

2024

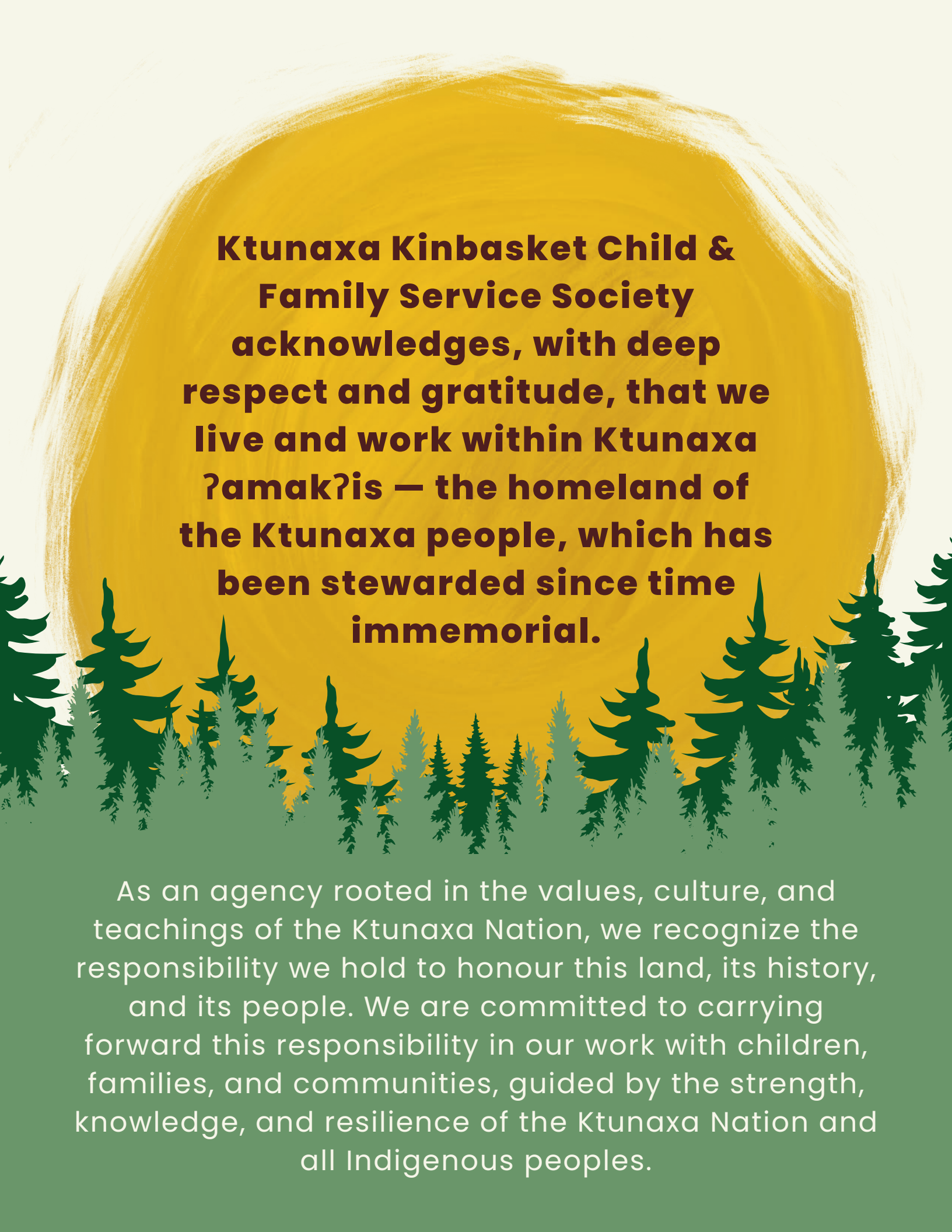
2025

KTUNAXA KINBASKET

CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES

ANNUAL REPORT





**Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child &
Family Service Society
acknowledges, with deep
respect and gratitude, that we
live and work within Ktunaxa
?amak?is — the homeland of
the Ktunaxa people, which has
been stewarded since time
immemorial.**

As an agency rooted in the values, culture, and teachings of the Ktunaxa Nation, we recognize the responsibility we hold to honour this land, its history, and its people. We are committed to carrying forward this responsibility in our work with children, families, and communities, guided by the strength, knowledge, and resilience of the Ktunaxa Nation and all Indigenous peoples.

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Mission

The Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child & Family Service Society (KKCFSS) is committed to working collaboratively with Aboriginal families and communities of the Ktunaxa Territory to increase their ability to fulfill their responsibilities for caring for their children in a culturally relevant manner.

Values

ksu?kin / Yukki?wi ·mu

Caring / Hope

?a ·kiktu?nam ?a ·qa?wi?is

Community Input

nu ·ki? ninmunapsi na ·qa?wi ·namis

Inclusivity

tumik

Integrity

qanikitci?ni

Quality Services

hali?kaxuma?ni kwitqanaxunak?is ?a ·q?smakni?ks

Respect

ktuk?aqa?itma?

Safety and Security

qanikitci?ti ?aknumu?ti?is

Stewardship

Trust

?at ksuki? ?upxa kitki ·k?amnamis

Willingness to Learn

wili?wi ·na ·ti kitki ·k?a?kas

Wisdom

Strategic Pillars

Strategic Pillar One

Decolonize Client Experience: What do our clients say is helpful?

- Goal 1a:** Advance Agency's delivery of strength-based life skills training.
- Goal 1b:** Support place-based culturally relevant experiences in each community.
- Goal 1c:** Engage new families in intergenerational sharing and celebrating.

Strategic Pillar Two

Decolonize Social Work Practice: How do we employ new tools grounded in tradition?

- Goal 2a:** Strengthen the agency's self-awareness and training in decolonization.
- Goal 2b:** Promote decolonized policies and governance principles.
- Goal 2c:** Advance Signs of Safety to decolonize social work practice.

Strategic Pillar Three

Empower People in Engaged Community: How are we showing up in the community?

- Goal 3a:** Lead collaboration with partners and colleagues.
- Goal 3b:** Partner to strengthen relationships and communication.
- Goal 3c:** Measure agency impact on wellbeing in communities.

Board of Directors

Nasu?kin Jason Louie	President, yaqan nuk?iy
Debbie Whitehead	Chair (Non-Voting Member of the Board)
Janice Alpine	?akisq̓nuk
Nasu?kin Cheryl Casimer	?aq̓am
Debra Fisher	Métis Nation British Columbia
Chief Barbara Cote	Shuswap Indian Band
Nasu?kin Heidi Gravelle	Yaq̓it ?a-knuq̓i 'it

KKCFSS also wishes to recognize its outgoing board members for their years of dedicated service. Their leadership, insight, and steady presence have helped guide the organization through key milestones and moments of growth. Whether navigating challenges or celebrating successes, their contributions have helped shape the direction and strength of KKCFSS.

As they conclude their terms, we reflect on the lasting impact they've made on our work with children and families. Their commitment to care, respect, and cultural integrity will continue to resonate throughout the organization and the communities we serve.

A sincere thank you to:

Theresa Kains
Corey Letcher
Johanne Allard

Statement from Board of Directors

Well, it's been an exciting year for the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Service Society (KKCFSS)! If I were to use one word to characterize the past year for KKCFSS, that word would be "transformation." The past year, 2024-2025, was indeed a time of transformation for KKCFSS!

First of all, the past year was a time of leadership transformation at our Society. Not only did our previous CEO depart from the organization, but we established a new Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) position and appointed Derek Hunter, the Finance Director, to serve as Interim CAO during this period. Derek's leadership, alongside the Executive Team, helped guide the organization through a time of uncertainty with professionalism and care.

Over this past summer, the Board filled the CAO position with a new permanent employee, Dr. Tom Weegar. Tom comes from the College sector with 30+ years of senior leadership experience where he has served in a number of leadership capacities including College President and Vice-President, Academic. Please join me in welcoming Tom to KKCFSS and to Ktunaxa ʔamakʔis! I would also like to comment the Board for their swift and careful action to ensure continuity and stability of KKCFSS' leadership!

Second, we experience leadership transformation throughout the organization. For a variety of reasons, some mid-level leaders left our organization and a number of mid-level leaders either joined our organization or were promoted within the Society. This kind of transformation is often a good thing for a not-for-profit organization such as ours as it brings in fresh and innovative ideas and perspectives.

Third, we had transformation in consolidating the operations of ʔikxawiʔikimik – Foundry East Kootenay. We are particularly proud of the opening of ʔikxawiʔikimik – Foundry East Kootenay, a youth wellness hub that reflects the power of collaboration and the importance of culturally safe, integrated services. This initiative is a testament to the vision and hard work of many, and it represents a meaningful step forward in how we support young people in our region.

Fourth, we've had transformation by way of the substantive feedback we've received from staff through a Staff Engagement Survey which we sent out in February 2025. Through this survey, we have discerned that there are many aspects of our Society which we need to focus on, build strongly, and ensure they are at a standard that allows us to place children first (always!) and best serve the needs of our clients and communities. These aspects of our Society which we will focus on will likely become the next six Strategic Directions of our strategic plan, where we will again transform our services and Society to become a stronger, more responsive and reflective organization.

I'd like to acknowledge all KKCFSS Board members for their time, insight, and commitment in guiding the strategic direction of the organization. It's been a privilege to work alongside such passionate and dedicated individuals.

I also want to recognize the staff across all KKCFSS offices in the territory. The work you do is not only important — it's foundational. Your efforts are central to rebuilding Indigenous governance and reclaiming rightful jurisdiction over children and families, which remains the cornerstone of our collective path forward.

As a governance body, the Board remains focused on long-term sustainability, strategic oversight, and cultural integrity. We continue to support efforts to strengthen staffing, improve internal systems, and ensure that KKCFSS is well-positioned to meet the evolving needs of our communities. We are also committed to supporting leadership development and succession planning, recognizing that strong leadership is essential to the health of any organization.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I extend our sincere appreciation to the staff, leadership, and community members who make this work possible. Your dedication and commitment are deeply valued. KKCFSS is more than a service provider—it is a reflection of our collective responsibility to care for our children in ways that honour who we are.

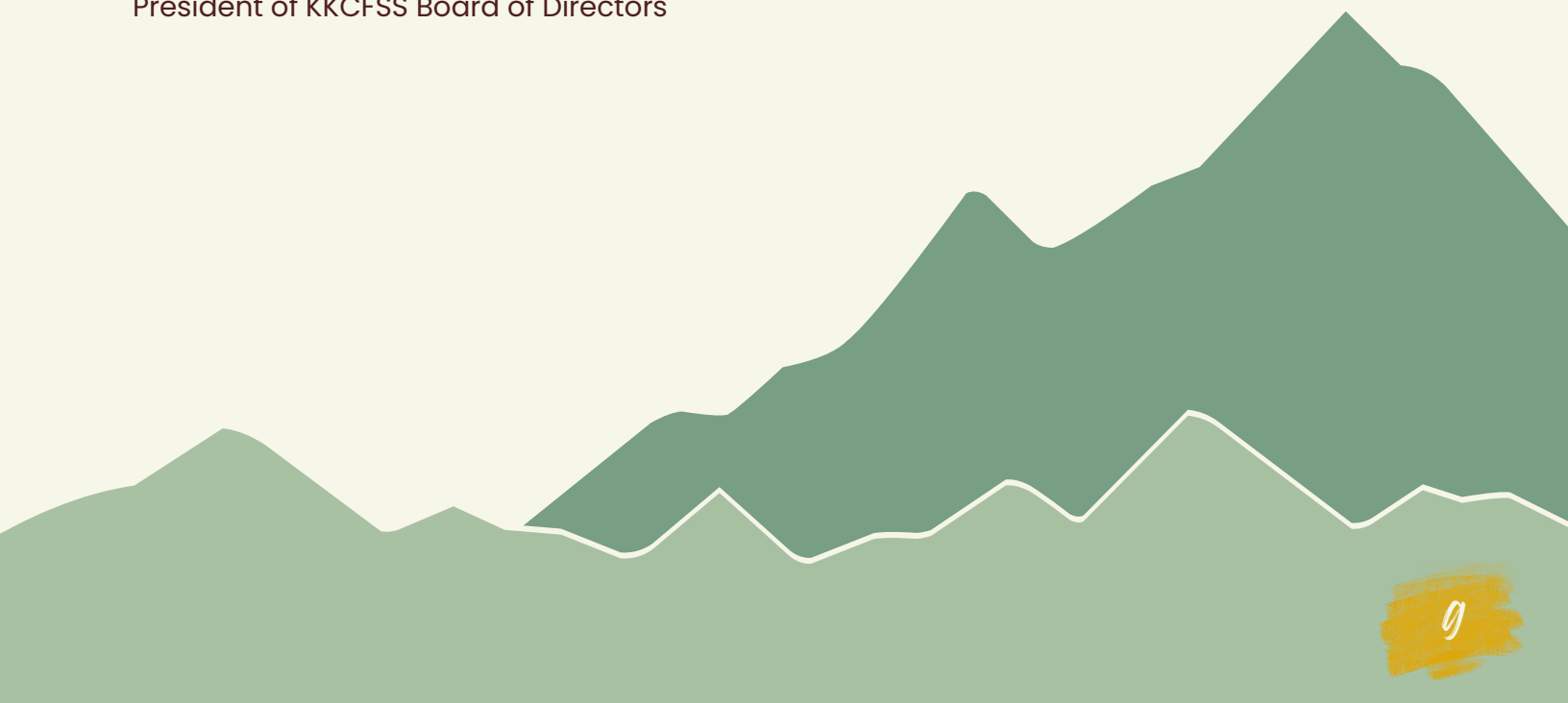
Although 2024-2025 has been a year of transformation, that transformation — along with a process of consolidation — will continue into the forthcoming year. Through these processes, the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Services Society will become stronger, more culturally-responsive, and reflective of community needs throughout the region.

