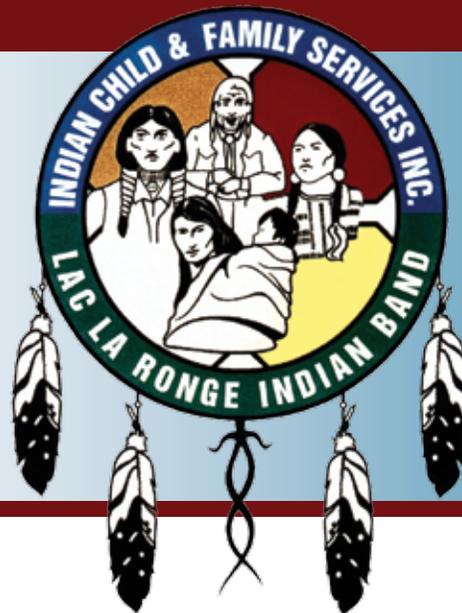


Lac La Ronge Indian Band Child & Family Services Agency Inc.

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Dexter Kinequon, Executive Director
Kyla McKenzie, Assistant Director



Background

Lac La Ronge Indian Band Child & Family Services Agency Inc. (familiarily known as La Ronge ICFS) serves a population of 4,700 persons—of whom 1,800 are under the age of 18—in six Saskatchewan communities.

La Ronge ICFS is an independent, corporate body governed by an elected eight-member Board of Directors and funded by the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, a federal governmental department. The Saskatchewan province's Ministry of Social Services has delegated authority to La Ronge ICFS since 1994 to provide Lac La Ronge Indian Band members with:

- Child protection services
- Foster care services
- Professional management and staff
- Public awareness and education
- Training in human resource development
- Program evaluation
- Family support services
- Preventative services
- Child and youth services

An open and forward-thinking philosophy pervades the organizational culture at La Ronge ICFS. "We believe our agency is distinguished because we look at trends and allow ourselves to explore all opportunities that spur creativity and innovation," asserts Executive Director Dexter Kinequon.

The agency's quest for innovation is closely interwoven with its focus on the value of its 35-member staff. "We are known as an employer that meets the needs of its employees and offers many perks and benefits," Kinequon says. For example, the agency pays full membership fees for staff members to use gyms and fitness centers, a small expense that Kinequon says yields big returns in a healthier and happier workplace. "We consider staff an investment," he declares. "Satisfied employees provide better service, which, in turn, results in greater satisfaction among the persons we serve."

Staff recognition is at the heart of the agency's employee programs. "People are important, and we strive to make them feel important," says Assistant Director Kyla McKenzie. The recognition includes acknowledging employees' many accomplishments and their years of service.

Low caseloads for counselors also help La Ronge ICFS staff members to concentrate on the specific needs of each person the agency serves.

Thinking creatively and valuing employees have led to a low staff turnover rate. “Staff retention is a big concern among First Nations communities,” Kinequon says. “La Ronge ICFS is fortunate and unique to have so many dedicated and long-time staff members on board. They bring vast skills and knowledge to our agency.”

The Challenge

Senior managers at La Ronge ICFS were confident that the agency’s values were aligned with the principles of accreditation. Yet the decision to seek accreditation was a challenging one and was debated inside and outside of the agency.

Internally, front-line staff members did not initially understand the accreditation process. Although they readily acknowledged the prestige of being accredited, many were hesitant to plunge into the process. “What if we fail?” was a doubt expressed by several employees. Kinequon privately weighed the risk-taking venture. “No one wants to not make the grade in the public eye,” he admits.

With staff education and discussion, staff members eventually felt positive that they were ready to tackle the accreditation process. Bolstered by staff buy in, from front-line to senior management, an external challenge remained to convince the public and the agency’s governance that accreditation was a beneficial goal. “I lobbied Lac La Ronge Indian Band politicians and La Ronge ICFS board members for a long time so they could fully grasp and embrace the concept of accreditation,” Kinequon remembers.

