



A Voice for Youth

MEDIA RELEASE

DO NOT RELEASE PRIOR TO:
9:30 a.m., February 25, 2009

Children's Advocate Declares Foster Home Overcrowding a Crisis in Need of Immediate Action by the Ministry of Social Services

SASKATOON — Saskatchewan's Children's Advocate, Marvin Bernstein, tabled a special report in the Saskatchewan Legislature today, entitled, "***A Breach of Trust: An Investigation into Foster Home Overcrowding in the Saskatoon Service Centre.***" The report includes 49 findings and 45 recommendations made to the Ministry of Social Services.

"This report documents numerous graphic, repugnant and disturbing cases of children placed in overcrowded foster homes being harmed physically, sexually, emotionally and psychologically, as well as being subjected to both child-on-child and caregiver-on-child violence," said Mr. Bernstein. "The nature and prevalence of the incidents found by the investigators indicate a pressing need for the Ministry of Social Services to review every instance of a child placed in an overcrowded foster home to find out whether harm has occurred to him or her, and to immediately conduct proper case planning and placement matching to ensure that these children's safety, security and full range of needs are met."

"This investigation and report clearly establish that the Ministry of Social Services has breached the trust of many, including: children in the care of the Minister; parents and families of origin; foster parents; Ministry managers and front-line staff; judges who preside at child welfare proceedings; and the citizens of Saskatchewan," said Mr. Bernstein. "This breach of trust, across so many groups and with so many serious consequences for so many children placed in overcrowded foster homes, must not continue."

"This breach of trust is rooted in the fact that the Minister of Social Services, as legal parent or guardian, has a fiduciary duty to act as a 'prudent parent' to ensure that the rights and entitlements of children in her care are protected," said Mr. Bernstein. "The Ministry of Social Services must exercise a higher duty of care towards any child placed in its trust and must, by its own policy, 'meet or exceed the best interests' of every child in its care. For the Ministry of Social Services to place children in its care in overcrowded foster homes where they are clearly at serious risk of further harm is to doubly victimize these vulnerable children and to breach a very sacred trust."

"While there may be some debate about whether the foster care overcrowding situation has reached 'crisis' proportions, it is my view that it has reached the necessary threshold to draw that conclusion, when one considers that up to 21 children have been placed in one foster home in the Saskatoon Service Centre area," said Mr. Bernstein. "These numbers have no counterpart anywhere in Canada and constitute the institutionalizing of family-based foster care to a degree never previously seen in this country,"

Mr. Bernstein noted that the issue of foster home overcrowding is not new and has been raised, criticized and condemned by the offices of the Provincial Ombudsman, Children's Advocate and

Provincial Auditor for over two decades. With each successive child death review, systemic investigation, or audit of the Ministry of Social Services, the same themes have emerged swiftly and clearly time after time, and do once again in this report:

- Current foster home resources do not meet the specialized needs or numbers of children coming into the care of the Minister.
- Many foster homes are significantly overcrowded and exceed the capacity of the homes to safely accommodate the number of children placed in them.
- Children in care of the Minister who are placed in overcrowded foster homes are at increased risk of physical, sexual, emotional and/or psychological harm.
- Foster parents do not receive adequate supports, resources and respite services from the Ministry of Social Services.
- Inadequate case information is documented in Ministry of Social Services files and communicated by Ministry caseworkers to foster parents regarding children placed in their care.
- There exists a Ministry of Social Services culture of non-compliance with policy and best practices related to: the maximum number of children to be placed in a foster home; placement matching between foster home capabilities and foster children's needs; and the reporting and documenting of serious case incidents and investigations into complaints of abuse and neglect in foster homes.
- There is a high turnover in Ministry caseworkers, not enough caseworkers, and not enough contact between caseworkers, foster parents and children in care.
- Children of Aboriginal ancestry are significantly over-represented in child welfare care.

Mr. Bernstein observed that the Ministry of Social Services and the Government of Saskatchewan must make children a priority and establish a clear children's agenda on which a stronger and more stable child welfare system can be built.

"In my view, the answer to the unacceptable, prolonged and ongoing overcrowding predicament lies in looking at the problem from the viewpoint of the children – rather than from the perspective of the adults – and in placing their interests first," said Mr. Bernstein. "Let us not shield ourselves from the obvious truth that there is a fundamental problem in the family-centred service philosophy at work in this province. If we fail to provide a *Children and Youth First* foundation, the already fragile child welfare system may collapse like a house of cards at any time. If that happens, the unfortunate victims will be the children."

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

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