Hu Sukiłqukni and I look forward to seeing you at our next AGM in July 2026.

Nasu?kin Jason Louie

yaqan nuk?iy

President of KKCFSS Board of Directors



MESSAGE FROM THE INTERIM CAO

DEREK HUNTER

*CAO FROM FEBRUARY TO
SEPTEMBER 2025*



ki?su?k kyukyit ápiniskit,

This past year has been one of transformation, resilience, and growth for KKCFSS. On behalf of the leadership team, I am honoured to reflect on the journey we've taken together with our staff, communities, and partners. Our mission — to work collaboratively with the Indigenous families and communities of the Ktunaxa Territory to increase their capacity to nurture and care for their children in a culturally relevant and holistic manner — has remained our guiding light through every challenge and success.

In early February, KKCFSS experienced a significant leadership transition. The departure of our former CAO marked a period of change for the organization. In response, the Board appointed me to serve as Interim CAO while continuing in my role as Finance Director. It was a time of uncertainty, but also of deep commitment — I was honoured to serve alongside the staff and community during this time. I witnessed firsthand the strength of our staff and the clarity of our shared purpose. Together, we leaned into our values, supported one another, and ensured that our services remained steady and addressed immediate needs.

In September 2025, we welcomed our new CAO, Tom Weegar, whose experience in governance and non-profit leadership, and passion for community-led work brings renewed energy to our organization. Tom's vision is rooted in relational accountability, cultural integrity, and strategic growth. As a leadership team, we are aligned in our commitment to stability, collaboration, and innovation.

This transition and fiscal year was not without their challenges. Staffing instability — particularly around recruitment, retention, and morale — was felt across departments. Leadership changes added complexity to internal operations, and we knew that maintaining cohesion would require intentional effort. We prioritized communication, transparency, and team wellness. Staff stepped up in remarkable ways, showing care for one another and for the families we serve. We learned valuable lessons about the importance of succession planning, cross-training, and creating space for staff voices in decision-making.

Despite these hurdles, the 2024/2025 fiscal year was a year of incredible achievement. One of our notable achievements was the opening of *tikxawiḡikimik* – Foundry East Kootenay – a youth wellness hub offering integrated services for mental health, substance use, primary care and social supports. This project was made possible through strong community partnerships and a shared vision for youth-centered care. Early feedback from youth and families has been overwhelmingly positive, and we are excited to see this space grow and evolve.

Across the organization, we saw program growth and innovation. Cultural and community engagement remained central to our work, with events like First Fridays, community dinners, and seasonal celebrations continuing to bring families together. Staff participated in training and education initiatives, including Our Children Our Way Conferences, deepening their understanding of culturally informed practice. We also welcomed new staff across multiple sites, including key positions that will support long-term sustainability. The onboarding of dozens of new employees reflects our commitment to building capacity and investing in the future of Indigenous families.

Throughout the transition, financial stewardship remained stable. As Interim CAO, I worked closely with our finance team to ensure budget stability, consistent grant reporting, and program tracking. We continue to better align our planning with community needs, and lay the groundwork for future strategic initiatives under the leadership of our new CAO.

Looking ahead, our priorities include stabilizing staffing, strengthening community partnerships, and expanding culturally grounded services. We are committed to strengthening KKCFSS's foundation and building a future that reflects the voices and needs of the communities we serve. Our work is not just about service delivery – it is about relationships, accountability, and the wellbeing of children and families.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the staff, caregivers, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, youth, community partners, and Nations who make our work possible. Your dedication, wisdom, and resilience continue to inspire us. KKCFSS remains dedicated to its mission, and we look forward to the year ahead with hope, determination, and a shared commitment to our communities.

Thank you,

Derek Hunter

Interim CAO and Director of Finance



MESSAGE FROM THE CAO

TOM WEEGAR

CAO SINCE SEPTEMBER 2025



ki?su?k kyukyit áapiniskit:

My name is Tom Weegar and I am the new Chief Administrative Officer at the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Service Society. I moved down to Cranbrook from Yellowknife, NWT in early September to assume this role. Since my wife and I are originally from BC (raised on Vancouver Island), we are excited to return to the province!

Through my career, I have worked as a senior educational leader within the college system across Canada and into Minnesota. Most recently I have served as President of a community college in Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. Throughout my career, I have worked closely with Indigenous communities to put in place community-based college programs.

I have also had the opportunity to work directly within Indigenous community including as CEO of the Gwich'in Tribal Council in Inuvik (that's a long way north!) and as Lead Negotiator with the kwikwetlem First Nation in Coquitlam. I also started my career (way back in 1991) by coordinating a first-year college program on reserve with the Kitsumkalum Band in Terrace, BC.

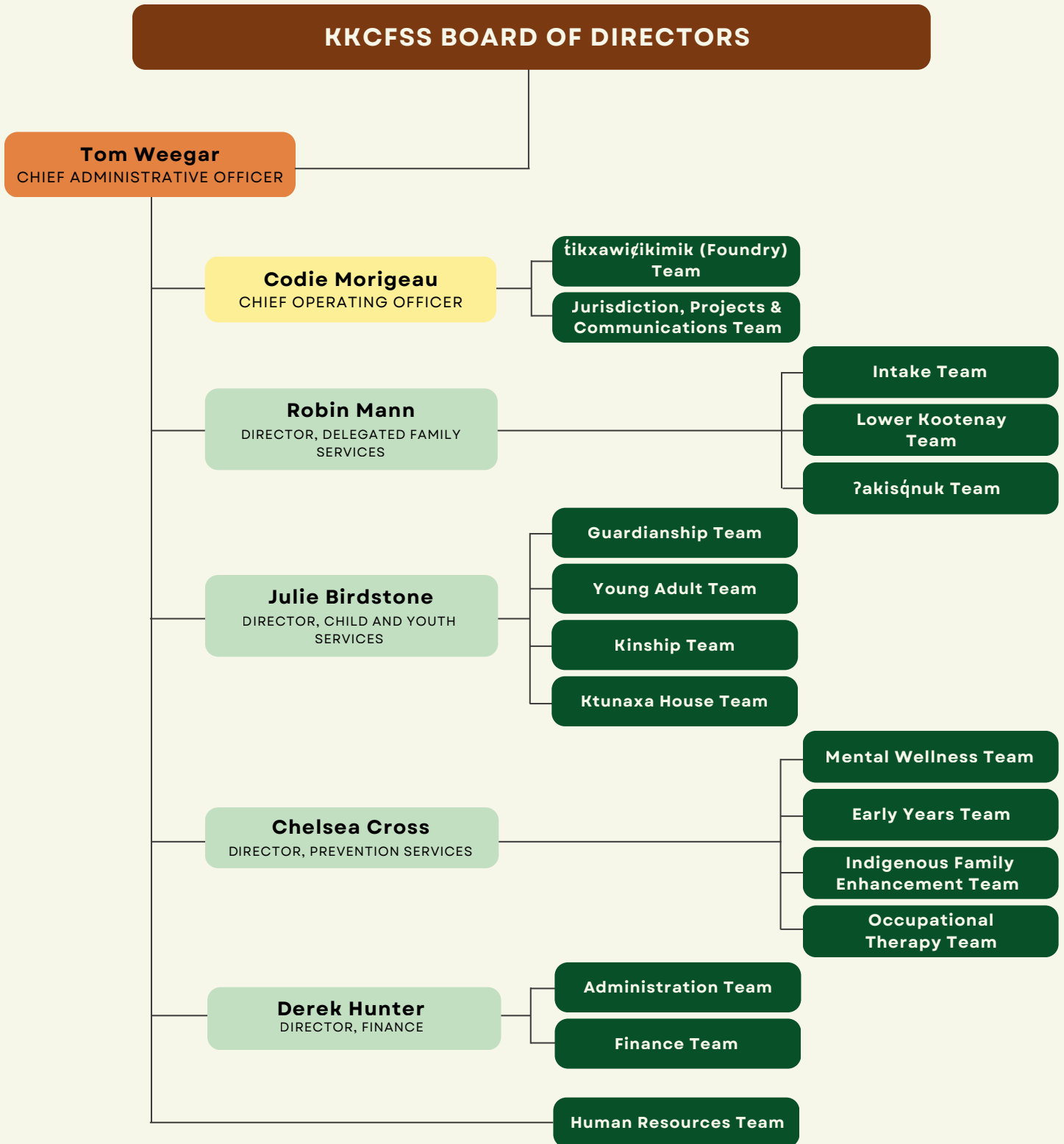
I'm still very new with KKCFSS so my focus right now is meeting with staff to listen and learn about their dreams and aspirations for the organization. I am also working closely with all staff to determine a plan for moving the organization forward; this will be developed soon into a new strategic plan with a number of significant strategic directions to make KKCFSS a stronger and more vibrant and community-responsive organization.

I am thrilled to be working with KKCFSS! I look forward to meeting you and to serving Indigenous families and communities throughout Southeastern BC. Thanks for your time.

Hu Sukiťukni,

Tom Weegar, Ed.D., M.E.S.
Chief Administrative Officer

Executive Organizational Chart



Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction refers to the inherent right of Indigenous Nations to govern themselves and make decisions about the wellbeing of their children, families, and communities. This right has always existed — it is not something granted by Canada, but something Indigenous peoples have held since time immemorial. Bill C-92, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, creates a legal mechanism for this jurisdiction to be formally recognized within Canadian law. It affirms that Indigenous Nations have the authority to create and implement their own child and family service laws. This recognition does not mean that Indigenous peoples had ever given away their inherent laws or governance systems, instead, it provides a pathway for those laws to be acknowledged and respected within federal and provincial systems.

Jurisdiction is not a single model or a one-size-fits-all approach. Each Nation must design its own structures based on its unique history, culture, and governance traditions. This diversity is a strength, but it also presents challenges, especially when navigating complex legal and operational systems. Jurisdiction is not a final destination — it is a living, ongoing practice. It is shaped by the people and sustained through community-led dialogue, meaning continuous conversations within and across communities guide decision-making. These conversations ensure that laws and systems remain accountable to those they serve and reflect the values and priorities of the Nation.

Within the Ktunaxa context, KKCFSS has been tasked with supporting Ktunaxa jurisdiction and to explore what jurisdiction could look like and support decision-making. This work is about helping each community define its own path forward by identifying strategic options, potential challenges, and opportunities. KKCFSS's role is to provide the tools, research, and engagement supports needed to help leadership make informed decisions rooted in their own governance systems and cultural practices.

The jurisdiction initiative first received funding in January 2021 and was led by Julie Birdstone, who stewarded the effort through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Julie's work laid the foundation for engagement, research, and early drafts of legislation. She worked closely with KKCFSS staff, Ktunaxa leadership, and Elders to begin shaping what a Ktunaxa child wellness law could look like. However, by 2023, the initiative had slowed and many of the original staff had moved into new roles or left the organization. In December 2024, Crystal Phillips was brought on to help revive and strengthen the initiative.

Crystal brings a strong foundation in Indigenous research, governance, and law shaped by both her academic background and personal experiences. She holds a Master's degree in Women and Gender Studies where her thesis focused on understanding conversations by Indigenous women on feminist theory and the political agency of Indigenous women. Over the past decade, she has worked in roles that involved archival research, legal research consulting, and supporting Indigenous organizations in building systems that reflect their own ways of knowing.

"Jurisdiction, to me, is about restoring the right to belong and protecting our children from being removed under colonial justification. It's about empowering communities to create laws rooted in our own governance and kinship systems, so our stories and connections to land are never lost, but always known and spoken."

Crystal Phillips
Strategic Projects
Administrator



Crystal brings not only professional expertise but also a lived understanding of how deeply colonial policies have impacted families and communities. Her connection to this work is rooted in her own family's story. Her mother is a survivor of the 1960s Scoop. In 1997, Crystal's mom reconnected with her biological mother and Crystal had the opportunity to build a relationship with her grandmother before she passed away in 2023.

These experiences have shaped how Crystal approaches jurisdiction — not simply as a legal or policy matter, but as a pathway to restore connection, protect children, and ensure Indigenous laws, stories, and relationships to land are remembered, respected, and carried forward.

Since joining KKCFSS, Crystal has taken on the complex task of revitalizing the Ktunaxa jurisdiction initiative. Her work is not just about organizing documents or reviewing timelines — it's about building on a foundation for meaningful, community-led governance.

