Chapter 14
Processes to Place Minister's Wards in Permanent Homes

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Under *The Child and Family Services Act*, the Ministry of Social Services (Ministry) is required to intervene on a child's behalf if the child is in need of protection due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect. When children have remained in the care of the Ministry for more than 18 months, they may become permanent wards or long-term wards of the Ministry based on court orders. The Ministry is responsible for planning for the long-term development of these wards, including their placement in permanent homes that provide a safe and nurturing environment.

Our audit for the period July 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012 found that the Ministry had effective processes to place permanent wards and long-term wards in permanent homes (e.g., long-term homes and adoptive homes) except the Ministry needs to:

❯ Complete and approve policies and procedures for its adoption program including those for addressing complaints or appeals

❯ Follow its established policies and procedures to formally document the permanency plans in place for permanent wards and long-term wards

❯ Place children on the adoption list within 120 days as required by the Ministry's policies

❯ Set performance measures and targets for its adoption program

❯ Begin collecting and analyzing information related to the outcomes of its services for long-term wards and permanent wards in its care

We make seven recommendations.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The mandate of the Ministry of Social Services (Ministry) is to support citizens at risk as they work to build better lives for themselves through economic independence, strong families, and strong community organizations. The Ministry also "protects Saskatchewan's vulnerable people and supports their inclusion in the province's prosperity."[1] To accomplish this, the Ministry operates a number of programs, including affordable housing, income assistance, supporting persons with disabilities, and child and family services.

The Child and Family Services Act requires the Ministry to intervene on a child's behalf if the child is in need of protection due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect. The Ministry has services designed to protect children from abuse or neglect, support

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[1] Ministry of Social Services *Annual Report 2011-12*, p. 6.

families and communities in caring for children, assist people facing family violence, and assist families to adopt children under *The Adoption Act, 1998*.

This audit examines the effectiveness of the Ministry's processes to place permanent and long-term wards in permanent homes.

The Ministry provides care for children requiring protection and out-of-home care. Children placed in out-of-home care can be either **wards** (temporary wards, permanent wards, or long-term wards) or **non-wards**. On behalf of the Minister, the Ministry assumes legal responsibility for **wards** and acts as a parent with the rights and obligations of a parent. **Non-wards** are those children who the Ministry helps to support without having legal custody of the child.

When children are no longer able to remain in their own home, their parents and the Ministry may enter into a voluntary agreement to have the child placed into the custody of the Minister. If the Ministry needs to intervene on a child's behalf, the Ministry can obtain a court order to place the child into the custody of the Minister. The Ministry expects that such children will only remain in its care temporarily and that most children will be able to return to the care of their families, extended families, or cultural communities (i.e., **temporary wards**).

Under *The Child and Family Services Act*, upon a protection hearing,[2] a court may issue an order permanently placing the child in the care of the Minister (i.e., **permanent ward**). Permanent wards generally have a limited continuing relationship with their birth parents. They may be registered for adoption, or placed in alternative homes such as long-term foster homes or homes of their extended families. At December 31, 2012, the Ministry had 593 permanent wards in its care. The average age of these children was nine years. Under its policy, the Ministry has 120 days from the date of a permanent court order to place such children on its adoption list, or to arrange for alternate plans.

The Ministry may determine that a child is unlikely to be adopted, by reason of the age of the child or other circumstances. In such cases, courts may order that the child be placed in in the custody of the Minister until the child attains the age of 18 years (i.e., **long-term ward**). Long-term wards may continue to have a relationship with their birth parents and cannot be registered for adoption. At December 31, 2012, the Ministry had 782 long-term wards[3] with an average age of 14 years in its care.

Figure 1 outlines the Ministry's process to find permanent homes for children.

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[2] A hearing held to determine whether a child is in need of protection.
[3] Ministry of Social Services Linkin System.

