

The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth supportive of new funding for at-risk children in 2015-16 budget, calls on government to increase investments in early childhood development

SASKATOON – Bob Pringle, Advocate for Children and Youth, was pleased to see that the Government of Saskatchewan has provided an additional \$7.7 million in the 2015-16 budget to address the critical needs of at-risk children, youth and families in relation to matters such as: foster care/extended family care; medically fragile/complex needs children; assisted adoption; prevention services; and youth transitioning to adulthood.

“Against the backdrop of a relatively tight budget, I do like these priorities,” he said. “It’s good to see the Province taking concrete action to address some longstanding human service challenges. In the course of our advocacy work we come across too many children and youth whose needs – for things like supportive relationships, education, housing, life skills and healing – are unmet.”

The Advocate also appreciates that there was a \$2.14 million increase in funding for child care operating costs. However, the total number of funded spaces in the province remains relatively unchanged at just over 14,200, with licensed spaces for fewer than one in five children, the lowest levels of licensed child care in any province, and far below demand.

“We need to do better. It’s unfortunate that the province was unable to find funding for more prekindergarten programs for vulnerable three and four year olds, although I acknowledge that there has been a modest increase in funding for existing prekindergarten programs (\$546k). “Child care and prekindergarten are critical components of any larger early childhood strategy,” Pringle said. “This also marks the second consecutive year that there have been no new resources for FASD services, and significant pressures in relation to both FASD and autism remain.”

While pleased that more low-income families will not have to pay provincial income tax, the Advocate expressed concern about the province’s failure to publicly track progress on the various elements of the Saskatchewan Child and Family Agenda. As well, too many Saskatchewan children continue to live in poverty. Pringle is hopeful that the recently appointed advisory group on poverty reduction will “quickly turn its attention to actions to stem the tide of increasing economic disparity in our province.”

Finally, the Advocate was encouraged to see that \$6 million in funding is being provided to support the Province’s continued response to the recommendations from the Joint Task Force on Improving First Nations and Métis Education and Employment Outcomes in Saskatchewan (of which \$925,000 will be invested through the Ministries of Advanced Education and Economy to assist Aboriginal youth in training apprenticeship programs and \$5.1 million through the Ministry of Education).

“Although we are pleased that this budget has provided new resources for programs and services delivered through the Ministry of Social Services, with only a few exceptions, this trend does not hold for other important human service ministries such as Health or Education,” said Pringle. “For example, there were no funds for new child care or prekindergarten spaces, or for services supporting children

and youth with FASD or mental health issues. I was pleased to learn that the Little Tots program in Saskatoon for young children with autism was funded on an ongoing basis.”

“On balance,” Pringle concluded, “the 2015-16 provincial budget fails to provide vulnerable Saskatchewan children the supports and services they need to thrive and prosper.”

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. He leads a small team of regional advocates, investigators and other staff who work on behalf of the province's young people. Our vision is that the rights, interests and well-being of children and youth are respected and valued in our communities and in government legislation, policy, programs and practice.

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