



Saskatchewan
Ministry of
Social
Services

Putting Children First

Addressing the Challenge:

Response to the Saskatchewan Children's
Advocate Report on Foster Home
Overcrowding in the Centre Region

February 2009

Background

Saskatchewan's child welfare system is facing numerous challenges. In recent years, the number of children coming into care has steadily increased. For decades, the Ministry of Social Services has experienced ongoing pressure to adequately meet the needs of the vulnerable children and youth within the system.

While the issue of foster home overcrowding has become more acute, the problem is certainly not a new one. In 1986, then Provincial Ombudsman David Tickell identified the need to improve elements of the child welfare system and to address foster home overcrowding. His report, entitled *The Protection of Children: The Rights of Children: The Urgent Need to Improve a System in Crisis*, was released in December 1986, and noted among his concerns:

- Good foster parents being overloaded by the Department with too many or too difficult foster children (p. 33); and
- Shortage of foster homes and specialized foster homes (p. 33)

During the last two decades, the problem of foster home overcrowding has steadily worsened. At several points throughout the years, the problem was acknowledged but never adequately addressed.

In September 2005, the Children's Advocate Office (CAO) began receiving complaints specifically related to foster home overcrowding in the province's Centre Region. In response to mounting concern about the chronic overcrowding of homes in this particular region, the CAO launched an investigation into the issue.

While the problem of foster home overcrowding in Saskatchewan, particularly the Centre Region, is evident, the issue is one that persists across Canada. The Canadian Foster Family Association's July 2008 newsletter cites foster home shortages in Newfoundland and Labrador and British Columbia. Also, as recently as last year, the media reported on foster home shortages in Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario.

Addressing Capacity

Over the last few years, the number of children coming into care has increased by more than 100 children per year. Capacity – the number of spaces available for children who require out of home care – needs to increase to keep pace.

There are three general categories of living arrangements for children in the care of the Ministry:

- Foster homes
- Group homes
- Alternative arrangements with extended family or those with a significant connection with the child

Data is attached (see pages 9-11) which describes in a clear and forthright manner the situation in the child welfare system. This data will be posted to the Ministry website at www.socialservices.gov.sk.ca and will be updated regularly.

It is clear that immediate efforts are required to add capacity to the system and ensure that appropriate placement decisions are being made in the best interests of the child.

The Ministry will set real targets to expand capacity. Data being posted to the Ministry website will allow open accountability of the progress. During the next fiscal year, the Ministry will have a province-wide goal of adding 200 additional spaces for children and youth in care.

Efforts to expand capacity will begin immediately and will include investments to expand group home spaces (details will follow the release of the provincial budget); targeted actions to attract more foster homes in partnership with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association (SFFA); and a series of initiatives to address long-standing concerns of foster families in an effort to ensure we retain more foster homes.

A new relationship with the Central Urban Métis Federation Incorporated (CUMFI) represents the type of relationship the Ministry will pursue in an effort to expand capacity. The project will bring 21 new spaces to Saskatoon and will be open by May 1, 2009.

Beginning in April, the Ministry will launch a new initiative called *Family Finders* with existing partners to locate families for children in care and expand the capacity for appropriate alternate care arrangements.

Foster Home Recruitment

The Ministry has a long-standing relationship with SFFA which includes working together on foster family recruitment promotional activities. More recently, the SFFA began operating the province wide 1-800 inquiry number, allowing the SFFA to coordinate and support people interested in becoming foster parents.

The Ministry is providing additional funding for the SFFA to expand recruitment efforts, including:

- \$150,000 for promotional activities
- Resources to hire a dedicated foster home recruitment specialist to attract Aboriginal families (this individual began work in mid-January)
- Resources to hire dedicated staff to respond to initial foster home inquiries and support implementation of PRIDE (Parent Resources for Implementation, Development and Education) training
- Beginning in March 2009, the Ministry will launch a new initiative to engage existing foster families in attracting potential foster care givers through a referral program.

Foster Home Retention

The relationship between foster families and the Ministry has long been problematic in many respects. The Ministry is immediately adopting the following Value Statement:

Foster families are partners with the Ministry in the care of children in need. As such, they can expect to be treated with respect at all times, and as partners, they will have full access to the information they require to care for children.

To ensure that this Value Statement is honoured and to support foster families in doing their important work of caring for children, the Ministry will create a foster family advocate unit. This integrated unit of SFFA and Ministry staff will work directly out of the SFFA office and will report directly to the Assistant Deputy Minister of Child and Family Services in the Ministry of Social Services. This unit will offer foster families another alternative for having their concerns addressed, and will augment the existing conflict resolution process.

