



Nova Scotia  
Home for Colored Children  
Restorative Inquiry

# Reflection and Action Task Group

2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the Legislature



© Crown copyright, Province of Nova Scotia, 2019

Reflection and Action Task Group 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the Legislature  
Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children Restorative Inquiry  
April 2019

ISBN 978-1-55457-955-6



**SANKOFA:**

“To reach back and get it”

Sankofa is a Ghanaian word that, in English, means “to reach back and get it.” The principle of Sankofa is that one should gather the best of what the past has to teach in order to succeed in the future.

It is expressed visually as a bird that flies forward while looking backward with an egg in its mouth.



# About the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry

The Government of Nova Scotia is currently holding a public inquiry into the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children (the Home) as part of its response to the Home's history and the abuse that occurred there. Through the lens of experiences of former Home residents and others related to the history of the Home, the Restorative Inquiry has been examining systemic and institutional racism in Nova Scotia. Its mandate includes examining the impact this harmful legacy has had on families and communities. It also tries to address the consequences of this legacy in a meaningful, forward-focused way.

The Restorative Inquiry has been working with former residents, affected communities, and public partners—including government—to develop a shared understanding of what happened, why it happened, and why it matters for all Nova Scotians. Throughout this Inquiry, partners have been working together to address this legacy with a focus on future solutions—solutions that can prevent further harm by making meaningful changes toward a safer, healthier, and just future.

The activities facilitated by the Council of Parties end in March 2019. Following this, the Council of Parties will focus on sharing and reporting its work outlining activities, actions, and implementation plans for continuing action addressing the central issues.

# About our task group

As outlined in the Restorative Inquiry's mandate and terms of reference, the Reflection and Action Task Group works collaboratively with the Council of Parties—the governing body leading the Inquiry—to ensure public and government institutions are actively engaged in and support the Restorative Inquiry process. We also consider knowledge gained throughout the process so we can make plans to take appropriate action during the final phase of planning and action.

The Reflection and Action Task Group includes representatives from the Inquiry's Council of Parties and deputy ministers from the following government departments:

- Communities, Culture, and Heritage
- Community Services
- Education and Early Childhood Development
- Health and Wellness (including IWK & NSHA)
- Justice
- Labour and Advanced Education

We have a mandated responsibility to report to the legislature on government's participation and action in advancing the goals and impacts of the Restorative Inquiry. It is essential that all members of the legislature, as representatives of all Nova Scotians, be part of this learning process and take part in our collective responsibility to find a better way forward.

This report summarizes government's participation in the Inquiry's work. The Council of Parties (as commissioners) reports on the overall work of the Inquiry. It has published three reports over the course of its mandate summarizing the work and themes that have emerged from each phase of the mandate. These reports can be found on the Restorative Inquiry's website: [restorativeinquiry.ca](http://restorativeinquiry.ca).

This is the second report of the Reflection and Action Task Group to the legislature. It summarizes government's participation in the Inquiry during the learning and understanding phase, and as we proceed in the planning and action phase.

## Phases of the Restorative Inquiry

The Restorative Inquiry has facilitated collaborative work through three phases of its mandate:

- Relationship building
- Learning and understanding
- Planning and action

The Restorative Inquiry has shown us that we are all responsible for making positive change, particularly as it relates to the issues the Inquiry has identified. The initial phase of the Inquiry focused on identifying the parties connected to the mandate of the Inquiry and building the relationships needed to undertake collaborative work. The learning and understanding phase involved building further connections—bringing multiple parties together to deepen their exploration and understanding of the issues and their relationships to each other.



