

Foster care in Saskatchewan in 'crisis': Children's Advocate

Report finds government officials routinely break their own rules

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A special report by Saskatchewan's Children's Advocate concludes that children in foster care in the province are being subjected to a long list of abuses due to a "culture of non-compliance with policy" among staff at the ministry of social services.

"Over a generation of children in the care of the Minister have suffered harm as a result of being placed in overcrowded foster homes," Marvin Bernstein wrote in his report, which was released Wednesday.

The review was undertaken after Bernstein received a number of complaints about overcrowded foster homes in Saskatoon.

His investigation uncovered a disturbing number of examples of policies and practices that put children at risk.

In several cases cited in his report, Bernstein found that children who had histories of committing sexual abuses were being placed into overcrowded homes without telling the foster parents about those problems.

In one such case, Bernstein said, "the foster parent reported that the Ministry caseworker responded that, 'a certain amount of sexual abuse is to be expected in a foster home.'"

Bernstein also found foster parents were often in the dark about a child's history of violence.

In another example, Bernstein reported that a foster family was told a new arrival in their home had no medical needs. However, "the foster parent discovered that the child had a shunt in her head that required significant medical care."

Ministry staff 'manipulative'

Bernstein also reported that ministry staff would use "manipulative methods" to "'trick' or coerce foster parents into taking another child into their care."

Bernstein quoted one foster parent as saying, "They [social service staff] lie! They beat around the bush and don't tell you what's wrong with the children."

When Bernstein examined the specific issue of overcrowding in Saskatoon, he said he found an alarming set of numbers.

According to his findings, 259 of 1,067 children in foster homes in the Saskatoon region were living in overcrowded foster homes.

In some cases, he found that homes had gone beyond their allowable number of children by over 400 per cent.

In the most extreme example, a foster home that should have had just four children was instead looking after 15.

The report also documented a case where a 2½-year-old — in a home with more than 10 other children in it — had been separated into another room and left behind a gated doorway, to cry.

A case worker made note of that and observed that the foster parent was "overloaded."

However, more than a year later the home remained overcrowded.

In another example, Bernstein recounted how one foster home, which was approved for four spots in 2007, quickly began accepting more children.

Within four months, there were 18 children in the home, Bernstein reported.

He went on to note that despite case worker reports that children in the home were afflicted with chronic lice, the overcrowding continued.

Bernstein said that when Children's Advocate Office officials learned of the situation, they scheduled a visit.

However, upon their arrival, they found the place was empty and learned that the home "had been closed due to abuse concerns."

According to Bernstein, "[in] just over one year of operation, 104 children had been placed in this foster home."

Bernstein found that the level of overcrowding in Saskatoon went beyond a problem with a temporary shortage of homes.

"While other jurisdictions indicated that they too are having difficulty recruiting and retaining foster parents, they have not allowed the normalization of overcrowding foster homes to become an acceptable solution to the issue," Bernstein wrote.

Problems are 'tip of the iceberg'

Bernstein said he believes there are more problems that need to be examined.

"We reveal merely the tip of the iceberg," Bernstein said of his report's findings.

"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."

Bernstein's report ended with a list of 45 recommendations, including calling for an immediate stop to placing children in homes beyond the number allowed, unless policies for those exceptions are closely followed.

Bernstein, who has been Saskatchewan's Children's Advocate since 2005, also expressed some

frustration that recommendations in his report may go unheeded.

"The Ministry of Social Services has known for over 22 years that there exists a culture of non-compliance with policy within varying sectors and offices of the child welfare system," Bernstein observed.

"The Office's collective experience," he wrote, "is that it takes an especially horrific or public event for Ministry of Social Services to take action, but that as soon as the furor dies down, the same old habits of non-compliance with policy emerge."

The province responded to Bernstein's report with a promise to take action in several areas, including increasing the number of foster homes in Saskatchewan.

"Reading the findings of the Children's Advocate's report was very disturbing," Social Services Minister Donna Harpauer said in a release.

She also promised to increase payments to foster families by three per cent, effective April 1, 2009.

Reacting to the report Wednesday, Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union (SGEU) president Bob Bymoer said he wants the government to take immediate action to increase the number of child-protection workers.

He also wants the government to bring back programs designed to work with at-risk families.

Although some SGEU members played a role in pushing families to take more foster children than the current limit of four, those workers are not to blame for the problems, Bymoer said.

"Can you blame them? Can you give them an option, a better option than what they're doing?" Bymoer told a news conference.

"Give them the tools, give them the resources, give them the foster homes to take the children to and give them the time on the front end to work with these families. Then come back and talk to us about putting blame on people if it isn't being done properly."

Workers have been asking the government for more resources and front-line workers for years, Bymoer said.

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