Additional initiatives to address long-standing concerns and strengthen the relationship between the Ministry and foster families include the following:

- The Ministry will develop service standards for processes and payments relative to the ongoing joint work between the Ministry and foster families. These service standards will be provided to all foster families so they have a clear understanding of what they can expect from the Ministry;
- In addition to rate increases totaling 17 per cent in 2007 and 2008, the rate of compensation for foster families will be increased again by three per cent effective April 1, 2009;
- In partnership with foster families, the Ministry will establish a working group to review and simplify the foster family payment fee structures;
- The Ministry will pay foster families for the time they spend completing foster parent training as part of the new Parent Resources for Implementation, Development and Education (PRIDE) program;
- The Ministry will increase funding to the SFFA to enhance respite programming for foster families;

- Additional funding will be available for damage compensation, and the process for foster families to make claims for damages to their property will be improved;
- In partnership with the SFFA, the Ministry will establish a mentorship program to allow experienced foster families to assist newly approved families; and
- The Ministry will implement a series of changes to policy that enhance the role of foster families in case planning for children in their care.

Leadership

The Ministry of Social Services has appointed a new Assistant Deputy Minister dedicated to child welfare. Mr. Tim Korol has been working with the Ministry as a Special Advisor to the Deputy Minister on child and family welfare. In his new role, he is tasked with ensuring the child and family welfare system has effective policies that are adhered to in a consistent manner across the province. In order to address the current challenges within the Centre Region, Mr. Korol will be responsible for overseeing the operations of that region.

A Transition Team has been put in place to support Centre Region management and staff as they make necessary changes, review child protection cases and move forward to ensure effective programming.

The Ministry will contract an independent organization to conduct a policy compliance review of the Centre Region Child and Family Services operations. This work will begin shortly and is expected to be completed this fall, and will include independent monitoring of improvements in policy compliance.

Accountability

For years, the Ministry has been advised by both the Children's Advocate Office and the Provincial Auditor to implement a proper information management system for Child and Family Services. In 2008, the government committed \$15 million to that project. The Ministry will select a vendor through a Request for Proposal process by the summer of 2009.

In the interim, the Ministry will introduce an electronic foster home case management and tracking system. This system will allow for improved access to data relative to the state of the child welfare system in Saskatchewan and enhance the exchange of information across the Ministry.

To ensure greater transparency as the Ministry moves to improve the child welfare system in Saskatchewan, statistical information will be openly available and updated regularly on the Ministry's website (see pages 9-11).

Legislative Review

The Government of Saskatchewan has adopted the *Children and Youth First Principles* as formulated by the Children's Advocate (see www.saskcao.ca/documents/cao-principles-web.pdf). These principles will act as a guide in examining policy and legislation and in developing and implementing both policy and legislative changes.

The Ministry has begun work on the review of *The Child and Family Services Act* and *The Adoption Act, 1998*. The review will be moving into a consultative phase soon and is expected to be complete by fall 2009.

Conclusion

The problems in the child welfare system have developed over many years and are numerous and complex. The Province has a plan to address the most immediate concerns and to put in place long-term measures to strengthen the system and improve outcomes for children in care.

The Government of Saskatchewan is committed to putting children and youth first, and to ensuring a better life for these vulnerable members of society.

2007-08 New Initiatives – Child and Family Services Division Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services

- Followed through with the pre-election commitment to hire 60 additional front line workers.
- Doubled funding for Mobile Crisis Units, which assist with families and children in crisis in the off-hours.
- Recognizing how cumbersome and difficult it is for workers to find available capacity in a timely manner when they are working in a paper system, committed \$15 million to fund an electronic case management system. This project had been promised as far back as 2004.
- Increased funding for foster families by 15 per cent immediately following the election and an additional two per cent in last spring's budget.
- Increased compensation rates for extended family caregivers by 40 per cent.
- Increased funding for Community Based Organizations who provide supports for children and families by 9.3 per cent last year.
- Provided funding to assist in the expansion of spaces for children and youth at risk in areas of group homes and specialized residential resources in partnership with various community organizations in Saskatoon, Regina, Yorkton, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, La Ronge and North Battleford. To date, since the fall of 2007, we have developed 86 more spaces, and 88 spaces are being developed or are in the planning stage.
- Turned over the administration and co-ordination of the hiring of and payments for in-home support workers for Saskatoon foster families to the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association.
- Implemented the PRIDE (Parent Resources for Implementation, Development and Education) training program to provide support for families who decide to foster children. PRIDE is used in some other jurisdictions but, unique to Saskatchewan, elders were consulted to incorporate a First Nations component in the training.

Child and Family Services - Statistics

	Dec 2003	Dec 2004	Dec 2005	Dec 2006	Dec 2007	Dec 2008
Children in care ¹	2892	2851	3075	3128	3246	3588
Children in foster homes	1590	1640	1779	1892	1948	1909
Children living with extended family, Alternate Care/PSI ² and Group Home placements	1302	1211	1296	1236	1298	1679
Children in care on reserve – at March 31 st each year	1133	1099	1123	1159	1183	1238
Foster homes	761	758	752	793	779	770
Foster homes with more than four children	/	/	/	/	131	136
Children living in foster homes with more than four children	/	/	/	/	847	925
Child Protection Investigations	702	650	844	540	393	564
Families receiving child protection services	2156	1979	2205	1927	1971	2282

1 - **These numbers include children who were apprehended by the Minister off-reserve and placed on-reserve.**