Figure 1— Ministry Process to Place Children in Permanent Homes
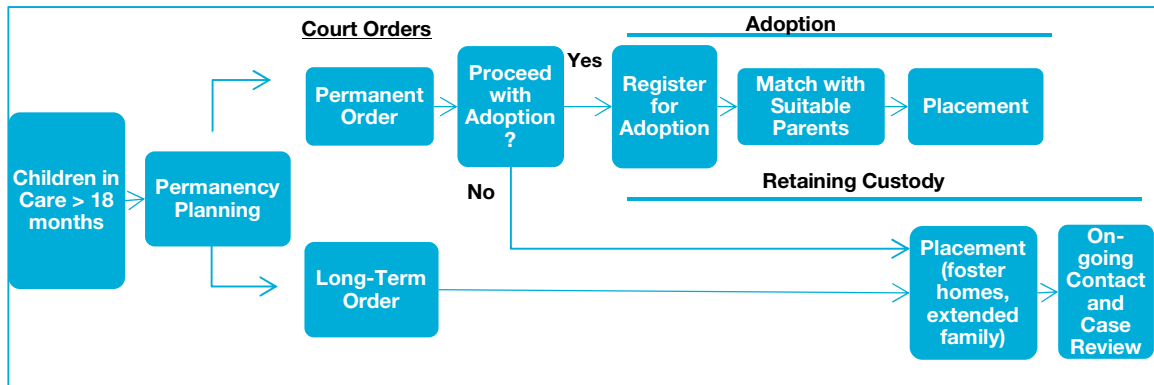
Source: Provincial Auditor Saskatchewan (April 2013)

The Ministry is responsible for planning for the long-term development of its wards, including placement in permanent homes that provide a safe and nurturing environment. Doing so provides a foundation for the Ministry's wards to grow to become productive and responsible members of their communities.

3.0 BACKGROUND

Providing child protection and planning for the needs of children in the Ministry's care is complex. It requires collaborative work in a number of areas including child and family services, adoptions, and the provincial courts.

The Ministry employs approximately 471 full-time equivalent positions, which includes positions such as case workers, permanency planners, and adoption workers to help ensure that the best interests of children in care of the Ministry are met.

Each child has a case file that contains case plans for the child, court orders, and other planning documents. These files are maintained manually. However, the Ministry has begun using the Linkin System[4] to move towards electronic case files. For example, case workers now include their contact notes within the Linkin System.

The Ministry provides child protection services through 20 service offices located in communities throughout Saskatchewan. It has grouped these offices into three service areas as shown in **Figure 2**.

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[4] Linkin is an information technology system used to assist the Ministry in monitoring and tracking children in care.

Figure 2—Location of Service Offices

Service Area	Service Offices		
South	- Regina	- Moose Jaw	- Yorkton
	- Weyburn	- Estevan	- Fort Qu'Appelle
	- Swift Current		
Centre	- Saskatoon	- Kindersley	- Rosetown
North	- Prince Albert	- Creighton	- La Ronge
	- Melfort	- Nipawin	- Lloydminster
	- Meadow Lake	- North Battleford	- Buffalo Narrows
	- La Loche		

Source: www.socialservices.gov.sk.ca/service-delivery (12 April 2013)

At December 31, 2012, the Ministry was responsible for planning for the long-term needs (i.e., permanency planning) and finding permanent homes for approximately 1,400 permanent wards and long-term wards. Selected permanent homes must provide these children with suitable, stable, and nurturing environments. The Ministry can find a permanent home for its wards in either of the following two ways:

❭ Register wards for adoption and transfer custody to suitable adoptive parents after adoption occurs

❭ Retain custody of those wards who won't be adopted and continue the existing long-term placement of the child in a stable home (e.g., foster home, group home, or extended family placement)

Adoption

At December 31, 2012, the Ministry had 100 **permanent wards** registered for adoption. The average age of those children registered for adoption was eight years old.[5] **Figure 3** and **Figure 4** outline the historic trend of adoptions.

The Ministry supports the adoption of **permanent wards** through its Domestic Adoption Program. The Ministry attempts to match a permanent ward with suitable adoptive parents. The Adoption Support Centre of Saskatchewan, a non-profit third-party organization provides adoption information and refers prospective parents to the Ministry. Prospective adoptive parents must then apply to the Ministry, meet specified criteria, and pass a home study assessment where the Ministry evaluates parents' suitability.

If children being adopted have special needs (e.g., health needs, developmental needs), the adoptive parents may receive financial support to assist them in meeting the child's needs. This is done through the assisted adoption program. Adoptive parents in assisted adoptions receive about $3.35 million a year.

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[5] Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services Central Adoption Registry database.