## Central issues

Based on what the Inquiry learned from former residents of the Home, partners in government and the community, and through its research, it identified three central issues to guide its work:

- responses to institutionalized abuse
- experiences of children and youth in the care of the province
- historic and ongoing impacts of systemic racism on African Nova Scotians

### Responses to Institutionalized Abuse

Insights & lessons from NSHCC experience of institutional child abuse

### Experiences of Children and Youth in Care

Experience with care system (particularly for ANS children & youth)

### Impacts of Systemic Racism on African Nova Scotians

Broader patterns and experience of systemic racism (ANS) in Nova Scotia

While these issues are listed separately, the Inquiry has understood and approached them as interconnected. As all involved deepen and share their understanding of these issues, we can, together, use this shared understanding to build the capacity we need to best address them.

## The story of the Home

The story of the Home for Colored Children is one of the general failure of systems to meet human needs and how this failure reflects and contributes to the context of systemic racism.

Through our participation in the Inquiry process, we have come to understand the significance of the story of the Home. We have deepened our understanding of the important place the Home has in African Nova Scotian history and culture—that it was a point of pride for the community that worked to establish it with the best of intentions to care for children in our province’s deeply racialized society.

The vision of the Home and the level of commitment from the community to help and support children is what makes it so painful to learn that many of the children and young people who lived there had such harmful experiences. We have come to learn that the story of the Home is not a simple one—that it is much more complicated than good or bad people, or good or bad intentions. As we try to deepen our understanding of why and how this could have happened—to understand these failures of care—we must look at the systems, structures, and society in which it happened. We are learning more about the gaps in the care system that failed former residents of the Home. We are also learning about the conditions that allowed abuse and neglect to take place. The story of the Home and its failure to provide appropriate care, is a story of the racism that has marked Nova Scotia’s history and continues to be embedded within the systems and structures that affect children, families, and communities to this day.

We are privileged to be part of a process that is focused on helping people understand their responsibilities for what happened and for what must happen next to ensure a better future. The Restorative Inquiry has shown us a different way of working. We remain committed to exploring how we can restructure our current ways of working to reflect this principle-based approach to working differently together. We continue to look for ways to create opportunities for people to help us to understand and address problems, and to work with us as we chart our path forward.

## Participation in the Restorative Inquiry process

There are four goals within the mandate of the Restorative Inquiry that guide our participation within the Inquiry process:

- Build just and respectful relationships.
- Develop knowledge and understanding.
- Establish shared understanding and seek just change.
- Develop plans and take action.

As a government, we have offered a variety of supports over the course of the Inquiry, particularly in the following areas:

- administration and infrastructure
- systems examination and sharing of information
- collective participation in dialogue, examination, and action across government and with the Inquiry and its partners
- time and resources that allow us to absorb the lessons we learned and alter our way of thinking so we can adjust the way we work

## Partner circles: Learning and understanding phase

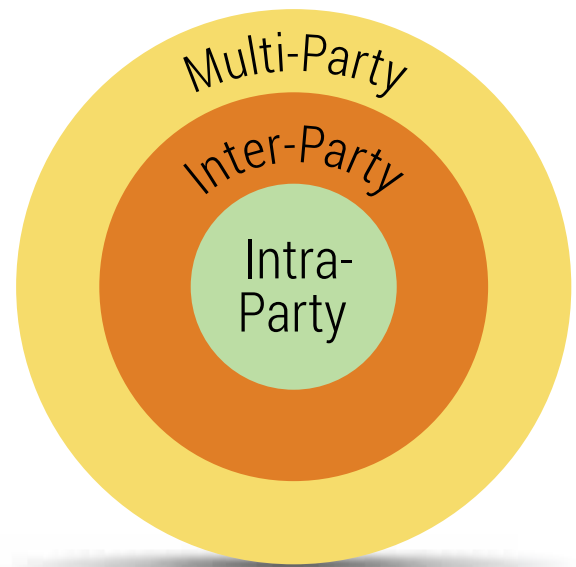
The Restorative Inquiry uses processes grounded in restorative principles. Much of the work has taken place in dialogue circles. Participants in these circles are asked to reflect on and discuss a series of questions related to specific aspects of the central issues. They are then asked to consider where responsibilities lie and what steps should be taken next. The Inquiry process then supports these next actions and brings parties back together to consider and review these next steps.