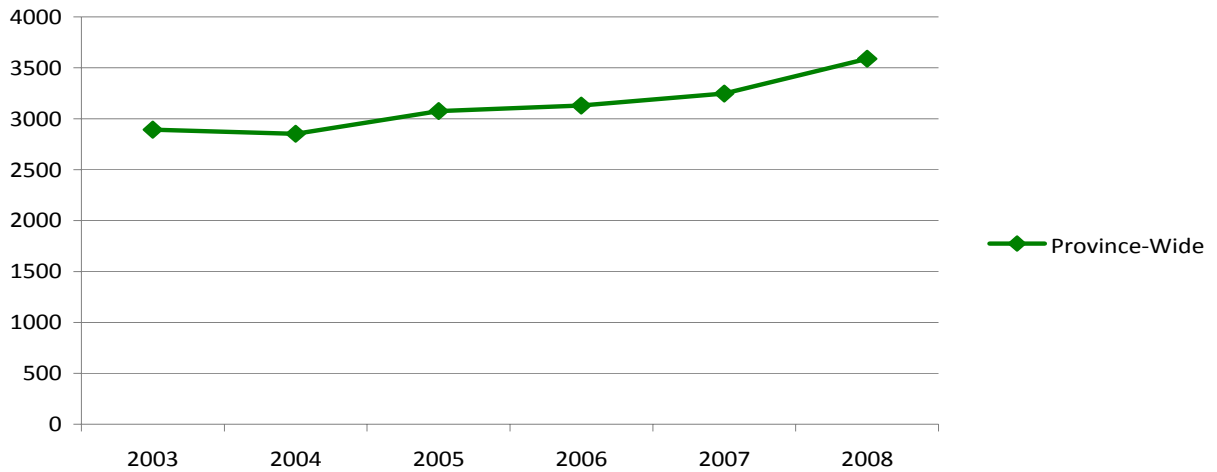
2 - Persons of Sufficient Interest

/ - Data not available

As has been identified previously, Social Services' Child and Family Services Division does not have a current stable information management system. The above data represents a snapshot of data taken at December 31st each year. The data, while reliable, represents the gathering of information from two internal sources within the Ministry, as well as manual counting in some instances. As such, the data is the best available at this time and represents a viable picture of the trends in the data relating to children in care.

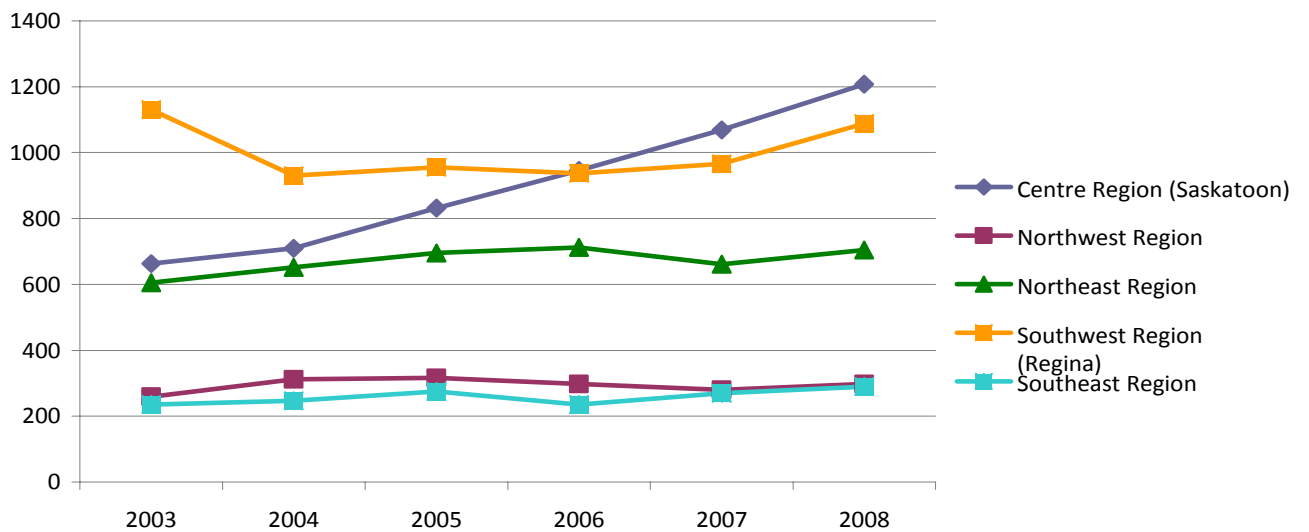
The exception to the above statement relates to the number of children in care on reserve, which is data provided by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and represents the data at March 31st each year.

Children in Care in Saskatchewan 2003-2008 Province-Wide



*As of December 31 of each year

Children in Care in Saskatchewan 2003 – 2008 By Region



* As of December 31 of each year

Number of Foster Homes over the Recommended Number of Four

# children in the home	December 2008		December 2007	
	# homes	Total Children	# homes	Total Children
5	46	230	57	285
6	31	186	25	150
7	16	112	20	140
8	14	112	13	104
9	13	117	8	72
10	12	120	3	30
11	2	22	1	11
12	1	12	2	24
14	1	14	0	0
15	0	0	1	15
16	0	0	1	16
	136	925	131	847

*as of December 31 of each year