She has been carefully reviewing historical records, engagement transcripts, and draft legislation to ensure continuity and avoid duplication. This includes mapping KKCFSS's service delivery models to assess how they align with the broader goals of jurisdiction and identifying areas where adaptations may be needed to reflect Ktunaxa values, laws, and ways of caring for children and families.

Crystal's approach is grounded in the belief that jurisdiction must be shaped through constant, relational engagement. She is not simply collecting information — she is preparing the groundwork for future conversations with communities, Elders, and leadership. Her research into other Indigenous Nations' jurisdictional pathways is helping to build a framework for developing child and family laws that supports each band in exploring this using their own governance and law-making processes. This work is not about creating a single solution, but about offering tools and insights that can support diverse approaches rooted in culture, kinship, and community priorities.

The learning curve has been steep. Crystal has spent months understanding how KKCFSS's departments connect to jurisdiction, studying the history of child welfare reform in Canada and British Columbia, and reviewing internal documents such as meeting minutes, newsletters, and past reports. One of her most significant accomplishments has been locating and organizing information and establishing solid record management for jurisdiction.

JURISDICTION

Many staff who contributed to the early stages of the initiative have since moved into new roles or left the organization, and no formal transition plan was created; Crystal's work has helped bring clarity to what exists, what's missing, and what needs to be rebuilt.

More than just a technical exercise, this process has revealed the importance of trust, transparency, and accountability in jurisdictional work. Crystal is laying the foundation for a renewed engagement strategy — one that is not limited to one-time consultations, but built on ongoing, reciprocal relationships with the people the law is meant to serve. Her goal is to ensure that future steps are guided by what communities have said, what they continue to say, and what they need to see reflected in their own laws and governance systems. However, the work has not been without challenges.

The most significant challenges were that jurisdiction was quite new and still developing, and the initiative was not properly resourced or funded for the magnitude of work involved. From January 2020 to September 2021, the work was undertaken informally by staff off the side of their desks without a dedicated role. As a result, a comprehensive project plan was not developed, and several online community engagement sessions were cancelled due to low attendance. This prompted a reconsideration of the engagement approach, though the shift had not yet been implemented. Without consistent funding and staffing, the process lacked continuity and structure. Crystal has noted that building a concrete timeline with a defined end point is challenging, as the jurisdictional landscape has and continues to evolve significantly. Much of the work completed to date will be situated within broader jurisdiction priorities and goals from communities and citizens.

Looking ahead, Crystal is finalizing a review of past jurisdiction work and creating a framework to guide future efforts that includes lessons learned from First Nations who have or are actively pursuing jurisdiction. Crystal's top priority is to create a clear jurisdiction path forward focusing on the development and implementation of a clear project and engagement plan.

Jurisdiction is complex; there is a vast amount of information to sort through, and the more Crystal learns, the more she sees how deep and layered the work truly is. She emphasizes that any child wellness law must be part of a larger network of Ktunaxa laws. It's not just about services — it's about how the Nation lives, knows, and governs. Indigenous child wellness laws must not replicate colonial systems and label them 'Indigenous.' True jurisdiction must reflect the lived experiences, traditions, and values of the people.

Crystal expresses deep gratitude to the staff, Elders, and community members who have contributed to this work. She recognizes the importance of relationships and shared knowledge in moving the jurisdiction initiative forward. Her work is guided by care, precision, and a commitment to ensuring that any process that supports the development of the Ktunaxa Nation's laws is rooted in their own governance and kinship systems.

JURISDICTION WORK TIMELINE

January 01, 2020

Bill C-92, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* comes into effect. KNC has the mandate for jurisdiction. KNC Social Sector and KKCFS take a collaborative approach to Ktunaxa jurisdiction.

April 2020

Multi-stage proposal submitted to Indigenous Services Canada by KNC Social Sector.

Provincial State of Emergency declared due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

June - July 2021

RFP for contractor to support Engagement is posted. No proposals are received.

Provincial State of Emergency for COVID-19 Pandemic Ends.

February 2022 - March 2023

Engagement sessions begin, both virtually and in-person. Three 2-day Elders' Sessions, 1 leadership session, 4 in-person sessions, and 3 virtual sessions were held.

In February 2022, a majority of COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

May - July 2023

Julie Birdstone provides the Board of Directors an update on progress to date.

Julie takes on a new role as *Director of Child and Youth Services*.

April 2024

1-year term positions *Community Liaison* and *Engagement Coordinator* positions are posted, with no suitable candidates applying.

November 2024

Position description is revised to *Strategic Projects Administrator* and posted to lead Jurisdiction work.

March 2025

Crystal begins a thorough review and analysis of progress to-date and research on Indigenous child welfare law.

March 2020

Provincial State of Emergency declared due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

January 2021

Proposal funds are released by ISC to KNC. KKCFS leads initiative and engagement.

Initial leadership information engagement session is held virtually.

September 2021

Julie Birdstone takes on the engagement work, with support of KNC Social Sector, KKCFS Staff, and contractor Cheryl Casimer.

BC Introduces BC Vaccine Card, requiring proof of vaccination for entry to indoor events of 50+ people.

March 2023

Draft Ktunaxa Child Wellness Act provided to Board of Directors and Elders' Focus Group.

2nd stage of proposal for ISC funding is submitted.

December 2023 - February 2024

ISC proposal completed after 9 months of back-and-forth on proposal and supporting documentation.

ISC approves the proposal and releases the funds to KKCFS, which is leading the work.

September - October 2024

Senior leadership considers various options for filling the Jurisdiction staff vacancy including contracting and special projects, before deciding on a full-time permanent position as needed.

December 2024

Crystal is hired as the *Strategic Projects Administrator*.

ROBIN MANN

DIRECTOR OF DELEGATED SERVICES



Dear Community Members, Partners, and Colleagues:

It is with humility and gratitude that I share this annual reflection on behalf of Delegated Family Services. I began serving as Interim Director in November 2024 and I am honoured to have recently been appointed to the permanent role. Stepping into this position has been both challenging and rewarding and I am deeply committed to leading this department with integrity, accountability, and care.

My journey with KKCFSS began over a decade ago, first as a caregiver when a child close to our family became involved with the system. That experience opened my eyes to the realities of trauma, displacement, and resilience and it ultimately inspired me to pursue a Bachelor of Social Work through the University of Victoria. Since joining KKCFSS in 2019, I have had the privilege of serving in a variety of roles: as a Child Protection Social Worker, a Guardianship Social Worker, and later as part of the Strengthening Abilities for Journeys of Empowerment (SAJE) program within the Young Adults team supporting young adults up to age 27. Each step along the way has reinforced my commitment to supporting children and families through some of their most difficult moments.

Delegated Family Services is at the heart of our organization's work. Our role is to ensure the safety and well-being of children while supporting families with compassion, accountability and care. This is often difficult work. When we need to intervene, this can feel intrusive, and we are sometimes perceived as "the bad guys." Yet our goal is always safety, pursued in the least intrusive and most culturally-respectful way possible. We work hard to balance accountability with support and to honour the strength and potential of families to heal and grow.

This year has been a time of transition and rebuilding. Following significant staffing changes, we have been re-establishing our Intake team with an emphasis on diversity, cultural awareness, and strong foundations in Signs of Safety practice. This has been a humbling reminder of why many of us entered this field in the first place — to do the grassroots work of supporting families, keeping children safe, and fostering resilience.

Among the moments that stand out are stories of reunification, where children have been safely returned to their families after years of perseverance and commitment. These are powerful reminders that families can succeed when given the right support, and that our role is not only to intervene but to celebrate healing and restoration.

We have also embraced new tools and technologies that streamline our case management, reduce administrative burdens, and increase transparency by giving families access to their own information. These shifts are helping us build stronger relationships and spend more time in direct connection with those we serve.

Ktunaxa values, teachings, and language remain central to how we define success. Small but meaningful steps — such as integrating Ktunaxa greetings in our communications, engaging Elders at community dinners and quarterly meetings, and seeking guidance from Knowledge Holders — remind us that culture is not an “add-on,” but a foundation. Looking ahead, I hope to further integrate cultural practices into our daily work, deepen our community engagement, and ensure that our department remains responsive to the vision and direction of those we serve.

The challenges of this year have been significant: staff turnover, capacity pressures, and the inherent toll of child protection work. Yet there have also been opportunities to reflect, reset, and return to basics. We are prioritizing staff wellness, ensuring caseloads are more balanced, and creating space for fun, recognition, and connection within the team. These investments are essential if we are to retain skilled, passionate workers and continue providing quality care for families.

In the year ahead, our priorities will include strengthening our Intake team through ongoing training, rebuilding community open houses to foster trust and transparency, and simplifying processes so that our work remains both effective and sustainable. Above all, we will continue to support families with respect, believing in their capacity to heal and thrive.

I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to the staff who have persevered through a difficult year, to our leadership team for their guidance — especially Derek, whose calm and steady presence has been deeply valued — and to the families and communities we serve, whose resilience inspires us every day! Together, we will continue to build a future rooted in safety, healing, and cultural pride.

With respect and gratitude,

Robin Mann

Director, Delegated Family Services



Intake



The Intake team at KKCFSS plays a vital role in the early stages of service delivery, acting as the first point of contact for children, youth, and families seeking support. Their work is foundational to the organization's ability to respond quickly and effectively to community needs, ensuring that families are connected to the right services at the right time.

Collaboration is central to the Intake team's approach. They work closely with other KKCFSS departments, and maintain strong relationships with external service providers to ensure families receive holistic support. The team also values the guidance of Knowledge Holders and Elders, whose teachings help inform culturally-respectful service planning and referrals.

This collaborative spirit helps ensure youth and families are not only connected to services, but also supported in ways that reflect their cultural identity and community strengths.

While the Intake team does not offer direct programming, they provide individualized service delivery, and work across departments to ensure youth and families have access to the full range of supports available through KKCFSS and its partners. This includes coordinating with internal teams such as Guardianship and the Prevention teams, as well as connecting families to community-based programs and culturally-grounded resources.

The team's work is guided by Ktunaxa values and a commitment to culturally safe practice. Intake workers often navigate complex and urgent situations with compassion and professionalism, laying the groundwork for long-term support and healing. Their ability to respond promptly and thoughtfully helps KKCFSS maintain a high standard of care across all programs.

This year, the Intake team faced several challenges, including higher levels of staff leave and burnout. These pressures impacted capacity, and required the team to adapt quickly to maintain service delivery. Despite these hurdles, the team remained committed to supporting families, and worked together to ensure continuity of care. Their resilience and dedication helped minimize disruptions, and uphold the quality of services provided.

As the Intake team moves into the new fiscal year, they are focusing on:

- Strengthening collaboration with internal teams and external partners to ensure smooth transitions for families.
- Maintaining culturally-grounded intake practices that reflect Ktunaxa values and community needs.
- Exploring opportunities to streamline intake processes for improved responsiveness.
- Supporting staff wellness and development to sustain high-quality service delivery.

While their work often happens behind the scenes, the Intake team plays a vital role in advancing KKCFSS's mission to support children and families with care, respect, and cultural integrity. Their professionalism and dedication continue to strengthen the foundation of our organization.



Lower Kootenay

The Lower Kootenay team at KKCFS, based in yaqan nu?kiy, has had another successful and heartwarming year of service. The team continues to provide culturally-grounded, community-based support to children, youth, and families, working in close partnership with the Lower Kootenay Band and other community organizations. Their work is rooted in the belief that strong relationships, cultural connection, and shared responsibility are key to helping families thrive.

Ktunaxa values, teachings, and language are central to the team's approach. Staff participate in land-based learning activities, cultural workshops, and community events that honor traditional knowledge and practices. From huckleberry picking and teepee building to powwow preparation and reconciliation walks, the team ensures that culture is not just included in their service delivery.

This year brought exciting growth to the team, with several new staff joining in family support, administrative, and child protection roles. At the same time, the team said heartfelt farewells to long-standing and valued members, who moved on to new opportunities. While bittersweet, these transitions have brought fresh energy, and strengthened the team's capacity to serve the community.

Programming has flourished this year. First Fridays have become a beloved tradition, with over 150 attendees gathering to share meals and connect. Creative groups included Valentine's card making, rock painting, and a community movie night. Cultural programming featured powwow prep, regalia and moccasin making, beading, and a popular Lifebook Scrapbooking program that will return next year due to high interest. Additional programming included a week-long feather workshop during spring break, a weekly cooking group for youth and families, and a resume-building workshop for young adults. Monthly caregiver coffee gatherings supported kinship caregivers, while the Kitak̓ikin Playgroup in the Park ran throughout the summer, offering a relaxed, outdoor space for families to connect and play. Seasonal events added joy and connection to the year. For example, the team hosted a festive Christmas dinner with support from local partners featuring food, music, face painting, photos, and a visit from Mr. & Mrs. Claus. Each child received a gift and the feedback from families was overwhelmingly positive.

Staff participated in meaningful community events, including the Reconciliation Canoe Walk, community cleanup day, and the Annual Polar Dip. These moments helped deepen relationships, and demonstrate the team's commitment to walking alongside the community in both celebration and reflection.