In addition to sessions with other Inquiry partners, the Inquiry held 16 facilitated dialogue sessions with more than 170 public servants from the following areas:

- child welfare
- education
- health
- justice and policing
- labour, skills, and learning



In collaboration with the Council of Parties, we participated in a series of partner circles as the Inquiry progressed through its mandate. In early phases of work, staff from relevant departments and public institutions participated in intra-party circles, that is, they held dialogues within their own areas of work, to consider how their departments and institutions are connected to the Home and its former residents. They also considered current issues related to those connections and paid particular attention to how these issues are related to systemic racism.



Each dialogue session was designed to build on or incorporate the understanding and learning of previous sessions. During the process, participants built stronger relationships with each other across disciplines, departments, and programs. This shared understanding and these strengthened relationships allowed us to explore the central issues and their relationship to each other in more depth.

Participants took part in multiple circles in each of the following areas and, among other considerations, explored how systemic racism factored into each theme:

- responses to institutionalized abuse
- coming into the care system
- experiences during care
- transitioning out of the care system

These circle dialogue sessions helped us to understand what we need to do to improve government systems, programs, and services. This process was specifically designed to bring us together as a collective. It gave us the opportunity and space to work together to understand different perspectives and their effects across departments and program areas. This process balanced learning about the substantive issues with how we came together to learn. This collaborative process enhanced our capacity to understand fully so that we can act collectively. This process also taught us that we still have much to learn from the experience of the Home.

## What we have come to understand

The partner circles discussed above opened our eyes to how the central issues are interconnected, particularly in the areas of systemic racism, the care system, and responses to institutional abuse. As a province, we need to do better and government must continue to evolve to meet the needs of all Nova Scotians.

### ***Silos and fragmentation***

One of the most important things we learned is how significantly our ways of working can affect those we serve. From our participation in the Inquiry, we learned that our traditional 'system-centred approach' to working has negative effects on both what we intend to do, and how we work with one another.

What do we mean by 'a system-centred approach'? We mean that we often divide human needs into separate issues according to the jurisdiction or responsibilities of a particular department, program, or system. Each one of these can be described as a silo. Laws, policies, and practices are often then developed based on those silos and their interests and objectives, which can lead to fragmentation.

We learned that our fragmented system can make it difficult for us to see and respond to human needs as a whole, and instead divide our focus along the lines of individual systems, programs, or organizational mandates. We believe this must change.

The following are some of the consequences of working within a fragmented government system:

- It is difficult for individual silos to see the total effect their policies and practices have on individuals, families, and communities.
- People find it difficult to know where to turn for help. Their needs don't always fit neatly into boxes. As a result, people have difficulty getting the care they need.
- Silos make it difficult to deliver all the needs of children and young people in care.
- It is difficult for the appropriate silo to respond in a satisfactory manner to institutionalized failures.
- It conditions decision-makers within each silo to react, blame, and defend rather than look for system-wide solutions. Often, an individualized focus of blame limits a wider examination of the conditions, contexts, and circumstances within which abuse and harm occurs.
- It creates barriers to building connections with other silos or with the community.
- The limited scope of each silo allows systemic racism to continue by rendering it at times invisible or revealing itself only partially. These silos make it difficult for the people working within them to understand the way in which racism plays out when it is not a single act. We fail to see that racism is not just about one person's actions or one rule, but about how the systems, themselves, are unfair.



### ***Systemic racism***

Through the story of the Home, we learned that we have to look beyond isolated acts of racism to see how inequality, privilege, and a racialized society contribute to the way institutions are structured and how systems operate. We also need to look at intersecting policies, procedures and practices that grow out of these structures and systems. This will help us to understand how racism played out in relation to the Home and continues to affect the community and children in care.

