



A Voice for Youth

MEDIA RELEASE

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

SASKATOON — Saskatchewan's Children's Advocate, Marvin Bernstein, tabled a progress report on foster home overcrowding in the Saskatchewan Legislature today. The report includes the Ministry of Social Services response to 45 recommendations made by the Children's Advocate in the February 2009 report, *A Breach of Trust: An Investigation into Foster Home Overcrowding in the Saskatoon Service Centre*.

"The first recommendation made in this report was for the Ministry of Social Services to report on a biannual basis, every June 30th and December 31st, its progress, including results of quality improvement and accountability measures undertaken by the Ministry, regarding each and every recommendation contained in the report, so as to facilitate public reporting by my Office," said Mr. Bernstein. "The Ministry of Social Services accepted this recommendation and has provided updated statistics and information on its response to all 45 recommendations."

"This official Ministry response, as well as follow-up interviews with six foster parents, 15 children and youth in care, and a consideration of other post-February 25, 2009, organizational, university, union and association responses, informs the reporting and commentary in this progress report on foster home overcrowding in Saskatchewan," said Mr. Bernstein.

Of the other 44 recommendations made to the Ministry of Social Services in *A Breach of Trust*, the Ministry has: accepted 16; partially accepted two; not accepted nine; and deferred 17 until such time as the planned review of *The Child and Family Services Act* has occurred. The Children's Advocate Office analysis of the Ministry's responses to all 45 recommendations has led the Children's Advocate Office to: close with adequate action taken eight; close by discontinuing three; and keep active the remaining 34.

"Although I had intended to table this report at an earlier date, this became difficult as a result of a number of intervening events," said Mr. Bernstein. "In this regard, it should be noted that for the first several months after the release of *A Breach of Trust*, there was little direct communication between senior levels of the Ministry of Social Services and my Office. If a progress report had been issued at the end of June, as originally anticipated, it would have depicted a very different picture and would likely have been founded on incomplete information. This would not have been conducive to balanced, informed and objective reporting."

"In more recent months, there has been improved communication between the Ministry of Social Services and my Office, and more frequent meetings and discussions about the steps taken by the Ministry to implement the recommendations set out in *A Breach of Trust*," said Mr. Bernstein. "This dialogue has led to a more informed and contextualized progress report, which

enables me to speak more confidently to a number of positive developments, while still identifying core areas of continuing concern.”

Mr. Bernstein observed that the Ministry of Social Services had taken many first steps — some mis-, some tentative and some bold — since the release of the report, noting positive developments that included:

- A statement of commitment to adopt and implement the *Children and Youth First Principles*.
- Increased support for foster parents and the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association.
- Increased efforts to recruit and retain foster homes.
- Substantial funding announcements for and development of group home and other residential resources along the continuum of care.
- Work on social work staff recruitment and retention efforts.
- Significant investment in information technology development.
- A statement of commitment to broad consultations as part of a legislative review of *The Child and Family Services Act* and *The Adoption Act*.
- Acceptance of the recommendation to conduct mandatory education for Ministry of Social Services staff on the rights of children and youth.
- Improved communications with youth in care and foster parents.
- Increased compliance with policy relating to physical accommodations and placement considerations.
- A small reduction in the number of children and youth placed in overcrowded foster homes.

Notwithstanding the number of positive developments that have occurred since the release of *A Breach of Trust*, there are still some core areas of continuing concern:

- As of June 30, 2009, 18.2 per cent of all active foster homes were overcrowded and 43.5 per cent of all children and youth placed in foster care lived in an overcrowded home in Saskatchewan.
- Significant overcrowding of foster homes in the three major cities of Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert.
- Lack of a reliable electronic information management system to provide comprehensive, accurate and timely data when requisitioned and to inform the quality assurance efforts of the Ministry of Social Services.
- Lack of comprehensive statistics and reporting on recruitment and retention of foster homes.
- Delay in conducting a comprehensive review of the cases of children and youth currently placed in overcrowded foster homes in the Saskatoon Service Centre.
- Deferral of the Children’s Advocate Office’s recommendation regarding the development of a *Children and Youth First Vision and Action Plan*.

- Partial acceptance of the Children's Advocate Office's recommendation calling for a mandatory single information management system for both on and off-reserve child welfare services.
- Non-acceptance of the Children's Advocate Office's recommendation concerning the creation of a Special Committee on Information Management.
- Non-acceptance of the Children's Advocate Office's recommendation concerning the creation of a Special Committee on Foster Care and Permanency Planning.
- Deferral of all of the recommendations calling for legislative reform without consideration of some legislative amendments that are so urgent that they should be fast-tracked in order to avoid the serious risk of harmful impacts for children and youth in receipt of government child welfare services.

"One of the unfortunate unintended consequences of delivering a critical, but necessary, report like *A Breach of Trust* is that it can create a dampening of morale in child protection workers and foster parents, who may take the concerns personally, rather than as a call to examine the provision of child welfare services systemically," said Mr. Bernstein. "To be clear, in my view, the child protection workers and foster parents in Saskatchewan are the unsung heroes and continue to be the backbone of the child welfare system, as they contribute immeasurably to beneficial outcomes for the children and families of this province. They should be respected and valued for the importance of the work that they do and for the passion and commitment they exhibit on behalf of our most vulnerable citizens," said Mr. Bernstein.

Mr. Bernstein observed that the release of *A Breach of Trust* has served the public interest and acted as a catalyst in increasing public awareness and in activating sincere engagement on the part of professionals, associations, unions, university faculties and community-based organizations, as well as in stimulating constructive and purposeful action on the part of the Ministry of Social Services. Mr. Bernstein explained that one of the positive developments following the release of *A Breach of Trust* was the many child protection workers, foster parents and youth, who came forward and voiced their willingness to be part of the solutions to the challenges facing the child welfare system.

"With many of the Ministry of Social Services announcements made in February 2009, a new Deputy Minister of Social Services appointed in June 2009, an organizational restructuring within the Ministry occurring in October 2009, and the announcement in November 2009 of a broader child welfare review, there is a unique opportunity to turn things around for the children and youth residing in overcrowded foster homes," said Mr. Bernstein. "If we see the promotion of the best interests of children and youth in care, or in receipt of government services more generally, as a collective responsibility, we can all become advocates on behalf of children and youth, and we will be well on our way to achieving a more comprehensive child welfare vision in Saskatchewan."

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

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