Collaboration has been a cornerstone of the team's success. They work closely with the Lower Kootenay Band (LKB), community organizations, and service providers to ensure families receive holistic and culturally-safe support. The team also engages with Knowledge Holders and Elders whose guidance and teachings enrich programming, and strengthen cultural connections. These relationships have helped the team deliver responsive, respectful services that reflect the values and strengths of the community.

The team also faced a few challenges this year. Staff transitions created temporary gaps in service delivery requiring flexibility and teamwork to maintain consistent support. High demand for programming and services sometimes stretched the team's capacity, especially during large community events. Coordinating logistics across multiple programs and locations added complexity and balancing direct service with administrative responsibilities remained an ongoing challenge. Despite these hurdles, the team responded with resilience, stepping up to support one another, and ensuring that families continued to receive high-quality care.

The team is excited for the year ahead. They are looking to:

- Continue evolving the case management model to improve service coordination.
- Facilitate another round of Lifebook Scrapbooking due to high community interest.
- Expand cultural programming with deeper involvement from Elders and Knowledge Keepers.
- Maintain strong partnerships with LKB and community organizations.
- Support staff development and cross-training to ensure flexible, responsive service delivery.
- Build on the success of First Fridays and seasonal events to foster community connection.
- Explore new ways to support youth and young adults with life skills and employment readiness.

The Lower Kootenay team is proud of the work they've accomplished, and grateful for the opportunity to serve the families and children of yaqan nu?kiy. Their commitment to cultural integrity, community connection, and collaborative care continues to guide their work, and inspire their vision for the future.



ʔakisq̓nuk

The ʔakisq̓nuk team is a multi-service team offering child protective services, family support, early years programming, and counselling for both adults and children. Housing multiple services under one roof has fostered a strong foundation for collaboration, enabling staff to respond to community needs in a coordinated and holistic way. This integrated approach has helped build trust, and streamline support for families navigating complex challenges. The team primarily supports members of the ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation, Shuswap Band, and Columbia Valley Métis communities with clients ranging in age from 3 to 55.

Clients access the team for a variety of reasons including counselling, family support, early childhood development, and financial assistance. While demographics have remained consistent, staff have noticed evolving expectations around what services should include. In some cases, one-time supports have led to ongoing expectations from community members, prompting reflection on how to clearly and compassionately communicate the scope and limits of available services.

The team includes nine staff members (one currently on maternity leave): an Office Administrator, a casual Team Lead Consultant, an Early Years Worker, two Counsellors, a Family Support Worker, and two Child Protection and Guardianship Social Workers. One of the Social Workers joined the team this year and is still in training, but her presence has helped ease the workload and reduce backlog. However, the absence of an on-site, full-time Team Lead has created challenges — particularly for frontline staff who require guidance, sign-offs, and timely communication. Staff have also noted gaps in training for key data and case management softwares which has impacted service delivery. These gaps have led to delays and additional stress, especially for newer staff who are still learning the systems.

Community engagement remains a central part of the team's work. Monthly Community Strengthening Dinners at the nearby rec center have helped build relationships, and create space for informal feedback. These dinners are well-attended, and offer a welcoming environment for families to connect with staff outside of formal settings. They also serve as a reminder of the importance of gathering in community and sharing food as a way to build trust. Beading Circles have offered opportunities for team bonding and community connection, creating a calming and culturally-meaningful environment. These circles have become a cherished space for reflection, creativity, and intergenerational learning. Informal conversations at events and booths have also been valuable for gathering suggestions and hearing directly from community members. Collaboration with ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation, Columbia Valley Métis, and Shuswap Band — highlighted by a shared lunch — has strengthened relationships, and reinforced the importance of community dinners as a tool for engagement and connection.

Ktunaxa values, language, and teachings continue to guide the team's work. Cultural elements are thoughtfully integrated into programs and events — for example, arranging for prayers in Ktunaxa before community meals, choosing culturally- relevant music, and encouraging staff to learn the language. Staff are eager to deepen cultural integration, and have suggested e-learning modules for new and existing staff as well as inviting Ktunaxa speakers and Elders to share knowledge and answer questions in office settings. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to cultural safety and responsiveness in service delivery.

Despite challenges, which include ongoing issues with the office space and the absence of a Team Lead, the team has remained grounded and committed. The lack of a Team Lead in-office (due to a planned leave of absence) created delays and confusion in workflow, especially around areas requiring approvals and guidance. Staff often felt left waiting for support or information from other offices, and worked around these gaps by leaning on each other, and staying focused on what they could control. Their ability to maintain consistent service provision despite these challenges speaks to the strength of their relationships, and shared sense of purpose.

Looking ahead, the team is focused on:

- Staying on top of individual duties as staffing levels increase.
- Prioritizing work-life balance and mental health, recognizing the stress of the past year.
- Filling key staff positions to stabilize service delivery, and reduce pressure on existing staff.
- Exploring cultural learning opportunities, such as e-learning modules and guest speakers.
- Strengthening internal communications, and alignment around service scope and decision-making.

The ʔakisq̓nuk team continues to provide essential, culturally-grounded services through collaboration, adaptability, and a strong commitment to community. Their resilience and care remain at the heart of their work, ensuring individuals and families are supported with respect, consistency, and cultural integrity. As they move forward, their priorities reflect a deep commitment to growth, healing, and connection.



JULIE BIRDSTONE

*DIRECTOR OF CHILD
& YOUTH SERVICES*



Elders, Community Members, Partners, and Colleagues:

As I reflect on the past year and my time serving as Director of Child and Youth Services, I feel immense gratitude for the journey we've shared. Though I officially stepped into this role in June 2023, my journey with KKCFSS started in 1998 as the fifth person hired. Over the years, I've had the privilege of serving in nearly every role — from Family Support Worker and Social Worker to Team Lead and Jurisdiction Manager. These experiences have shaped my understanding of our work, and deepened my respect for the path we've walked together, and the direction we are heading.

My department oversees Guardianship, Kinship, and the K-House. While it is never easy to know that children are in care, we hold a sacred responsibility to ensure they grow up knowing who they are, where they come from, and that they are loved and cared for in ways that honor their culture. Our goal is to raise strong, healthy citizens — whether from Ktunaxa or other Nations — while upholding the vision of our Elders: that children remain rooted in family, community, and culture.

This past year has brought its share of challenges, but also many moments of pride. Like others across the organization, our team was impacted by the crisis in delegated services, which required many of us to return to frontline roles. It was not easy, but it revealed something powerful: the strength, compassion, and unwavering dedication of our staff. People stepped up, leaned in, and gave more than was asked. That spirit of unity and care was one of the year's most meaningful highlights.

We also continued to nurture cultural connection. Thanks to the efforts of our staff and partners, children in care took part in moccasin making, cultural gatherings, and community dinners. For children from other Nations, we worked to reconnect them with their families and communities whenever possible. We know this work is not always simple, especially when families have been disconnected for generations, but we remain committed to finding pathways home.

This year has also been one of reflection and learning. The challenges reminded us of the importance of cross-training, reducing silos, and building a culture of learning so that everyone feels supported and prepared to step into different roles when needed. It also prompted us to ask important questions about our practice model, and whether they truly reflect what our communities need and value.

Looking ahead, our priorities are clear: to train our new Intake team in core practice models, strengthen Guardianship and Kinship through consistent frameworks, and prepare our services for the movement toward jurisdiction. We are also focused on improving data collection and analysis to better understand community needs — from housing to health — and respond with commitment. Most importantly, we will continue to walk alongside communities, ensuring that wellbeing is defined by them, and supported by us.

To all staff who stepped forward during a difficult year: thank you! To our leadership and Board: your steady support has been invaluable. And to our partners — including MCFD offices, who shared the workload when we needed it most — your collaboration has made a difference. This year has tested us, but it has also shown us what is possible when we come together with purpose and heart.

I am honored to continue this journey with each of you as we work toward healing, self-determination, and a future where our children thrive.

Hu sukił kuk'niy,

Julie Birdstone

Director of Child & Youth Services

Young Adult

The Young Adult team at Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Service Society, based out of the ʔaąam office, plays a vital role in supporting young adults across the East Kootenay region as they transition out of government care. The team provides services to youth up to the age of 27, offering a range of supports, including social work, transition planning, housing navigation, and connections to health, wellness, and cultural resources. Their work is grounded in trauma-informed, culturally-safe practices, along with Signs of Success and Signs of Wellbeing, to empower young people as they move toward independence.

A major development this year was the provincial introduction of the Strengthening Abilities for Journeys of Empowerment (SAJE) program. This initiative has added new dimensions to the team's role, requiring expanded planning and coordination to help youth navigate evolving systems and supports. While the team continues to offer individualized advocacy and guidance, SAJE has introduced additional responsibilities that require collaboration with provincial and community partners.

The Young Adult team is composed of staff who bring experience from various departments across KKCFS including child protection, kinship care, and mental wellness.



This multi-disciplinary foundation strengthens the team's ability to respond to the complex and diverse needs of young adults. Staff actively prioritize incorporating Indigenous knowledge and values into their work and emphasize a strengths-based approach that focuses on resilience, identity, and self-determination. This philosophy is reflected in their day-to-day practice, where youth are supported in building on their existing strengths, and making informed decisions about their futures.

In addition to one-on-one support, the team collaborates with other KKCFSS programs and regional organizations to connect youth with opportunities for cultural engagement, life skills development, and community involvement. Their work reflects KKCFSS's commitment to holistic, community-based care that honours the strengths and aspirations of Indigenous youth.

Like many teams across the organization, the Young Adult team faced staffing challenges in 2024–2025 including temporary leaves that impacted capacity. However, the team worked collaboratively to minimize disruptions, and ensure continuity of care. The team's adaptability and commitment to youth-centered service delivery allowed them to maintain a high standard of support, despite these challenges.

In the coming year, the team is focusing on:

- Supporting young adults navigating SAJE
- Continuing collaborations with internal and external partners
- Continuing to build relationships with communities and families

Whether supporting young adults through SAJE, strengthening partnerships, or deepening community connections, the Young Adult team continues to uphold KKCFSS's commitment to empowering Indigenous youth through holistic, strengths-based support that honours each young person's path toward independence.



Guardianship

The Guardianship team at KKCFSS plays a central role in supporting children and youth who are in care, working alongside families, communities, and other service providers to ensure safety, stability, and cultural connection. Their work includes both court-mandated and voluntary services guided by legislation such as the Child, Family, and Community Services Act (CFCSA), Aboriginal Operational and Practice Standards and Indicators (AOPSI), and Bill C-92 which affirms the rights of Indigenous communities to care for their children, and mandates the rights of children in care to their culture, family, and community.

The team's approach is rooted in Ktunaxa values and a commitment to culturally-safe practice. Guardianship workers support children and youth through a variety of care agreements including Voluntary Care Agreements, Continuing and Temporary Custody Orders, Youth Agreements, and Independent Living Agreements. Their goal is to help each child plan for permanency whether through reunification with family, placement with extended family or trusted adults, or preparation for independence and adulthood.

Collaboration is key to the Guardianship team's success. They work closely with families, Knowledge Holders, Elders, and community partners to ensure children and youth remain connected to their culture and support networks.

This includes one-on-one work, group activities, and coordination with outside agencies to meet each child's unique needs. The team has also been working on implementing Signs of Connection and Belonging into their work with the children, their family, community, and culture.

This year, the Guardianship team faced challenges related to increasing complexity in cases, and the emotional demands of supporting youth through transitions. Despite these pressures, the team remained committed to providing consistent, compassionate care. Their ability to adapt and collaborate ensured that children continued to receive the support they needed.





Future priorities for the team include:

- Continue strengthening cultural integration through regular engagement with Elders and Knowledge Holders.
- Enhance collaboration with internal and external partners to support permanency planning.
- Support staff wellness and development to sustain high-quality service delivery.
- Continue to develop and use Signs of Connection and Belonging in the work they do.
- Continue to work with the Nations the children belong to, as they also go into Jurisdiction, and ensure that the Nations' expectations around their children are met.

The work of the Guardianship team, like that of all teams across KKCFSS, reflects a shared commitment to supporting children and youth with care, respect, and cultural integrity. Together, these collective efforts continue to strengthen our services and uphold the values at the heart of our organization.

Kinship

The Kinship team at KKCFSS continues to provide culturally-grounded support to children and caregivers across the region. Their work centers on placing children with extended family or approved caregivers, ensuring that each child remains connected to their culture, language, and traditions. The team believes children thrive in environments where they are surrounded by people who know and love them and they work hard to make those connections possible.

Ktunaxa values, language, and teachings are woven into the team's daily work. Caregivers are encouraged to attend cultural events and learn about Ktunaxa traditions. The team uses Ktunaxa language when possible, and shares traditional teachings to support cultural safety. Looking ahead, the team hopes to deepen cultural integration by working with our Family Connections Worker and caregivers to encourage connection. The team also aims to include Elders more regularly in caregiver support groups and cultural training, to better support families in meaningful ways.

The Kinship team is responsible for ensuring children and youth who cannot live with their parents have access to safe and nurturing homes. Kinship Social Workers support foster caregivers, all "Out of Care" caregivers (those who live with family or people they identify as family), as well as the youth themselves. They collaborate with internal teams such as Child Protection and Guardianship to ensure caregivers have everything they need to provide the best care possible. Core services include recruiting and assessing caregivers, providing contracts, and completing annual requirements such as Home Reviews and Environment of Care checks.

