



A Voice for Youth

MEDIA RELEASE

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Children's Advocate Tables *Progress Report II on Foster Home Overcrowding in Saskatchewan*

SASKATOON — Bob Pringle, Children's Advocate, tabled his first special report in the Saskatchewan Legislature today. The *Progress Report II on Foster Home Overcrowding in Saskatchewan* provides an update on progress made by the Ministry of Social Services to address the issues identified and implement the recommendations made in the February 2009 report, *A Breach of Trust: An Investigation into Foster Home Overcrowding in the Saskatoon Service Centre*.

"Since the release of the *A Breach of Trust* report, the reduction in the overall number of children and youth affected by these issues is significant," said Pringle. "In 2008, nearly half of Saskatchewan children and youth in foster care lived in less than 20 per cent of all foster homes, which created a level of overcrowding that posed increased risks to children, youth and their caregivers. Today, that number has been reduced to just under one third—a certain indication that the system is aware of and working to address foster home overcrowding and related issues."

Pringle's report recognizes the solutions implemented so far by the Ministry of Social Services including: a new system of monitoring and approval when maximum placements in a foster home are exceeded; significant capital and operational funding for alternative residential resources; a new case management system that is in the pilot phase with roll-out expected by end of this fiscal year; the hiring of 30 new Child Protection Case Assistants; and an expanded and improved Quality Assurance Unit.

On a broader level, the completion of the Child Welfare Review in December 2010, and the Government of Saskatchewan's first response in March 2011 to the 12 recommendations made by the Review Panel, demonstrates to Pringle a commitment to address the factors that continue to drive compression of the foster care system in Saskatchewan.

"A key element of the Government's response was the commitment to work differently with First Nations and Métis peoples and organizations involved in delivering child welfare services," said Pringle. "We have already experienced this new respect and consideration in action and applaud this move toward collaboration and consultation with these central partners."

"Much good work to craft a holistic response has been going on since the release of the Panel's report in December 2010," said Pringle. "Early indicators suggest the Government has accepted the Panel's recommendation that a fundamental change must happen in child welfare from a classic 'threshold' system with a primary focus on protection, to one where a greater focus is placed on providing universal access to family supports to prevent children and youth from coming into care."

While this fundamental shift is occurring over the longer term, Pringle cautions that all of us must remain vigilant to the well-being and best interests of children and youth currently in care.

“Since the release of *A Breach of Trust*, we have continued to experience numerous referrals requesting advocacy for children and youth placed in foster homes,” said Pringle. “There have also been three tragic and publicly reported deaths of children in foster care where overcrowding and/or other factors known by the Ministry of Social Services should have prompted better interventions and decision making.”

“These cases demonstrate that there are still too many vulnerable children and youth living in foster homes that do not have the capacity to safely care for them,” said Pringle. “The ‘overcrowding’ is but one indicator that these homes require increased supports and monitoring to be successful.”

Similar to what was found in the original investigation, Pringle reports that his Office continues to see examples of serious case incidents and/or policy non-compliance that place children and youth at risk of harm in some foster homes including: incomplete or inaccurate assessment of the foster parents’ capabilities, lack of placement matching, unsafe physical accommodations, and treatment of complaints of abuse or neglect as quality of care concerns that go uninvestigated.

Pringle also reports that Ministry of Social Services’ managers and front-line staff in Saskatoon and other regions continue to report caseload pressures that prevent them from meeting case planning or contact standards in even the most overcrowded of foster homes.

“If the Ministry of Social Services cannot find the resources to increase supervision and monitoring in these cases—where it is known there are increased risks for children and youth placed in over capacity foster homes—how can it ensure that placing a child or youth in these out-of-home resources is a safer option than remaining with his or her family,” said Pringle.

The rapid expansion of alternate residential resources, which is a positive development in Pringle’s view, also requires increased monitoring and supervision to ensure new staff have the required qualifications and training to appropriately care for the children and youth placed in these peer and group homes.

Pringle encourages all ministries and agencies of government, and in particular health and education, to focus on what will make a meaningful, long-term impact on children, youth and their families. The Ministry of Social Services cannot stand alone in solving the challenging social factors underlying neglect, such as poverty, addictions and mental health issues, which must be addressed prior to children and youth being removed from their families.

“Our hope, in promoting the implementation of the Child Welfare Review Panel’s recommendations and continuing to highlight the issues still found in foster care today, is that Government will be a good parent when it must be a parent and Government will support parents to be successful to prevent children and youth from coming into care,” said Pringle.

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For the full report please visit: www.saskcao.ca.

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