Overall, we learned that fragmented systems perpetuate the conditions in which systemic racism thrives. At the same time, silos make it difficult to address these conditions. Systemic racism cannot be fully addressed by responding to isolated incidents or by individual departments alone. It must be addressed holistically.

### ***Importance of developing trust***

Participants in the partner circles acknowledged that trust is essential to building healthy relationships. However, they also noted that among many Nova Scotians, particularly African Nova Scotians, there is little trust in government and its systems. Many people mistrust and even fear the systems that are meant to protect them.

### ***The care system***

The story of the Home also revealed how the care system operated and how it failed, in this case, to provide adequate care for the children and youth in the Home. It also revealed how people within the system lacked the authority, abilities, and tools to meet the children's needs.

### ***Response to institutional abuse***

The story of the Home showed how systems operating in isolation from each other failed to work together to respond when abuse in the institution was reported.

## Supportive action we have taken

The Restorative Inquiry is designed to be action-oriented. It focuses on bringing together people who can make immediate changes and those who will look further ahead to address issues that require more work. One of the benefits of coming together in this process is the opportunity to take the lessons of the Home and this process and see how they influence our thinking about initiatives that are currently underway and what we may want to do differently. We have not waited for the end of the Inquiry's mandate to take supportive action.

Part of learning from the story of the Home and former residents' experiences is coming to understand the circumstances that brought children and youth to the Home. These include the financial struggles within families and the community that contributed to children to be taken from their families. As part of child welfare transformation, we have introduced and expanded programs and services that support families and aim to keep children with their families. For example, we have implemented a program (**Families Plus**) that helps families who are at risk of having their children taken into care. Families are assessed and, if there is a reasonable prospect of improvement with the right support, families are given that support to help them retain custody of their children.

Another area of support is **Alternative Family Care (AFC)**—a program that helps to prevent children from coming into care by offering financial assistance and other supports to their families. Since December 2018, more than 290 children have benefited from this program. This assistance helps to reduce the stress on a parent or guardian who is unable to care for their children financially. Knowing that their children are being supported at home, parents or guardians can focus on getting the help they need to solve the problems that put their children at risk of being taken into care.

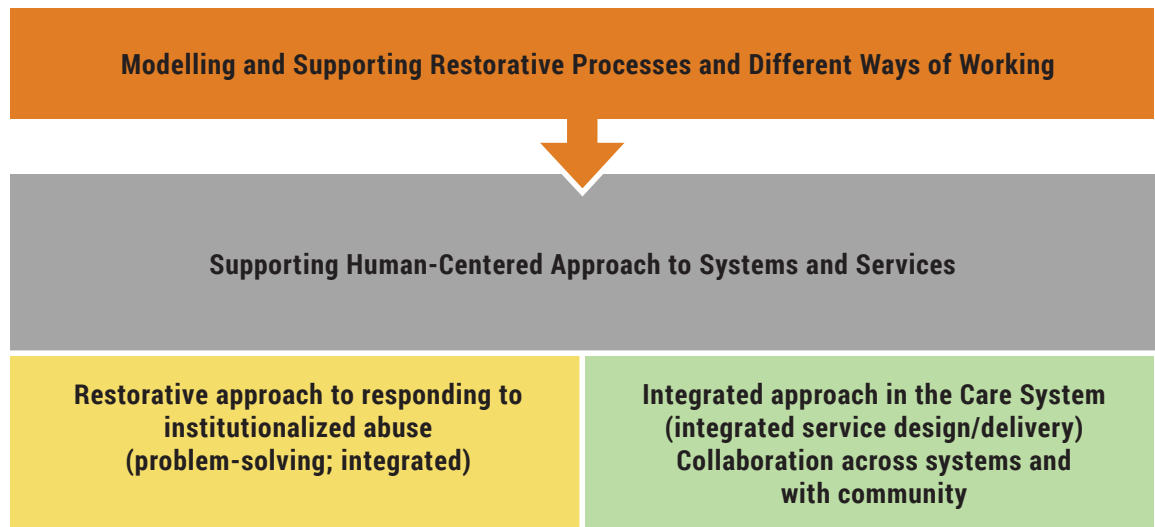
We have also been able to apply the principle-based approach of this process to how we think about developing responses to current gaps in systems. For example, the **education strategy for kids in care** of the province will be developed to take a more holistic and integrated approach to supporting kids in our care. This will help us to better support their learning so they achieve better educational outcomes and a better transition to adulthood.