Throughout the year, the Kinship team offered a variety of programs and events that helped caregivers build skills and strengthen community ties. First Aid Training gives caregivers the tools to respond to emergencies and keep children safe. Cultural connection events such as community dinners and International Indigenous Day provided opportunities for families to celebrate traditions and deepen their cultural understanding. Other community events, such as a Family Mini Golf & pizza event hosted in collaboration with Interior Community Services, brought families together for fun and bonding in a relaxed setting.

Kinship also launched a new group this year: the Grandmother's Group (GG's Circle). This group supports grandmothers and great aunties under 54.01 agreements (Permanent Transfer of Custody). It offers a confidential space where caregivers can enjoy coffee and snacks while discussing challenges such as legal or financial issues. The group provides a safe space where caregivers can get emotional support and connection among caregivers in similar situations.

This year, the team welcomed a social work student through the Student Practicum Program. This student brought fresh energy and valuable support to the team, contributing to casework and helping with events.



The team looks forward to January 2026, when another Social Work practicum student will arrive. No other new services or pilot programs were introduced this year and service delivery methods remained consistent. The team focused on maintaining the quality of their existing framework, and ensuring caregivers received steady, reliable support.

Collaboration played a key role in the team's success. Internally, they worked closely with Intake and Guardianship teams for case planning, the Mental Wellness team for mental health support, and the Early Years team to assist caregivers with child development and cultural learning. Externally, their partnership with Interior Community Services provided trauma-informed training and resources that helped caregivers feel more confident in supporting children with complex needs.

The team has experienced heavier caseloads this past year, and frequent requests from MCFD to borrow homes added pressure to already limited housing options. In response, the team prioritized urgent cases, shared workloads, and streamlined internal processes. They also advocated for caregivers and coordinated with MCFD to make the best use of available resources. The team stepped up to support other departments while maintaining their own responsibilities and they remain hopeful that the worst of these challenges is behind them.

As the team transitions into the 2025/2026 year, they are looking to:

- Strengthen relationships with Ktunaxa Elders to support cultural learning and guidance.
- Incorporate traditional teachings more consistently into caregiver support groups.
- Continue building community visibility through participation in cultural and organizational events.
- Explore opportunities to expand trauma-informed training for caregivers.
- Maintain high-quality service delivery while managing caseloads effectively.
- Advocate for increased housing options to better support kinship placements.

The Kinship team remains deeply committed to supporting children and caregivers with compassion, cultural integrity, and community connection. As they look ahead, the team is excited to continue building strong relationships, deepening cultural integration, and finding new ways to uplift families. Our work is rooted in the belief that every child deserves to grow up surrounded by love, tradition, and belonging — and they will keep working to make that vision a reality.

Ktunaxa House

Ktunaxa House (also known as K House) provides a safe and supportive home for children and youth who need a higher level of care than can be provided in a standard foster home setting. Since opening in 2009, K House has offered stability, consistency, and a sense of belonging for young people in our communities. What began as “Hoodoo House” in a small two-bedroom home on reserve has since grown into a dedicated residence on Mission Road, where it continues to support children through culturally-grounded and relationship-based care.

K House is unique in both its size and its approach. Though an unlicensed group home, it typically cares for one to two children at a time, sometimes welcoming a sibling group to keep family members together. This smaller model allows for strong, lasting relationships to develop between staff and the children, creating a foundation of safety and trust. Some children stay for just a few weeks while others remain for years. Each journey is shaped by individual needs, histories, and healing processes.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development contracts with service providers to operate similar homes in the mainstream system. These homes are often run as businesses, with priorities that do not always center on the well-being of children. K House was created differently, with a focus on providing a stable home where young people are cared for, supported, and able to build lasting relationships with staff.

K House began as a response to the lack of appropriate placement options for Ktunaxa youth. To keep children connected to community, language, and culture, creative solutions were explored including renting a home in ʔaąam with Ktunaxa caregivers. As youth transitioned out, others would move in, and at times, the need for space exceeded what was available. This led to ongoing discussion about whether the home should pursue provincial licensing or remain unlicensed.

The main limitation of operating as an unlicensed home has been the restriction of housing to no more than two children unless they are immediate family. While licensing may have addressed this, it posed challenges: significant costs, limited budgets, and provincial requirements that would have restricted the ability to provide culturally-safe care rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, ceremony, and practice. After careful consideration, staff and the Board chose to remain unlicensed. This decision keeps K House small and intentional, focusing deeply on one or two youth at a time, and investing in love, culture, identity, belonging, and life skills that prepare young people for adulthood and independence.

Staff at K House place a strong emphasis on cultural connection and land-based activities. Children spend time on the land, take part in cultural teachings, and build a sense of identity and belonging through these experiences. Over the years, the home has also offered opportunities such as equine therapy, gatherings with Elders, and cultural workshops — more than just programs, these have been pathways to healing and resilience. Many young people describe K House as “the best home they ever had,” largely because of the genuine care and lasting relationships built with staff. The home also partners with services such as Rocky Mountain Behaviour Analysts to ensure children with significant mental health or behavioural needs receive specialized support.

Operating K House is not without challenges. The limits of being an unlicensed home and the complex needs of children with histories of trauma require ongoing effort and creativity. While there have been discussions about moving into an urban setting or pursuing licensing, the current location continues to provide an important connection to land, culture, and community.

This year, K House welcomed children and youth ranging from age six to eighteen. Each placement is carefully considered for safety and fit, with 24-hour awake staffing provided when needed. Staff are trained to respond to trauma-related behaviours such as aggression, self-harm, or running away while maintaining focus on building trust, stability, and healing.



The impact of K House extends beyond its walls. Some youth remain connected, visiting staff or sharing their stories of resilience, while others go on to participate in cultural and community events. These ongoing relationships show the lasting influence of K House — not only as a placement option, but as a place where cultural grounding, connection, and hope take root.

Many young people describe K House as “the best home they ever had,” largely because of the genuine care and lasting relationships built with staff.

CHELSEA CROSS

DIRECTOR OF
PREVENTION SERVICES



Ki?su?k kyukyit áqapiniskit,

Hu qak?ik Chelsea Cross. My mother is Rosemary Phillips, and my maternal grandparents are Alec and Florence Phillips; my father is John Nicholas, and my paternal grandparents are Jack Stevens and Elizabeth Nicholas. I have familial ties to both ?akis?nuk First Nation and Ya?it ?a?knu?i?it First Nation.

It has been my honour to serve as Director of Prevention Services since July 2024, following three years as the department's Advisor. My journey with KKFSS began in 2007 as the Head Start Coordinator and Early Years Consultant, later as Early Years Team Lead, and Prevention Services Advisor, and currently serving as Director of Prevention Services.

Since the age of 18, I have been fortunate to work in many Nation programs, including youth programs, daycare, and summer programming. These experiences, combined with my ongoing studies in management and leadership, and integrating two-eyed-seeing approaches have shaped how I navigate this work – with a deep respect for culture, community, and collaboration.

Prevention Services encompasses a wide range of programming, including Mental Wellness, Occupational Therapy, Early Years, Indigenous Family Enhancement, and Jordan's Principle Service Coordination. Together, these services support children, youth, families, and their communities through cultural and community belonging, wellness, empowerment, and collaboration. At the heart of our work is the belief that the people we serve are the experts of their own lives and that programs and services are strongest when they are shaped in true partnership.

This year has been one of both challenge and growth. Like many departments, we faced staffing changes, vacancies, and the uncertainty that comes with transition. Despite this, the Prevention teams maintained a high level of service delivery and even expanded in areas such as occupational therapy. One highlight has been learning together with Jared Basil about the Ktunaxa Nation Social Investment Sector's Practice Framework. This shared learning has not only grounded us in a Nation-led vision for care, but has also given us new tools and approaches to guide our programming.

We also celebrated many milestones within our teams and in community. Prevention hosted our annual National Indigenous Peoples Day event at Rotary Park in Cranbrook, our annual Children's Christmas Gathering, provided food bags for families, and provided child-minding to support Ktunaxa Citizens with young children to fully participate in the Ktunaxa Nation Annual General Assembly. We co-hosted cultural and community gatherings and collaborated with Foundry to offer programming that builds connection and wellness. Each of these moments reflects our department's role in creating spaces of belonging, joy, and cultural pride.

Cultural integration remains central to our work. Our department is committed to providing quarterly cultural programs that strengthen identity and connection. Our practices are guided by Ktunaxa values such as ʔa-kikʔuʔnam ʔa-qaʔwiʔis (Community Input), qanikitʔiʔti ʔaknumuʔtiʔis (Stewardship), qanikitʔiʔni (Quality Services), and ʔat ksukitʔupxa kitki-kʔamnamis (Willingness to Learn). These teachings remind us that quality service is not just about programs delivered, but about how we walk with families — meeting them where they are, drawing on their expertise, recognizing their strengths, and honouring their dreams.

There were also challenges that tested us. Staffing shortages required me to step in and lead multiple teams while maintaining my director duties. The lack of physical space and housing continues to be a barrier for many families and youth we serve, and expanding Prevention into more communities remains a strong desire that is limited by physical and human capacity. Through these challenges, we focused on what we could control, created space to support one another, and leaned into change management practices to guide us forward.

Looking ahead, our priorities include strengthening our engagement processes and how we monitor and evaluate programs, ensuring cultural integration remains embedded across all services, and moving toward needs-based screenings that better reflect the realities of families. These steps will help us ensure our work remains transparent, responsive, and aligned with community priorities.

I want to conclude by extending my heartfelt gratitude to the Indigenous Family Enhancement and Early Years teams for your patience, resilience, and adaptability in the absence of dedicated Team Leads. I recognize how challenging it has been to navigate a time of transition and uncertainty, and I want you to know how deeply appreciative I am of the strength and integrity you brought to your work. It has been an absolute privilege to walk alongside both teams.

I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone across KKFSS, front-line staff and leadership alike, who have continued to show up each day with courage and compassion. In a time marked by fear and uncertainty, your unwavering commitment to the children, youth, families, and communities we serve has been nothing short of inspiring. You have continued to embody our organizational values, even when doing so was not easy. Your dedication does not go unnoticed.

Together, may we continue to move forward grounded in our values, and guided by the people and communities we serve.

With respect and gratitude,

Chelsea Cross

Director of Prevention Services



Mental Wellness

The Mental Wellness team provides culturally grounded, trauma-informed counselling and wellness support to children, youth, young adults (ages 0–27), and their caregivers across Ktunaxa ʔamakʔis. Services are offered in-person in several communities and virtually when requested, ensuring accessibility and flexibility. The team works alongside individuals and their support networks to promote holistic well-being, recognizing that healing happens within relationships – whether with family, community, land, or culture.

Counselling services are tailored to each person and may include talk therapy, somatic interventions, land-based practices, play therapy, expressive arts, and equine-facilitated wellness. Families are also supported through group programming, outreach, and collaborative planning with other service providers. The team’s approach centers on building trust, honoring cultural identity, and supporting each person’s healing journey.

This year, the team expanded collaborative service planning, especially with health services and family therapy, and launched the Early Years Mental Wellness Program, integrating play therapy and social-emotional learning for young children. Participation in the PCN steering committee improved access to child and youth psychiatry services, allowing for earlier consultation and treatment.

Collaboration remained central. The team partnered with the Indigenous Family Enhancement Program, Early Years team, Kinship team and ʔikxawiʔikimik – Foundry East Kootenay Peer Support Workers, band health centers, pediatricians, and psychiatry services. Monthly Wellness PODs with Early Years and IFEP teams fostered connection and coordination. The Youth in Crisis Table also strengthened support for those needing intensive services. Community engagement included attending dinners, hosting info tables at AGMs, and participating in local events, building relationships and raising awareness of available supports.

The team included 15 members: a Team Lead, Clinical Counsellors, Wellness Outreach Counsellors, a Wellness Outreach Worker, and an Equine Facilitated Wellness Worker. Two new staff joined in January, bringing valuable experience. While some staff moved on for personal milestones, new hires are expected in September. Recruitment continues in yaqan nuʔkiy, with interim coverage provided by the Cranbrook office.

Ktunaxa values, language, and teachings guide the team’s work. Clients are invited to explore how cultural identity supports wellness. Staff connect individuals to Knowledge Holders and consult with the Cultural Lead. Weekly PODs include practicing Ktunaxa words using First Voices, reinforcing language and culture in daily practice.

Highlights included play-based caregiver-child groups in Lower Kootenay, youth sessions at the KNC Summit, art therapy in ʔakisq̓nuk, and the “Let’s Talk” series with ʔaqam Health & Wellness. The team also delivered the “Fatherhood is Sacred, Motherhood is Sacred” program, hosted the Polar Plunge in yaqan nuʔkiy, and offered Equine Facilitated Wellness groups. A seminar on ʔasqanaki – intergenerational healing’ was presented to the Cranbrook Historical Society.