Figure 3—Children Registered for Adoption During the Previous Five Fiscal Years

March 31, 2008	March 31, 2009	March 31, 2010	March 31, 2011	March 31, 2012
87	89	129[6]	138[6]	85

Source: Ministry of Social Services Central Adoption Registry database

Figure 4—Children Placed for Adoption During the Previous Five Fiscal Years

March 31, 2008	March 31, 2009	March 31, 2010	March 31, 2011	March 31, 2012
71	62	104	64	74

Source: Ministry of Social Services Central Adoption Registry database

Retaining Custody

Long-term wards and **permanent wards** (who are not registered for adoption) remain in the care of the Minister and are placed in foster homes, with extended families, or in group homes. These wards remain in care until they turn 18 years old, or until they turn 21 years old if they enter into a voluntary agreement with the Ministry to continue supporting them. **Figure 5** outlines the historical trend of long-term wards and permanent wards.

Each year, the Ministry conducts a review of all long-term wards and permanent wards and updates the child's permanency plan as needed.

Figure 5—Five-Year Comparison of the Number of Permanent and Long-Term Wards

Year	Permanent Wards	Long-Term Wards	Total
December 31, 2008	499	975	1,474
December 31, 2009	541	929	1,470
December 31, 2010	576	884	1,460
December 31, 2011	611	815	1426
December 31, 2012	593	782	1,375

Source: Ministry of Social Services Linkin System

During 2011-12, the Ministry provided approximately $42 million to foster parents and caregivers to provide for the needs of permanent wards and long-term wards in its care.

4.0 AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, CRITERIA, AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this audit was to assess the effectiveness of the Ministry's processes to place Minister's wards in permanent homes (long-term homes and adoptive homes) for the period from July 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012.

To conduct this audit, we followed the *Standards for Assurance Engagements* published in the *CICA Handbook - Assurance*. We examined the Ministry's policies and procedure

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[6] The number of children registered for adoption increased in these two years because management took corrective action to address a backlog in adoption registrations.

manuals, case files of children in care for more than 18 months, and other relevant documents. We also interviewed key managers and staff of the Ministry.

To evaluate the Ministry's processes, we used criteria based on the work of other auditors and current literature listed in the selected references. Management agreed with the criteria in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6—Audit Criteria

To have effective processes to place Minister's wards in permanent homes (long-term homes and adoptive homes), the Ministry of Social Services should:

1. **Plan for the permanent needs of children in care of the Minister**
   1.1 Develop policies and procedures to guide the placement of children into permanent homes
   1.2 Set requirements for permanent categories for children (e.g., adoption, long-term placement)
   1.3 Set performance measures and targets

2. **Determine if children will be registered for adoption or remain in care of the Minister**
   2.1 Determine when children will remain in care of the Minister (e.g., when wards of the Minister will not return to their birth families)
   2.2 Develop permanency plan for each child who is in care for over 18 months
   2.3 Identify children who may be registered for adoption and initiate processes to establish as permanent wards within prescribed times
   2.4 Identify children who will not be registered for adoption as long-term or permanent wards

3. **Select adoptive homes for permanent wards**
   3.1 Assess suitability of adoptive parents
   3.2 Match children registered for adoption with approved parents
   3.3 Assess needs of children to determine eligibility for assisted adoption program

4. **Select suitable homes for long-term and permanent wards (who will not be registered for adoption)**
   4.1 Assess suitability of homes for long-term and permanent wards in care of the Minister
   4.2 Match long-term and permanent wards in care of the Minister with suitable homes
   4.3 Regularly review conditions of long-term and permanent wards in care of the Minister

5. **Monitor performance**
   5.1 Collect information relevant to performance measures
   5.2 Analyze information
   5.3 Address complaints and concerns
   5.4 Report on performance measures and targets

We concluded that the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes to place Minister's wards in permanent homes for the period from July 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012 except for the following.

The Ministry needs to:

❯ **Complete and approve policies and procedures for its adoption program including those for addressing complaints or appeals**

❯ **Follow its established policies and procedures to formally document the permanency plans in place for permanent wards and long-term wards**

❯ **Place children on the adoption list within 120 days as required by the Ministry's policies**

❯ **Set performance measures and targets for its adoption program**

❯ **Begin collecting and analyzing information related to the outcomes of its services for long-term wards and permanent wards in its care**

5.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we set out our findings and recommendations for the criteria in **Figure 6**.

