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In the opening address at an international conference on rural social work, I advanced the argument that rural communities might take a leadership role in the provision of social services and I identified several factors which supported this argument (Wharf, 1985). First, professionals, politicians and community leaders know each other and it is relatively easy for interest to converge around a particular problem or issue. Arising from a convergence of interest it is also relatively easy for rural communities to establish an "initiating set"—a group of individuals who by virtue of their position in the community can ensure that attention is given to the problem (Sower, 1957). Second, many rural communities possess well developed networks built around family and friendship relationships. Such networks can be used to augment the professional and formal service systems. Third, the relatively sparse and homogenous population allows policy makers to consult with citizens before making final decisions.

My interest in this argument was revived when, together with two colleagues from the University of Victoria, I participated in the evaluation of the Champagne/Aishihik Child Welfare Project (Armitage, Ricks & Wharf, 1988). The story of this project is told in Chapter 4. It was apparent to the evaluation team that this project represented an innovative approach to the delivery of child welfare services. The approach was based on respect for Native traditions and on a conviction by the Band members that Champagne/Aishihik children belonged and should remain in that community, regardless of some temporary, or even permanent incapacity of parents to care for their children. The evaluation did not simply track the activities of staff during the project and count the numbers of children in care. It also sought to determine if the family-centered and community-based approach developed by the Champagne/Aishihik Band could be connected to current conceptual developments in child welfare. The conclusion of the evaluation team was that the Champagne/Aishihik approach is consistent with emerging developments, as Sharon Hume notes in Chapter 4, "identifying support for this approach has done much to improve the band's sense of confidence".

The involvement in the Champagne/Aishihik evaluation bolstered my conviction that rural communities can take a leadership role in the social services. This view stands in marked contrast to widely held perception that programs and practice in the North are but a pale reflection of more professional and competent practice in southern urban centres. Yet the case studies presented here are innovative and respond to the needs of communities in a far more responsive fashion than do many programs in large metropolitan centres. The reason for this apparent contradiction—innovations occurring in the North which has been traditionally dismissed as a professional backwater—are explored in the final chapter.

The objective of this special issue is to investigate further the contention that rural communities can take a leadership role in developing and delivering social services. All chapters include both a main section and a commentary. Where the main section is written by a practitioner from the Yukon or the Northwest Territories, a commentary is provided by a faculty member from either the School of Child and Youth Care or the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. The intent of the commentary is to indicate the extent to which these examples of northern practice reflect high quality professional work. By contrast, where the chapter is written by a faculty member, a practitioner comments on the utility and relevance for northern practice.

The concept of community control is pivotal for the discussion in all chapters and is outlined in Chapter 2. Two related propositions provide the anchor points for this discussion. The first is that the distinguishing characteristics of rural communities are so marked and compelling that they require explicit attention in policy development and program delivery. For example, as the chapter on the Champagne/Aishihik child welfare project makes clear, effective child welfare practice in aboriginal communities must respect and be committed to aboriginal values and traditions. Policies planned in isolation from communities are usually ignorant of local customs and of the potential utility of helping networks. The second argument is that community control represents an avenue for enhancing the involvement of citizens in the policy making process. Citizens in the North are among the most excluded groups in terms of the democratic process in Canada. They are excluded for a variety of reasons such as the concentration of power in the south and distance between communities and personal inclination. Establishing local level structures to govern health, social and other services affords an additional vehicle for citizen participation.