The Journey

When the decision to pursue accreditation was finalized, another decision loomed: Which accreditor to partner with on the accreditation journey?

La Ronge ICFS began its evaluation by asking organizations that had achieved accreditation about their survey experiences. Then the agency began conversations with possible accreditors.

“One accreditor told us in a disinterested way that we must do this, this, and this to earn accreditation. CARF, in contrast, promised us, ‘We’ll work with you to get you accredited,’” Kinequon recalls. He was also impressed because CARF had a Canadian office and had previous success in accrediting First Nations agencies.

CARF delivered on its pledge to provide support and guidance. “CARF staff members were at our side as we prepared for our survey. They gave us guidance and helped us conduct mock surveys,” Kinequon says.

When the day of the on-site CARF survey dawned, La Ronge ICFS staff members were confident that they were well prepared, although feelings of anticipation and apprehension still ran high.

They had no need to feel apprehensive. “The surveyors had an ability to cut through the clutter,” Kinequon observes. “True to CARF’s consultative hallmark, the surveyors provided valuable advice on ways we could enhance our services.” At the end of the survey, agency staff members at all levels agreed that the CARF survey had been beneficial, no matter what the accreditation decision turned out to be.

Kinequon believes that the accreditation journey inspired the agency’s staff members to excel. “As a result of preparing for and going through our survey, our services continue to improve all of the time,” he reports.

Implementing the Quality Standards

To build staff understanding and enthusiasm, employees were gradually introduced to CARF's accreditation standards. McKenzie explains, "We began raising a single standard during each of our weekly staff meetings, and then we asked, 'How are we doing as an agency in meeting this standard?' We thus began documenting our conformance to the CARF standards."

However, survey preparation was not always an easy path for La Ronge ICFS. "Many of our business practices were oral," McKenzie recounts. "There was a general perception of 'that's the way we've always done it.' Preparing for accreditation required us to write down policies and procedures."

One of the agency's biggest tasks was creating its Occupational Health and Safety Manual. Transportation, for example, is vital to the agency, but the policies and procedures to ensure safety had been taken for granted. "We wrote down requirements, checklists, and drills, and compiled them in a single document," McKenzie says. "The manual ensures we follow procedures not only now but also in the future. And, since we continually monitor our business activities for quality, we can make changes to the policies and procedures when we see they are needed."

Accreditation Promotes Quality

The zeal and hard work of La Ronge ICFS staff members paid off in the agency achieving a three-year accreditation award, the highest available, from CARF for the agency's child and youth services in case management/services coordination, child/youth protection, family preservation and support, and foster family and kinship care. "We can now say we meet international standards of practice," Kinequon states with justifiable pride.

So impressed are Kinequon and McKenzie with the accreditation process that they are both considering submitting their applications to be trained to become CARF surveyors. CARF surveyors are peers in the field who bring their years of experience and expertise to the organizations they survey.

Kinequon advises organizations that are considering accreditation, "Be sure you understand why you want to be accredited. Your reason will establish your commitment to follow through. For example, if you're looking to improve your services, accreditation offers the roadmap to guide you. If you think only that accreditation is a trophy to impress others, you likely won't have the passion and the determination to earn accreditation."

Using his own agency's experience as an example, Kinequon encourages talking with other accredited organizations to understand the accreditation process before launching into it. McKenzie urges organizations to decide on a time frame for a survey and then commit to work steadily toward it. "It's easy to put off the accreditation journey because it might seem like a long road," she says.

Kinequon and McKenzie agree that accreditation plays an important role in the future of First Nations' programs and services. Kinequon reflects, "Our agency and First Nations communities in general exist in a challenging environment and are always under scrutiny. How can we demonstrate we are doing what we say we are doing? One answer lies in accreditation."

He concludes, "With tools we learned from CARF, we welcome the opportunity to provide leadership in improving child welfare among First Nations communities."