5.1 Some Improvements Needed for Planning for the Permanent Needs of Children in Care

5.1.1 Policies and Procedures in Place for Permanent and Long-Term Wards but More Adoption Program Guidance Needed

The Ministry has a Children's Services Manual (Manual) that sets out policies and procedures to plan for and support the well-being of children in the care of the Ministry, including permanent wards and long-term wards. The Ministry regularly updates the Manual and ensures it is consistent with *The Child and Family Services Act*.

The Manual gives staff guidance for when and how to determine if children in care are unlikely to return to their birth families and will need a permanency plan. The Manual also includes forms and checklists to help guide staff. For example, staff are required to complete the Long-Term/Permanent Ward Form when planning for the permanency needs of a child in care. This Form is also used for the annual review of each child in care. It takes into consideration such things as placement history, current placement, and the special needs of the child. It also documents consultations with birth parents, extended families, First Nations bands, First Nations child and family services agencies, and foster homes, as appropriate.

The Ministry does not have a comprehensive (consolidated) policy manual for adoptions. The Manual provides some guidance to staff in areas such as registering children for adoption, the adoption selection process, the adoption placement process, and assisted adoption. The Ministry also has the Adoption Services Policy and Procedures Manual. It provides guidance on assessing applicants and finalizing adoptions. The Ministry did a complete update on this manual in 1997. After 1997, the Ministry distributed new policies or revisions to policies to the adoption workers as required. For example, in 2009, the policies relating to assessment of prospective adoptive parents were distributed. The Ministry is currently in the process of drafting a new comprehensive adoption policy manual.

Adoption of children is a specialized program area that deals with placing vulnerable children in permanent homes that will provide a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment. Lack of clear and documented policies and procedures increases the risk of inconsistent practices relating to the placement of permanent wards in adoptive homes.

1. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services complete and approve the new adoption policy manual to guide staff on its adoption program for children who are permanent wards of the Minister.**

5.1.2 Requirements for Permanent and Long-Term Wards in Place

The Ministry has set requirements for permanent and long-term wards. In the Manual, the Ministry explains the distinction between these two types of wards. For children to be designated as permanent wards or long-term wards, staff need to obtain one of two types of court orders that put children in the care of the Minister until their 18th birthday (see **Figure 1**). A permanent order allows the Ministry to place the child for adoption. However, in the case of long-term wards, the Ministry does not have the right to place the child on its list to be adopted.

Because of this distinction, the Ministry requires staff to obtain long-term orders only after other permanency plans have been explored and an adoption plan is unlikely due to an individual child's age or other considerations.

5.1.3 Need to Develop Measures and Targets

The Ministry monitors and tracks the number of children in care as well as children in alternate placements ("non-wards") in its care on a quarterly basis by using its information technology system called Linkin.

The Ministry also tracks various statistics relating to adoptions through a separate electronic database. However, it has not established performance measures and targets for its adoption program.

Other jurisdictions have set performance measures and targets. For example, in Alberta, the Department of Human Services tracks the number of permanent wards who have been adopted and compares this number to an established target.[7] In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education tracks the percentage of its children in care who are adopted.[8]

Without setting performance measures and targets relating to adoption of permanent wards of the Ministry, the Ministry cannot evaluate the effectiveness of its adoption program. Such performance measures and targets could include those related to permanency planning, adoption planning, and matching children with prospective adoptive parents.

> 2. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services develop performance measures and targets relating to the adoption program for its permanent wards.**

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[7] Alberta, Department of Human Services. *Annual Report 2011-12*.
[8] www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/adoption/a00199753/children-in-care-and-adoption-performance-tables. (12 April 2013).

5.2 Processes in Place for Determining if Children will be Adopted or Remain in Care

5.2.1 Children's Options Reviewed

When a child has been in the Ministry's care for more than 18 months cumulatively,[9] staff are required to review the child's case plan and develop a permanency plan. These permanency plans are meant to provide children with the best opportunity to have a permanent, stable home environment. Permanency planning may include continuing attempts to reunite children with their families (if the family is demonstrating improvement in their ability to care for the child), or pursuing court orders for permanent or long-term custody of the child.

The Linkin System prompts permanency planning for a child by sending a reminder to the caseworker responsible for the child. The caseworker then reviews the child's case file and begins permanency planning.