The team's most meaningful successes were often personal: helping youth express emotions, supporting caregivers in group settings, and walking alongside clients as they challenged systems and envisioned healing spaces. A November team-building day with Cultural Lead Smokii focused on laughter, boundaries, and language. Another proud achievement was the collaborative creation of a Mental Wellness team policy guide, which fostered shared learning and practice development.

Systemic barriers — such as housing shortages, poverty, and limited access to substance use treatment — continued to impact wellness. In response, the team leaned into creative collaboration, advocacy, and efforts to decolonize systems.



Guided by staff feedback and community needs, the Mental Wellness team is prioritizing:

- Supporting knowledge transfer and collaboration across teams and programs.
- Facilitating community-led delivery of Fatherhood is Sacred / Motherhood is Sacred.
- Building shared session resources between Early Years Consultants and Counsellors.
- Advancing individual practice learning goals for each Counsellor.

The team is also exploring a consulting clinician program based out of FEK to offer drop-in, solution-focused brief therapy and support for agency programs providing direct client services.

KKCFSS continues to prioritize culturally grounded, trauma-informed approaches to wellness and care. The Mental Wellness team's efforts reflect a deep commitment to collaboration, professional growth, and responsive service delivery.

Early Years

Over the past year, the Early Years team continued to provide warm, culturally grounded support to families with young children across Ktunaxa ʔamakʔis. Their work focused on serving families with children aged 0–8 through three core programs: Aboriginal Supported Child Development (ASCD), Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP), and Urban Aboriginal Early Childhood Development. Services were delivered through in-home visits, office appointments, and community outreach and group activities, with a strong emphasis on meeting families where they are and sharing child development information and tools in ways that are culturally appropriate and responsive to individual needs.

The team also hosted a weekly Friday play group open to all families. Each session featured a unique theme — family favorites included the Summer Olympics and Grandmother's Tea themes — and was designed to support children's play skills while supporting parents and caregivers in building confidence and creating social connections.

Early Years has integrated a meaningful cultural element into Friday groups, creating space for families to share, learn, and grow together. This focus on cultural connection has become a valuable strength of the program.

Primary clients included families and caregivers in ʔakisq̓nuk, ʔaq̓am, yaqan nuʔkiy, and Yaq̓it ʔa·knuq̓iʔit. The Early Years team worked alongside families whose children may benefit from extra support in their development, whether due to a formal diagnosis, developmental differences, or emerging concerns.

Outside of direct service delivery, the team engaged with families through community events, parenting programs, and informal conversations. These interactions helped build trust and deepen understanding of community needs.



The Early Years team consists of six Early Years Consultants and one Team Lead. While staffing challenges arose in the 2024/2025 year, the team remained resourceful and committed. They developed a workplan, set team and individual goals aligned with the organization's strategic pillars, and organized regular team pod meetings where staff presented to each other on Early Years topics and team development. These efforts helped maintain momentum and fostered a sense of shared purpose.

Collaboration remained a key strength. The team worked closely with Counsellors, Social Workers, and Family Support Workers across the organization to support families holistically, especially when mental health needs were present. The Team Lead also attended community meetings and helped raise awareness of available services. Increased visibility at local events, which included booths sharing child development activities, helped spark conversations and build relationships.

Among the year's highlights was the team's proud support and organization of National Indigenous Peoples Day events in both 2024 and 2025. Their presence at community events grew, and the return of a Team Lead in-office strengthened coordination and morale.

Ktunaxa values, language, and teachings continued to guide the team's work. Elders were invited to participate in pod meetings, and staff registered for or completed cultural training. The team also attended community events and remained committed to ongoing learning and honoring reconciliation.

Building on the previous year's momentum, the Early Years team is focused on:

- Sharing child development information in ways that are accessible, culturally safe, and family-centered.
- Enhancing learning and implementation of culturally relevant practices in their work.
- Allocating dedicated time for team-building and connection activities.
- Implementing a development training program focused on child development, effective teaching strategies, cultural competence, and inclusive learning environments.

The team continues to explore new ideas to strengthen service delivery, which includes creating a play space within the office and deepening relationships with community partners. Their commitment to culturally safe, family-centered care remains at the heart of everything they do.



Indigenous Family Enhancement

The Indigenous Family Enhancement Program (IFEP) team provides culturally-rooted, youth-centered support to children, youth, and their families. Their mission is to strengthen Indigenous families and communities by offering family-centered services that enhance well-being, promote safety, and support permanence for children and youth. Their vision is a future where Indigenous children thrive in safe, loving homes connected to culture, community, and kinship networks.

IFEP's practice is guided by the Ktunaxa Nation Social Investment Sector's Practice Framework and KKCFSS's Best Practices, which are informed by Ktunaxa, Métis, and Shuswap members. The team works primarily in Cranbrook due to staffing and space limitations in other areas, serving children and youth between the ages of 7 and 21 along with their support networks. Services focus on youth justice, family support, substance use navigation, housing advocacy, school support, life skills, mental wellness, cultural connection, and healthy relationships.

Ktunaxa values, language, and teachings are foundational to the team's work. Each youth is invited to explore how cultural identity supports their well-being, and staff help connect them to knowledge holders and cultural supports. The team continues to seek opportunities to deepen cultural integration by expanding programming such as moccasin-making, ribbon shirt and skirt-making, and hide processing. These activities not only foster cultural pride and skill-building but also create space for intergenerational connection and healing.

The team includes five staff members: a Team Lead (currently filled by the Director of Prevention Services until September 2025), one Youth Justice and Family Support Worker, and three Youth and Family Support Workers. Despite the absence of a permanent Team Lead and ongoing organizational uncertainty, the team maintained strong service delivery and advocacy efforts. Their commitment to youth and families remained unwavering, even in the face of systemic challenges.

This year, the team observed a noticeable increase in support needs related to housing insecurity, access to substance use treatment, and parent-teen conflict. In response, IFEP adapted its programming and strengthened collaborations with internal and external partners. The team worked creatively to meet youth where they were at, offering flexible, responsive services that prioritized safety, connection, and empowerment.

Programming was diverse and community-rooted, including activities such as skating, climbing, summer drop-ins, ski and lake days, martial arts, art nights, and wellness gatherings. The Youth Health for Wellness series blended art and healing, while the Warriors Program and Another Way Friday created space for cultural reconnection and youth-led storytelling. These programs were designed to be inclusive, low-barrier, and responsive to youth interests, with a focus on building trust and fostering resilience.



Collaboration is central to IFEP's approach. All partnerships are built with client consent and designed to support youth holistically. The team frequently collaborates with the Mental Wellness team, Occupational Therapy, Delegated Youth Services, Rocky Mountain Métis Association, East Kootenay Addictions Services, Interior Health Youth ICM team, *ṭikxawiḡikimik* – Foundry East Kootenay, and Ground Floor Makers' Space. The Foundry team and Ground Floor were especially meaningful partners this year, expanding youth engagement and support through shared programming and co-facilitated events.

Feedback is gathered through surveys, sharing circles, and informal conversations. Youth gatherings often spark ideas that shape future programming. These moments of connection are central to IFEP's approach and help ensure that services remain relevant and youth-driven. The team values youth voices and actively incorporates their perspectives into planning and decision-making.

Training with Jared Basil deepened the team's understanding of person-centered services and Ktunaxa practice. Cultural opportunities on the land created space for healing and growth, allowing youth to reconnect with traditional teachings and practices. The launch of Another Way Friday offered youth a platform for storytelling and peer support, while Youth Art for Wellness blended creativity with emotional exploration. These initiatives helped youth express themselves, build community, and explore their identities in culturally-safe and supportive environments.

Despite challenges, the team remained open to learning, advocated strongly, and created space for youth to voice concerns about service gaps and communication. Challenges included operating without a permanent Tadeam Lead, organizational uncertainty, and the youth drug crisis. In response, the team prioritized youth needs, leaned into collaboration, and focused on prevention and direct support. Their adaptability and resilience were key to maintaining continuity of care and trust with youth and families.

Looking ahead, the IFEP team is focused on:

- Strengthening internal communication with Delegated Services.
- Clarifying and solidifying IFEP processes.
- Defining scope of practice and referral pathways for needs outside that scope.
- Evaluating tools and approaches to ensure they meet the needs of youth and families.

They are also exploring improvements in service delivery, including:

- Establishing better feedback loops between leadership, staff, and those served.
- Conducting needs-based scaling and mapping with youth and families to clarify service pathways and triage processes.



The IFEP team continues to play a vital role in advancing culturally-grounded, community-led approaches to healing and wellness. Through relationship-building, capacity development, and responsive programming, they have strengthened supports for families and deepened partnerships across sectors. Their work remains central to KKFSS's mission and future initiatives rooted in Indigenous knowledge and community.



Jordan's Principle

Jordan's Principle Service Coordination at KKCFSS is led by Sara Mercier, who provides compassionate and knowledgeable support to families navigating the Jordan's Principle request and payment process. Her role is rooted in advocacy, education, and connection — helping families identify unmet needs in areas such as education, health, and recreation, and guiding them toward resources that can address those gaps.

Jordan's Principle is a child-first initiative designed to ensure First Nations children receive the services they need, when they need them. Named in honour of Jordan River Anderson from Norway House Cree Nation, whose care was delayed due to jurisdictional disputes, the principle stands as a commitment to equity and timely access to care for First Nations children across Canada.

Sara's work is deeply relational and responsive. Her days are spent meeting with caregivers, contacting professionals to advocate for families, and educating service providers, organizations, and families about Jordan's Principle. She supports families through each step of the request process, helping them articulate their needs and navigate the complexities of funding applications.

While the work is rewarding, it comes with challenges. One of the most significant barriers is the lengthy wait times and delays in funding decisions from Indigenous Services Canada. These delays have national implications, contributing to ongoing litigation and hearings before the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. Despite these systemic issues, Sara remains committed to supporting families, sourcing alternative resources, and advocating for timely, equitable access to services.

A highlight this year was Sara's participation in the Teddy Bear Picnic at the Welcome to Summer event hosted by Kootenay Kids Society in Nelson. Events like these offer joyful, informal opportunities to connect with families while providing education and support. Each successful Jordan's Principle request (no matter how long the process) represents a meaningful win for children and families, helping meet urgent needs and improve quality of life.

Looking ahead, Sara has identified three key priorities for the coming fiscal year:

- Continued advocacy for families while communicating with Indigenous Services Canada, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are clearly represented.
- Strengthening networking and connection across all areas of Ktunaxa ʔamakʔis to build awareness and access to Jordan's Principle supports.
- Increasing attendance and education at community events to foster relationships, share knowledge, and support families in culturally-grounded ways.

Sara's work reflects the heart of Jordan's Principle: putting children first and ensuring families are supported with dignity, care, and respect. Her dedication continues to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those she serves.

Occupational Therapy

The Occupational Therapy (OT) team at KKCFSS has continued to grow and evolve over the past year, offering a wide range of services to children, youth, and families across Ktunaxa communities and surrounding areas. Led by Occupational Therapist Eli Poultney and supported by Occupational Therapy Assistant Eniko Janos, the team has focused on building a culturally-grounded, person-centered approach that emphasizes building on strengths and reducing barriers.

Occupational therapy services at KKCFSS include both assessment and intervention, with a strong emphasis on collaboration and relational practice. Assessments are tailored to each child and family, exploring sensory needs, strengths, interests, and environmental factors that impact participation. These assessments often lead to referrals to other professionals such as physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, counsellors, or pediatricians, ensuring a holistic and coordinated approach to care. They also support families in navigating Autism Funding, acquiring sensory and adaptive equipment, and preparing letters of support for Jordan's Principle applications.

Direct and indirect consultation is a core part of the OT model, with the team working closely with schools, daycares, caregivers, and other health professionals to reduce barriers to participation and advocate for appropriate supports. This work is deeply relational, often taking place in natural environments such as homes, classrooms, and community spaces, as well as within KKCFSS's newly developed sensory room.

The team collaborates regularly with the *ṭikxawiḡikimik* – Foundry East Kootenay team, Early Years team, Indigenous Family Enhancement team, and other KKCFSS teams to ensure a whole-team approach to service delivery.

Group programming has been a highlight this year, with the OT team facilitating social and regulation groups such as the swim club, which was designed for children facing barriers to full-time school attendance. Summer clubs and interest-based groups have also provided opportunities for connection and skill-building. The department has partnered with Early Years and Family Support to foster inclusion for neurodivergent children and implement universal-design principles across programming. In addition, Eli has delivered presentations to daycares, schools, and KKCFSS teams on topics such as sensory processing and supporting behaviour through connection.



Each day on the OT team looks different. Eli travels across a wide geographic area — including Sparwood, Fernie, Creston, Invermere, and Canal Flats — working in schools, homes, youth centres, and other community settings. Eniko's days are typically spent in and around Cranbrook and Canal Flats, supporting children and families in those areas. Their work includes one-on-one sessions with children, group facilitation, caregiver coaching, and interdepartmental collaboration. Activities are grounded in play, movement, and relationship-building, with a focus on supporting emotional regulation, sensory awareness, and independence.

This year brought several exciting developments. The creation of a sensory space, in partnership with the Mental Wellness team, has provided a dedicated environment for therapeutic work that is culturally-safe and responsive.

