	
I worry about life	1		2	2	
Drugs and alcohol are having an impact on my life	1	1	2	1	

Survey Analysis

There were seven surveys completed by parents. All seven parents agreed that participating and learning culture is important. Parents agree that while there are cultural activities for the community, there could be more culture provided for families and youth. It is clear all of the parents surveyed would like to spend more time supporting the youth. In general, parents feel there is adequate, safe housing along with having a sense of safety in their community. The survey also suggests that parents have concerns with children being in the foster care system.

Elder Survey Summary

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I know a lot about my culture	4	2	1		
There are enough cultural activities for families in my community	1	3	3		
There are enough activities for youth in my community	2	2	2		
I would like to spend time supporting the youth of my community	2	3			
Adequate support is available for adults/parents	1	1	4		
I have adequate, safe housing	3	2	2	1	
Adequate support is available for youth	1	2	2	1	
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	3			1	1

QUESTIONS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I participate in cultural activities	2	1	2	2	1
I speak my Native language frequently	3	2	3		
I participate in activities in my community	3	1	5		
I spend time supporting the youth of my community	3		2	2	1
I feel safe in the community	4		4		
I worry about life	1	1	3	3	
Drugs and alcohol are having an impact on my life	1	3			4

Survey Analysis

Seven surveys were completed. The Elders are separated into two age categories, 55 – 64 and then 65+ categories. There were 3 Elders between 55 -64; and 4 Elders 65 and up. After reviewing the data, we found that Elders know a lot about their culture and feel that there are enough cultural activities and activities in general for parents and youth. For the most part, Elders feel safe in their community and mostly agree with adequate and safe housing. The survey also indicates that while there are two Elders who disagree with having concerns for children who are in the foster care system the majority feel this is a grave concern for them.

This report was compiled in collaboration with Sasamans Society

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