5.2.2 Need to Consistently Complete Permanency Plans and Clearly Document Rationale for Decisions

Permanency plans for children are part of the children's case plans and annual reviews. The forms used for case planning and annual reviews include a specific section for permanency planning. These forms also require updated information about extended family, history of the Ministry's contacts with the child, and the child's developmental needs.

In all of the files we reviewed, we found that Ministry staff were planning for the needs of children in their care and maintaining contact with them to ensure that their best needs were being met. However, in 20% of the files we reviewed, permanency plans were not formally documented. Some case files indicated that the permanency plans were documented elsewhere in the files, (e.g., in the Family Reunification Assessment),[10] but such documents were not always present in the case files. In some other case files, the permanency plans were only identified throughout the caseworkers' contact notes. Management agreed that these permanency plans should be formally documented in each child's case file.

If a child's situation calls for immediate action (such as an emergency), a readily-accessible and documented permanency plan can help staff and managers react in a timely and appropriate manner. An up-to-date permanency plan allows for staff and managers unfamiliar with the file to make decisions without reading through many other documents. Caseworkers should document the permanency plan for each child in care and place the plan in the child's case file to facilitate consistent case planning. Absence of properly documented permanency plans increases the risk that children may not be placed in a long-term, stable home environment for an extended period. We did not find any examples of children who were placed in inappropriate homes.

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[9] For example, if a child was to be in foster care for a period of six months, returns to his or her family's care for a period, and then returns to care for an additional 12 months, the Ministry would be required to develop a permanency plan for the child.
[10] The Family Reunification assessment is a risk-based decision-making tool used by staff to determine the risk associated with reuniting a child (or children, in the case of sibling groups) with their family.

> **3. We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services consistently document the permanency plan for each child in care and place the plan in the child's case file.**

We found that the Ministry began permanency planning and initiated the process to make children permanent or long-term wards (e.g., seeking court orders). However, in 37% of the case files we reviewed, the decision to pursue a permanent or long-term court order was not clearly documented at the time of the decision. For example, some case files indicated that the Ministry had begun to pursue permanent or long-term court orders for children, but the case files did not document when and why this decision was made.

While we found that all case files we reviewed contained the rationale for the child's permanency order, the decision was not always clearly documented in a consistent manner in the child's case file. The Ministry maintains manual case files, with information often not in any order. Because of some poorly-kept case files, we could not determine how long it took the Ministry to determine that a child was unlikely to return to the family and the eventual court order for permanent or long-term custody.

As stated in **Section 3.0**, the Ministry has begun to implement its Linkin file management system. Currently, documentation of caseworkers' interactions with children (i.e., contact notes) are stored in Linkin. In the future, the Ministry plans to use Linkin to store additional documentation (e.g., checklists, forms) and move towards an electronic case file for each child.

Clearly documenting the rationale for decisions in a consistent manner will allow the Ministry to monitor whether caseworkers make timely decisions and whether their decisions follow the established policies.

> **4. We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services clearly document the rationale for its decisions to seek permanent or long-term custody of children at the time of the decision.**

5.2.3 Need to Place Children on the Adoption List Within 120 Days

The Ministry's permanency plans for children include a decision as to whether a child will be registered for adoption (i.e., placing the child on the adoption list). As stated earlier, when the Ministry determines that adoption may be in the best interest of a child, and that the child is likely to be adopted, it pursues a permanent custody court order.

According to the Ministry's established policies, a caseworker must decide within 120 days[11] of a child becoming a permanent ward whether the child will be placed on the adoption list or in long-term foster care. Placing children on the adoption list in a timely

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[11] Previously, the Ministry's policies required that permanent wards be registered within 90 days. This was increased to 120 days in September 2011.

manner is important so children can be matched with suitable families as soon as possible.

In 83% of the case files that we reviewed, children had not been placed on the adoption list within 120 days. The majority of the delays ranged from 51 days to over one year late. 57% of these case files had explanations for the delay (e.g., complex legal issues including appeals against court orders; the preparation and approval of the foster families that were going to adopt the child). In the remaining 26% of the cases, the files did not contain any explanation for the delays.

In one case, the Ministry took three years to place a child on the adoption list and the file contained no documentation explaining the reasons for this delay. Management stated that prior to 2010, a backlog in adoption registrations caused delays in having permanent wards registered for adoption. The Ministry took corrective action to address this backlog and the result was a high number of children being registered for adoption in 2010 and 2011 (see **Figure 3**).