The hiring of an Occupational Therapy Assistant has helped manage a growing caseload and supported both client services and administrative logistics. Together, Eli and Eniko have contributed to a sense of inclusion and belonging through KKCFSS programming, celebrating the progress and strengths of the children and families they serve.

As a newly established department, the team has also faced challenges. Building the OT program from the ground up has required attention to foundational logistics, including intake processes, assessment frameworks, and interdepartmental coordination. The large geographic scope and high volume of clients have made it necessary to continually refine systems to ensure that services remain responsive and effective.

Looking ahead, the Occupational Therapy team has identified three key priorities for the coming year:

- Developing and enhancing KKCFSS group programming to better support children with higher support needs, ensuring inclusive and interest-based opportunities for connection and growth.
- Strengthening collaboration with schools to improve the efficiency and impact of occupational therapy supports within educational settings.
- Sharing the vision and mission of the OT program more broadly, embedding Indigenous teachings and culturally affirming practices into all aspects of service delivery and community engagement.

The Occupational Therapy team is proud of the progress made this year and looks forward to continuing to grow in ways that reflect the values, strengths, and needs of the communities they serve.

ṭikxawiḡikimik

Foundry East Kootenay, known as ṭikxawiḡikimik, is a youth wellness centre located in ʔakisqakʔit (Cranbrook, BC), operated by KKCFSS. The centre offers integrated health and social services to young people aged 12–24, with a strong foundation in Indigenous values and community connection. ṭikxawiḡikimik – Foundry East Kootenay was established in response to a youth suicide crisis and inspired by the vision of Ktunaxa and Kinbasket grandmothers to create a safe, welcoming space for all Indigenous children and families living in Ktunaxa ʔamakʔis.

In its first year of operation, ṭikxawiḡikimik provided wraparound services that included mental health and substance use support, primary health care, peer and family peer support, cultural programming, and social services. These services are offered in person, virtually, and in community, ensuring accessibility and responsiveness to youth needs. Primary and mental health care emerged as the most accessed service areas, with youth seeking support for general physical and sexual health, as well as mental wellness and daily life challenges. Specialized services — such as medication-assisted treatment and gender-affirming care — were also available, delivered in alignment with provincial health guidelines and youth-informed best practices.

Mental health services included free, confidential walk-in counselling (WiC), using single-session Brief Solution-Focused Therapy. Youth could access support without prior assessment, and extended services were available when needed. Additional offerings included short-term and one-time counselling, as well as group-based supports such as Y Mind (for youth with anxiety), grief support, 2SLGBTQ+ and Trans youth support, and substance use support.

ṭikxawiḡikimik also served as a safe and welcoming space for youth to gather, connect, and participate in activities that promote wellness and belonging. Throughout the year, the centre hosted hot meals, movie days, and art therapy sessions. Weekly programming — such as the Wednesday “Art Sesh” and cooking groups for youth and families — provided opportunities for creativity, skill-building, and social connection. These activities were designed to reduce isolation and foster a sense of community.

Peer support is a vital part of the Foundry model. Youth with lived experience provide navigation help, harm reduction education, recreational activities, and collect feedback from youth. Peer Support Workers are available during walk-in and peak hours and are integrated into the Care team. Family Support is also available, offering caregivers a non-judgmental space to receive resources and emotional support from adults with similar lived experience.

ṭikxawiḡikimik collaborated with a wide range of community partners to offer additional services and resources. These included the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL), East Kootenay Addiction Services Society (EKASS), Ankors, Interior Health, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), and the Child and Youth Mental Health team (CYMH). The ṭikxawiḡikimik Team also worked closely with other KKCFSS teams — including Early Years, Indigenous Family Enhancement, Mental Wellness, and the Delegated Services teams — to ensure youth and families received coordinated, holistic care. Foundry is proud to be part of the KKCFSS family and the centre’s success is deeply connected to the collective efforts of staff across the organization.

Cultural integration is foundational to ʔikxawiʔikimik's approach. The centre is guided by Indigenous relational values and works to ensure that all youth (particularly Indigenous youth) feel safe, seen, and supported. Cultural supports are available for Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ youth, and the centre continues to explore ways to deepen cultural relevance in its programming and environment. Smokii Sumac, the Cultural Lead, has played a key role in this work throughout 2024 and 2025 — offering smudging ceremonies, cultural teachings, and language learning opportunities for both youth and staff. Youth have participated in harvesting trips, cooking classes, and land-based learning, all of which have helped bring the Ktunaxa way of being into every area of ʔikxawiʔikimik's work.

As ʔikxawiʔikimik celebrated its one-year anniversary, the team reflected on a year of growth, learning, and collaboration.

Despite changes in leadership and staffing challenges, the team remained committed to building a cohesive, resilient environment where every young person feels welcome and supported.

The team also navigated several operational challenges throughout the year. Building awareness in the broader community about the scope of ʔikxawiʔikimik's services required ongoing outreach and education. Many youth and families were unfamiliar with the centre's integrated model, and staff worked to clarify what supports were available and how to access them. Internally, the team began laying the groundwork for a youth leadership group, which will help ensure programming remains youth-informed and responsive. Expanding programs and services to meet growing demand also required creative problem-solving, especially in the face of limited resources.





Offering extended hours to better accommodate youth schedules was another area of focus, and while progress was made, it remains a priority for the coming year.

The centre also began exploring trauma-informed design principles to enhance the physical space. Feedback from youth highlighted the importance of lighting, privacy, and sensory-friendly environments. In response, the team made small but meaningful changes to ensure the space felt safe and welcoming for all. This looked like adding soft seating, calming artwork, and quiet zones across the building. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to youth-led design and continuous improvement.

Youth voice continues to be a driving force behind the evolution of ṭikxawiçikimik. From the beginning, the centre has prioritized listening to youth perspectives and incorporating their feedback into service design and delivery. Youth have expressed appreciation for the centre's welcoming atmosphere, the diversity of programming, and the ability to access multiple supports in one location. Their input has shaped everything from the layout of the space to the types of workshops offered. As the youth leadership group takes shape, the team is excited to deepen this engagement and create more formal pathways for youth to influence decision-making. This group will also help guide outreach strategies, ensuring that messaging resonates with young people across Ktunaxa ʔamakʔis.

Staff development has also been a key focus. The team at ṭikxawiçikimik includes professionals from a range of disciplines — Physicians, Nurses, Counsellors, Peer Support Workers, Cultural Lead, and Administrative Staff — who work collaboratively to provide holistic care. Ongoing training in trauma-informed practice, cultural safety, and youth engagement has helped strengthen the team's capacity to respond to complex needs with compassion and skill. Staff have also participated in cross-training with other KKCFSS teams, building stronger internal networks and shared understanding across service areas.



Beyond the walls of the centre, *ṭikxawiḡikimik* is helping to shift the landscape of youth wellness in the East Kootenay region. By modelling integrated, culturally grounded care, the centre is influencing how other organizations think about service delivery. It has become a hub for innovation, collaboration, and healing — a place where youth are not only supported, but empowered to lead. As the centre moves into its second year, it carries forward the wisdom of its grandmothers, the strength of its community, and the voices of the youth who continue to shape its path.

In the coming year, the team will continue to build on this foundation. Priorities include:

- Launching the Foundry Work & Education Program in the 2025/2026 fiscal year to support youth employment and education pathways.
- Strengthening partnerships with employers, educators, and health professionals.
- Deepening cultural integration through Indigenous-led programming and knowledge sharing.
- Enhancing peer and family support services to meet growing demand.
- Continuing to build a safe, inclusive, and youth-led space that reflects the values of the community.
- Increasing community awareness of services and expanding outreach.
- Supporting the youth leadership group to guide programming and centre development.
- Exploring extended service hours to improve accessibility for youth.

ṭikxawiḡikimik – Foundry East Kootenay remains a vital part of the KKCFSS service network, offering youth a place to access care, build relationships, and grow. As the centre enters its second year, the team is focused on strengthening its impact, deepening community connections, and continuing to walk alongside youth on their wellness journeys. The work of *ṭikxawiḡikimik* is not only about service delivery—it is about healing, empowerment, and creating a future where every young person feels valued, supported, and connected to culture and community.

OPERATIONS OVERVIEW



Behind every successful front-line service is a dedicated team working tirelessly to ensure smooth, efficient, and culturally grounded operations. Our behind-the-scenes staff includes Finance, Human Resources, IT, Administration, Communications, Proposal and Report Writing, and Maintenance and forms the hidden backbone of KKCFSS. These teams manage everything from contracts and payroll to technology systems, staff onboarding, internal communications, grant applications, and infrastructure upkeep, allowing front-line staff to focus on supporting children, families, and communities.

A special shout out goes to our Maintenance team, whose work often happens quietly but is absolutely vital. Whether it's setting up spaces for cultural events, keeping our offices safe and functional, or responding to urgent repairs, their contributions are deeply appreciated and essential to our daily operations — even if they don't have their own section in this report.

Administration + IT

The Administration and IT teams continue to play a foundational role in supporting KKCFSS's frontline and operational staff. This team ensures that the organization runs smoothly by managing core functions such as file management, contract support, office administration, and in-house IT services. Their commitment to privacy, maintaining current records and problem-solving remains a cornerstone of their work.

As the first point of contact in KKCFSS offices, the administration team sets a welcoming and professional tone for families, community members, and staff. Their day-to-day responsibilities include greeting visitors, assisting with technical and administrative needs, organizing meetings and events, and supporting contract processes. The team is known for its adaptability, often managing multiple tasks at once and responding quickly to the evolving needs of the organization.

The IT Lead provides all in-house tech support. This year brought unique challenges, including a rise in recruitment and onboarding, which increased the demand for IT setup and troubleshooting. Additionally, the lead continues to navigate the complexities of a shared IT infrastructure with the Ktunaxa Nation Council (KNC). Despite these challenges, the IT lead remains focused on expanding and creating new KKCFSS-specific systems in the coming fiscal year, with plans to introduce updated tools, IT policies, and privacy supports to better serve both staff and families.

The Administration team also plays an important role in connecting families to programs and services they may not be aware of. Whether it's a parenting group, cultural event, or wellness resource, the team takes pride in being a bridge to supports that strengthen families.

File closures are a particularly meaningful milestone, symbolizing progress in a family's journey. While the team does not engage with the contents of case files, they support the closure process with care and confidentiality.

Challenges this year included ongoing efforts to shift public perceptions of child and family services, as well as the impact of increased workloads on the team's ability to maintain social traditions like pancake breakfasts.

Looking ahead, the Administration and IT team is focused on strengthening internal systems and rebuilding opportunities for connection. Their goals for the next fiscal year include:

- Improving turnaround times for file closures and contract processing.
- Expanding internal IT systems to include new tools, policies, and privacy supports for staff and families.
- Strengthening onboarding processes to better support new staff and streamline IT setup.
- Reintroducing informal community connections by welcoming families into the office for coffee, tea, and conversation.
- Continuing to build cultural safety and welcoming spaces through respectful language, engagement, and relationship-building with community members.

Communications

KKCFSS Communications continued to support the organization by ensuring that information is shared in ways that are clear, accessible, and culturally aligned. Communications plays a unique role in connecting staff, leadership, and community through channels such as social media, posters, newsletters, photography, and videography. These tools not only highlight the work being done across programs, but also strengthen relationships with youth, families, and community partners by making information visible, engaging, and easy to access.

Cultural integration remains the central lens through which we approach our communications. Efforts are focused on incorporating Ktunaxa language, visuals, and values into materials and storytelling. Participation in community and cultural activities, such as ławiyatł (Huckleberry) Harvesting, helps ensure that communications reflect the history and identities of the Ktunaxa people. Looking ahead, communications is exploring creative, family-centered initiatives that combine storytelling, cultural connection, and community engagement, providing meaningful ways for families to see themselves reflected in the work. This approach ensures that all communications are grounded in culture, resonate with the community, and celebrate Ktunaxa identity in authentic ways.

Strengths carried forward include continuing a consistent social media presence, recognizable branding, and finding opportunities to engage directly with the community. Opportunities for growth include strengthening internal communications, collecting community and client feedback to inform programming, and increasing team capacity in ways that also benefit Ktunaxa and Indigenous youth. One avenue is bringing on a Ktunaxa or Indigenous summer student. This role would provide mentorship and hands-on experience in communications, supporting career development and skill-building for youth while bringing fresh perspectives to the team and increasing capacity for new initiatives.



Looking ahead, one of the key priorities for the future of KKCFSS Communications is developing a more strategic and integrated approach to communications. This includes expanding into video-based communications, which provides an engaging and accessible way to highlight programs, introduce staff and keep members of the community and those we serve informed. Communications will also focus on gathering more client and community feedback to incorporate into programming, ensuring that the voices of those we serve directly inform our work. Together, these efforts will support a more purposeful, story-driven communications strategy that reflects organizational values and strengthens relationships across the organization.



In the next fiscal year, Communications will prioritize developing a full communications strategy including the following:

- Expanding the use of video to engage youth, families, and community partners.
- Strengthening internal communications and connections across teams.
- Gathering client and community feedback to inform programming and initiatives
- Providing mentorship and learning opportunities for youth to build skills, contribute ideas, and support the communications team.