Additionally, the Department of Justice has focused on **responsive justice**—justice that is more preventative and culturally responsive. Within Justice, lawyers participate in case conferencing and settlement conferencing in child welfare situations. There is a focus on cultural competency to deepen our understanding of overrepresentation in the justice system. A new Restorative Initiatives Unit was introduced to support government's capacity to work more restoratively as we move forward.

We are also building more trustworthy relationships with African Nova Scotian communities across the province and are intentionally connecting African Nova Scotian communities with the work of government. For example, we are expanding the Office of African Nova Scotian Affairs to provide outreach to all regions of the province. This is critical to building just and respectful relationships. Deputy ministers from several government departments have formed a new committee to address African Nova Scotian concerns and to resolve issues collaboratively, reflecting ways of working modelled through the Restorative Inquiry. Representatives from all departments will support this committee through a working group. Together, the committee and the working group will work to ensure policy and programming decisions are considered from an African Nova Scotian perspective.

## Commitment to collaborative planning and action

This Restorative Inquiry has shown us that one of the most significant things we need to change is the way we work. Throughout the Inquiry, we have had the opportunity to work in a different way—a way that puts human beings and their connections to each other and to the community at the centre of the process. This helped us to see that systems and institutions should be more concerned with people’s needs rather than the system’s needs.



## Supporting a human-centred approach to systems & services

We want to continue the work to shift our focus from the operation of the ‘system’ to the needs of the people we serve. When we look at care in human-centered ways, we recognize the importance of relationships. Care requires supportive, trusting, healthy relationships. This is true for individuals in care relationships, but it is equally true for the relationships government departments, institutions, and services have with each other and with communities and the people we serve. These, too, should provide human-centred support and care.

## Restorative approach to responding to institutionalized abuse

We are working to develop more restorative ways to respond to institutional abuse and situations in which the care system is failing people.

### *Criminal and family court processes*

We are exploring ways to have criminal and family court processes work better together to support children and their families. This would contribute to a more holistic approach to care. We also want to find ways to offer better access to justice to those in need and better solutions for those caught in the system.

### *Restorative approach to institutional abuse*

We are exploring ways to deal with institutional abuse in a more restorative way, such as that modelled by the Inquiry. With such an approach, we hope that, in the future, those affected by institutional abuse will not experience the same harm as that experienced by the former residents of the Home on their 'journey to light'.

## Integrated approach in the care system

We plan to work with others within government, across the care system, and with the community to make the changes needed to allow families and communities to play a more active role in how children and young people are cared for. We support a culture shift within the care system that will see it orient itself more toward the people it serves than the system, itself. This shift should also see care system workers work more closely with families and communities.

## Supporting empowerment of children and youth

We are working within the Restorative Inquiry process to find ways to help and support children and youth address issues that arise in their relationships to the care system. At the same time, we are working towards creating a mechanism to help integrate systems and have them work more collaboratively in the future.

## Moving forward

The Reflection and Action Task Group will continue to adopt the principles of restorative and collaborative work that we learned throughout the Inquiry process. It is our job to take what we learned from this process into government so that we can continue to work with the community to improve our relationships with those we serve and to improve our systems so that they focus more on the people we serve than on the system itself.

We will continue to share and report on our progress as we advance the goals and impacts of the Inquiry. At the same time, we will continue the collaborative process as modelled throughout the Inquiry. That means we will continue to work collaboratively with community and partners to make a meaningful difference for Nova Scotian children, youth, and families.



  
NOVA SCOTIA