In cases where children were not registered within 120 days, they remained as permanent wards in the care of the Minister and continued to be placed in homes (e.g., foster homes) in accordance with their identified needs.

Children are less likely to be adopted as they grow older. Delays in placing permanent wards on the adoption list could negatively impact the likelihood that older children find stable adoptive homes.

> 5. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services follow its established policy to place those children whose permanency plans includes adoption on the adoption list within 120 days.**

5.2.4 Children Who Will Remain in Ministry's Care are Identified

Upon completion of each child's permanency plan, the Ministry pursues court orders for the custody of the child either as a permanent ward or a long-term ward. The Ministry determines what is in the best interest of the child (e.g., place the child on the adoption list or in a long-term foster home) and seeks the corresponding court order (see **Figure 1**).

In all the case files that we reviewed, we found each file included the specific court order.

5.3 Adoptive Homes Selected Appropriately

5.3.1 Suitability of Prospective Adoptive Parents Assessed

Once permanent wards are placed on the adoption list, the Ministry begins the process of matching them with suitable adoptive parents.

Individuals or couples interested in adopting children are first given information by the Adoption Support Centre of Saskatchewan, a non-profit third-party organization. It provides adoption information and refers prospective parents to the Ministry. Prospective parents are then required to submit an application to the Ministry outlining their competencies as prospective parents as well as their openness to adopt children of different ages, sexes, histories, and with possible health challenges.

Adoption workers of the Ministry assess the applicants. They do so by conducting a home study for assessing the prospective adoptive parents' suitability and ability to provide a child with a stable, safe, nurturing home. The prospective adoptive parents must also complete a training program called Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE). This program includes a number of training modules totalling about 100 hours of instruction and provides ongoing support and professional development for approved adoptive families. Prospective parents must also provide supporting documentation, such as criminal record checks, to demonstrate their suitability as adoptive parents. After prospective parents have demonstrated their suitability to adopt a child, adoption workers approve them.

For 100% of the files we reviewed in the Central Adoption Registry (CAR), we found that the Ministry had documented the assessment of prospective adoptive parents and properly approved their suitability as adoptive parents.

5.3.2 Children Matched with Prospective Adoptive Parents

The Ministry attempts to match children on the adoption list with prospective adoptive parents who have been approved to adopt children. It does this matching based on the needs of the child and the willingness and ability of prospective adoptive parents to care for the child in a way that meets those needs.

Once the adoption workers of the Ministry have determined that prospective parents are ready to adopt, they forward this information to the Central Adoption Registry (CAR) at the Ministry's central office. Staff at CAR enter the parents' information into the database. CAR staff search the CAR database for parents who match the needs of a child on the adoption list and print a list of prospective parents. CAR staff send this list to the child's caseworker. The caseworker, together with an adoption worker, determines which, if any, of the selected parents are suitable adoptive parents for the child.

If a proposed set of parents is deemed suitable by the caseworker and the adoption worker, they indicate their selection and rationale to CAR and the process to place the child in the home is initiated.

In all of the files we reviewed, we found that the matching process had used the needs of the children to select suitable parents within a reasonable period, and that the process had been appropriately documented.

5.3.3 Eligibility of Children for Assisted Adoptions Assessed

Eligibility for the assisted adoption program is based on the needs of the child. When a child is placed on the adoption list, caseworkers indicate if the child is eligible

for assisted adoption based on the child's needs (e.g., physical, mental, or emotional needs).

After a child has entered the adoption process, adoption workers fill out an additional form that designates the child officially eligible for assisted adoption, outlining the child's needs as rationale.

In all of the case files that we reviewed, caseworkers had completed and filed all of the required documents.

5.4 Improvements Needed to Plan for and Support Wards Who Are Not Listed for Adoption

5.4.1 Wards are Matched with Suitable Homes but Homes Need to be Assessed Regularly to Comply with Standards

Children who are not placed on the adoption list remain in the care of the Minister. Some children may not be placed on the adoption list because of their age or their unwillingness to be adopted.