By focusing on these new priorities and centering the approaches using a community-based lens, Communications will continue to evolve into a more strategic, story-driven area of work - one that amplifies culture, builds trust, and supports safe, healthy, and connected communities.

Human Resources

KKCFSS's Human Resources (HR) team serves a core function within the organization, ensuring it can offer high-quality services and supports to youth and families. As the organization continues to grow and evolve, HR remains a critical pillar in supporting staff and strengthening internal systems. The team, comprised of one HR Manager and two HR Administrators, provides the tools, guidance, and supports that help staff do their best work. This includes recruitment and hiring, onboarding, benefits administration, mental wellness supports, and broader organizational development initiatives.

Over the past year, KKCFSS has experienced significant growth, now employing over 120 staff across eight office sites — up from fewer than 50 in 2015. This expansion has brought both opportunities and challenges. The HR team has worked diligently to adapt to the changing needs of a larger and more geographically dispersed workforce. Early in the 2024/2025 fiscal year, the HR team expanded to include a second administrator. This strategic move allowed for a more effective division of responsibilities, enabling the team to balance immediate operational needs with longer-term planning and system development.

A major focus this year has been recruitment and hiring. The HR team has collaborated closely with leaders across the organization to meet staffing needs in a highly competitive labour market. The social and health services sectors continue to face significant recruitment barriers, including a shortage of qualified candidates, limited housing availability in the region, and challenges in filling temporary or contract roles to cover staff leaves. These issues are not unique to KKCFSS. In fact, they reflect broader systemic challenges across the sector. In response, the HR team has committed to researching and implementing innovative recruitment strategies. One HR Administrator now dedicates their role exclusively to recruitment and onboarding, providing personalized support to new hires and helping them navigate the complexities of relocation, housing, and integration into the organization.

Mental health and burnout have also been key areas of concern. Recognizing the emotional toll of frontline work, KKCFSS HR has prioritized staff wellness by offering access to third-party counselling services and other mental health resources. Feedback from staff has been overwhelmingly positive, and the team is now working to address the stigma that can prevent individuals from seeking support. In addition to these immediate interventions, HR is developing a resource and knowledge hub that will provide staff with centralized access to information about resources available, existing services, forms, policies and more. This initiative is part of a broader effort to build systems that support long-term mental wellness and resilience across the organization.

In terms of operational achievements, the HR team successfully led a comprehensive project to streamline and update all job descriptions across KKCFS. This initiative brought consistency to role expectations, clarified responsibilities, and identified areas where further development or support was needed. The updated job descriptions have strengthened internal communication, improved recruitment processes, and provided a clearer framework for performance management and professional development.



Looking ahead, the HR team is preparing to tackle several larger systemic priorities as recruitment stabilizes. These include:

- Updating Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) systems and policies to ensure compliance, clarity, and alignment with best practices.
- Creating a centralized resource hub and training videos to support onboarding, professional development, and staff engagement.
- Researching ways to decolonize HR practices, with a focus on equity, inclusion, and cultural safety.
- Building stronger connections and relationships across all office sites, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among staff.

As KKCFS continues to grow, the HR team remains deeply committed to supporting staff, strengthening organizational systems, and fostering a workplace culture rooted in care, collaboration, and continuous growth. Their work ensures that KKCFS is not only a place where youth and families receive meaningful support, but also a place where staff feel valued, empowered, and equipped to make a difference.

Proposal + Report Writing

This year, the Proposal and Report Writer continued to play a central role in supporting the organization's ability to stay accountable to funders, responsive to community needs, and prepared for future growth. While many roles contribute to the success of our programs, this position is uniquely focused on bridging data, planning, and funding. This ensures that the work being done across the organization is clearly documented, strategically supported, and aligned with both contractual obligations and emerging priorities.

Each month, staff across all service areas submit data that reflects the scope and impact of their work. This information is carefully reviewed and sorted according to the organization's contracts, including those with Indigenous Services Canada, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and Columbia Basin Trust. The Proposal and Report Writer organizes this data by staff roles, service locations, and program types, ensuring that each funder receives accurate, relevant, and timely reports. These reports not only fulfill contractual requirements — they also help tell the story of the organization's work in a way that is clear, consistent, and grounded in community realities.

In addition to reporting, this role plays a key part in program development and funding. By analyzing patterns and trends in service data, the Proposal and Report Writer helps identify what's working well, where improvements are needed, and where gaps exist.

When staff identify a need for a new program or service, they can collaborate with the Proposal and Report Writer to develop a clear plan—including goals, budget, and timelines. From there, funding opportunities are researched and applications are submitted.

This year, those efforts resulted in two major multi-year grants:

- The *Level BIPOC Grant*, which supports the delivery of culturally-safe programming for youth and families;
- The *Community Action Initiative Youth Wellness Grant*, which funds grief support for those impacted by the toxic drug crisis.

These grants reflect the strength of our proposals and the importance of community-driven, culturally responsive programming. They also allow the organization to build sustainable services that make a lasting impact.

A meaningful shift this year was the Proposal and Report Writer's return to working in-office. This change has strengthened collaboration across teams, especially around data collection and proposal development. Being on-site has made it easier to connect with staff, clarify reporting needs, and co-develop proposals that reflect the lived experiences of those delivering and receiving services.



One significant challenge has been the decrease in available grant funding from external funding organizations. Compared to previous years, the 2024/2025 fiscal year saw fewer opportunities, and this trend has continued into 2025/2026. Despite this, the Proposal and Report Writer continues to work closely with staff to develop strong, targeted proposals that reflect both funder priorities and the evolving needs of the communities we serve.

Looking ahead, the Proposal and Report Writer will focus on several key priorities:

- Transitioning to a fully digital reporting system, replacing the previous Excel-based format with a more efficient and detailed platform.
- Developing customized data reports for Team Leads and senior leadership to support planning and decision-making.
- Strengthening internal collaboration to ensure that reporting and proposal development remain grounded in frontline experience and community voice.

Through thoughtful reporting, strategic grant writing, and ongoing collaboration, the Proposal and Report Writer continues to support the organization's mission to deliver inclusive, culturally safe, and responsive services across all sites.

Finance

KKCFSS's Finance team plays a foundational role in supporting the organization's operations, growth, and long-term sustainability. As KKCFSS continues to expand its services and programs, the Finance team has worked diligently to adapt systems, manage increasing complexity, and ensure financial accountability across all areas of the organization.

This year marked a significant shift with the integration of *ṭikxawiḡikimik* – Foundry East Kootenay, which introduced new billing systems, contracts, and overhead expenses. The addition of Foundry required the development of new financial processes and structures, adding layers of complexity to day-to-day operations. Managing multiple systems has become a new norm, and the team has responded with flexibility and commitment, working to incorporate Foundry into existing systems while maintaining core financial functions.

The team is responsible for a wide range of activities that are essential to the organization's financial health. These include banking, payroll coordination, invoice review, budgeting, audits, financial reporting, and consultation on capital projects. They also provide guidance to Team Leads on financial planning and ensure that expenditures align with funding requirements and organizational priorities. Accounts Payable staff play a critical role in maintaining vendor relationships, processing payments, and resolving billing discrepancies, ensuring that financial obligations are met in a timely and accurate manner.

The organization's financial position remains stable, though capital expenses continue to have a notable impact. As a largely contract- and grant-funded organization, large capital decisions can significantly affect financial planning. Funding opportunities, like CHRT 41, can help to offset these impacts where they arise. Unspent funds and staffing changes have also led to carryforward liabilities, while unexpected funding received from ISC throughout the year has required ongoing adjustments to budgets and reporting. These shifts have required the team to remain agile and responsive, often revisiting financial plans mid-year.

One of the team's notable contributions was to the successful opening of *ṭikxawiḡikimik* – Foundry East Kootenay, including support for operational setup and financial integration. This accomplishment reflects the team's ability to manage complex transitions while maintaining continuity in financial operations.

The launch of the SAJE program by the Province of British Columbia in April 2024 introduced another layer of financial complexity. The program brought with it new billing structures, payment processes, and contract requirements. The Finance team worked quickly to integrate these changes into existing systems, ensuring compliance with provincial standards while maintaining clarity and consistency in internal processes. This work required close coordination with program staff and external partners, and highlighted the team's ability to adapt to evolving funding landscapes.

Challenges this year included adapting financial infrastructure to match the pace of organizational growth.

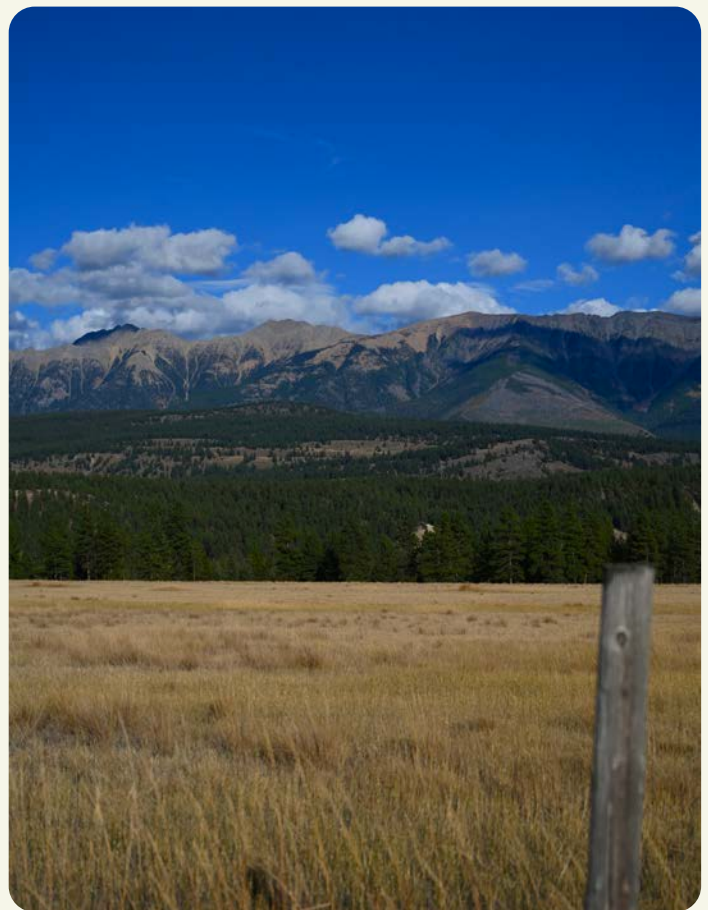
While other departments expanded rapidly, financial systems remained largely unchanged, requiring the team to work hard to catch up and move forward. The temporary reassignment of a director to the interim CAO role also reduced capacity, but the team maintained daily operations with dedication and professionalism. Additional supports were brought in to assist with audits and payroll, and staff were cross-trained to fill gaps. One staff member transitioned from Finance to HR, prompting the onboarding and training of a new Accounts Payable team member.

Looking ahead, the Finance team is focused on stabilizing staffing and systems to support long-term sustainability. This includes strengthening internal processes, updating policies through a cultural lens, and investing in staff development. These efforts will allow the team to move beyond reactive operations and begin implementing innovative tools and practices that strengthen financial stewardship across the organization.

Key priorities for the upcoming fiscal year include:

- Stabilizing staffing across the organization, ensuring that Finance roles are well-supported and sustainable.
- Reviewing and updating financial policies, with a focus on cultural relevance, clarity, and alignment with organizational values.
- Providing staff training and mentorship, particularly around financial systems, policies, and role development.
- Building capacity for innovation, including exploring new tools and systems to improve efficiency and transparency.
- Ensuring expenditures align with community needs, supporting programming and service delivery that reflects KKCFS's mission and values.

As KKCFS continues to grow, the Finance team remains committed to supporting its mission through sound financial management, responsive systems, and a collaborative approach to organizational development. Their work ensures that the organization can continue to deliver high-quality services to children, youth, and families — while maintaining the financial integrity and sustainability needed for long-term impact.



As part of this year's Annual Report, we extend our sincere appreciation to our staff, especially those who have reached milestones of 10+, 15+, 20+, and 25+ years of service in 2025.

This work is complex and often heavy. It asks much of those who choose to stay — not only in time, but in care, energy, and commitment. We recognize that our organization operates within systems and histories that can be painful for families, and we hold that truth with care as we honour the individuals who continue to show up.

To those who have remained through the challenges and changes: thank you. Your dedication has helped carry this work forward, and we are deeply grateful for all that you've contributed.

25+ Years of Service

Julie Birdstone – 27 years

20+ Years of Service

Jim Francis – 22 Years

Angie Louie – 20 Years

Gaylene Keyes – 20 Years

Tanya Francis-Stanley – 20 Years

15+ Years of Service

Chelsea Cross – 18 Years

Randi Hrisook – 17 Years

Lorna Gravelle – 15 Years

10+ Years of Service

Kris Schaper – 14 years

Derek Hunter – 10 years





Thank you to the Elders, Knowledge Holders, Community Members, Caregivers, Families, and Youth who lead, advise, share knowledge, offer critique, and walk alongside us. Your wisdom, strength, resilience and generosity guide our work and keep us grounded in what matters most.

We are grateful to be part of this shared journey, and we honour the trust you place in us.



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