The Ministry does not have specific homes for long-term wards or permanent wards who will not be adopted. Rather, staff attempt to place these wards in stable homes (e.g., foster homes, extended family, or group homes) that will continue to support their needs on a long-term basis. These homes are subject to the approval process of the Ministry that includes the same home studies and PRIDE training process required for adoptive parents.

The Ministry has established rules and procedures (standards) to protect children in the care of the Minister. On a yearly basis, the Ministry's quality assurance group monitors compliance with the child protection standards and assesses how well Ministry staff comply with these standards. For example, as part of this work, the quality assurance group assesses whether or not Ministry staff are reviewing foster homes on an annual basis.

As we reported in our *2012 Report – Volume 2,* Chapter 24, the Ministry needs to follow its processes to ensure that children in care are protected. For example, the Ministry's quality assurance group found that in 2011-12, on average, caseworkers were annually reviewing foster homes only 56% of the time.[12] The Ministry needs to annually review foster homes to ensure that the homes in which long-term and permanent wards are living continue to be safe and suitable.

5.4.2 Children's Conditions Reviewed Regularly

Caseworkers perform annual reviews for each child in long-term care using a standard form. The annual reviews consist of documenting information about the child (e.g., placement history, current placement, special needs of the child, and any consultations

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[12] Updated information not available as the Ministry of Social Services is currently reviewing its files for 2012-13.

with family, First Nations bands, or foster parents). The caseworker then includes a permanency plan update on the form. For all the case files that we reviewed, we found that staff carried out annual reviews for the children. Caseworkers also documented their regular contact with long-term and permanent wards. However, as we noted in **Section 5.2.2**, in some of these cases, the permanency plan was not always formally documented within each child's case files.

For all of the files we reviewed, caseworkers documented their regular contact with long-term and permanent wards to show whether homes were meeting the needs of wards on an ongoing basis. The files also documented that caseworkers regularly monitored children's performance in school, health conditions, and their relationships with their caregivers and, if applicable, their birth families.

5.5   Monitoring Performance Could be Improved

5.5.1 Collecting, Analyzing, and Reporting Information

As we note in **Section 5.1.3**, the Ministry collects information on the number of children in care and the number of children who have been placed into alternate care. It reports this information, on a quarterly basis, on the Ministry's website.[13] The Ministry also tracks the number of children placed on the adoption list, the number of children adopted, and other volume-based information. This information is compiled on a quarterly basis and reported to senior management in the service areas.

The Ministry does not currently collect information relating to the outcomes for children in its care, such as academic achievement or interactions with the criminal justice system. By tracking outcomes for children in its care, the Ministry would be able to determine whether the services it is providing for children in its care are meeting their best interests. The Ministry must begin collecting baseline information now to make this assessment in the next many years. This will include working with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice.

We note that in British Columbia, the government tracks the educational outcomes of children in permanent care (e.g., whether children in care are enrolled in age-appropriate school grades).[14] The Ministry stated that as it continues to implement the Linkin file management system, it plans on collecting such outcome-based data.

6.   **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services collect and analyze information related to the outcomes of its services to long-term wards and permanent wards in its care.**

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[13] www.socialservices.gov.sk.ca/children-first (12 April 2013).
[14] www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/foster/pdf/education_report_dec_2012.pdf (22 April 2013).

5.5.2 Complaints and Appeals Process Needed for the Adoption Program

The Ministry has established processes to investigate complaints of neglect or abuse of children in the care of the Minister. The Children's Services Manual provides caseworkers and supervisors clear guidance to follow when initiating and conducting such investigations. Complaints of suspected neglect or abuse can also be referred to the Children's Advocate's Office. The files we reviewed showed that the Ministry appropriately investigated reported complaints and documented decisions. The Ministry's central office monitors these investigations by receiving final investigation reports and maintaining a database of investigations.

The Ministry does not have established policies and procedures for dealing with complaints or appeals in its adoption program. While foster parents who disagree with a decision of the Ministry have an established appeal mechanism they may pursue, prospective adoptive parents do not have any such mechanism. In **Section 5.1.1**, we recommend that the Ministry implement an adoption policy manual. As part of this policy manual, the Ministry should include provisions for complaints and appeals. Management indicated that they plan on implementing a system for addressing complaints and appeals for the adoption program that will be similar to its complaints and appeals mechanism for children in care.

> 7. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services implement a formal complaints and appeals mechanism for its Domestic Adoption Program.**

6.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

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