

Chapter 31

Social Services—Placing Minister’s Wards in Permanent Homes

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Since our 2013 audit of the Ministry of Social Services’ processes to place Minister’s wards in permanent homes (e.g., long-term homes and adoptive homes), the Ministry has made good progress in implementing our seven recommendations. At March 31, 2015, the Ministry had implemented four recommendations, and was working to implement the remaining three.

The Ministry needs to develop performance measures and targets for its adoption program and follow its established policy to place children on the adoption list within 120 days. Also, it needs to collect and analyze information related to the outcomes of its services to long-term wards and permanent wards in its care.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Under *The Child and Family Services Act*, the Ministry of Social Services (Ministry) is responsible for planning the long-term development of permanent and long-term wards. This includes their placement in permanent homes that provide a safe and nurturing environment.

In our *2013 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 14, we concluded that the Ministry had effective processes to place Minister’s wards in permanent homes except for the following areas. At December 31, 2012, the Ministry needed 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 made seven recommendations. This chapter reports the results of our first follow-up of the Ministry’s progress towards addressing these recommendations.

To conduct this review engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance*. To evaluate the Ministry’s progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria



from the original audit. The Ministry's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

We reviewed the Ministry's policies and procedure manuals and other relevant documents. We also examined a sample of case files of children in care for more than 18 months.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at March 31, 2015, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

By March 2015, the Ministry had implemented four recommendations, was making progress towards implementing one other, and had made limited progress on addressing the remaining two.

3.1 Adoption Policy Manual Completed and Approved

We recommended 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. (2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Social Services implement a formal complaints and appeals mechanism for its Domestic Adoption Program. (2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Implemented

In July 2014, the Ministry completed and approved the revised *Adoption Services Manual*. This manual provides guidance to staff on assessment and decision-making processes as they relate to the Ministry's adoption program. It also includes a formal complaints and appeals mechanism for the Domestic Adoption Program. This provides prospective adoptive parents with an established complaints and appeals mechanism if they disagree with a Ministry decision or are unsatisfied with the services offered.

3.2 Development of Measures and Targets Underway

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

(2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Partially Implemented

The Ministry, through its quality assurance unit, carries out quality assurance reviews each year to monitor compliance with a number of its policies and standards, including permanency planning.

In 2014, the Ministry started to use these reviews to gather information that it expects will help it develop performance measures and targets related to the adoption program for its permanent wards. Starting in 2014, the quality assurance reviews have measured whether permanent wards are registered for adoption, and the timeliness of such registrations, and have assessed the Ministry's documentation outlining the rationale for not registering a child for adoption.

Management indicated that it expects to gather this information in its quality assurance reviews for a period of one year prior to developing measures and targets.

Setting performance measures and targets related to the adoption of permanent wards will allow the Ministry to evaluate the effectiveness of its adoption program.

3.3 Permanency Plans Documented

We recommended 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.

(2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Implemented

The Ministry requires that each child that has been in its care for more than 18 months cumulatively have a documented permanency plan. The Ministry expects its staff to use its children's assessment and development plan (a prescribed form) to document the assessment and planning according to the individual needs of the child. It also requires them to carry out Family Reunification Assessment as part of permanency planning.

For the children's case files we examined, we found that all of these files contained a completed children's assessment and development plan. Where required, a Family Reunification Assessment was included in the children's case file or the family services file.



3.4 Rationale for Decisions Documented

We recommended 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. (2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Implemented

The Ministry expects staff to document the decisions made on permanent or long-term custody of children, and reasons for those decisions using required forms. Such documentation enables the Ministry to monitor whether its staff makes timely decisions in accordance with its policies.

In 90% of the children's case files we examined, we found evidence that the permanency plan recommendation (i.e., permanent or long-term custody) was clearly documented, along with the rationale for the decision. In the remaining 10% of the case files reviewed, the rationale for the decision was evident in the caseworker's notes even though it was not clearly documented on the required form.

3.5 Placement of Children on Adoption List Not Timely

We recommended 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. (2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Not Implemented

The Ministry has a policy that requires a caseworker to decide, within 120 days of a child becoming a permanent ward, whether to place the child on the adoption list or in long-term foster care.

From January 2013 to September 2014, we found that 85% of the children were not placed on the adoption list within 120 days. Delays ranged from 23 to 587 days after the required 120 days. For the case files we examined, we found the files did not document the reasons for such delays.

Placing children on the adoption list in a timely manner is important. Children are less likely to be adopted as they grow older. Not placing children on the adoption list in a timely manner could negatively impact the likelihood that older children find stable adoptive homes.

3.6 Collection and Analysis of Outcome Information Needed

We recommended 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. (2013 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Not Implemented

In May 2014, the Ministry conducted a scan of practices in other jurisdictions regarding outcome-based indicators and measures. The Ministry indicated that it plans to review and analyze the information collected to help determine the next steps in monitoring its performance outcomes over the next year.

As noted in our past report, collecting and analyzing information related to the outcomes for children in the Ministry's care requires coordination with other Ministries (e.g., Ministry of Education, Ministry of Justice). In late 2014, the Ministry began working with other Ministries to collect information that will help them determine whether government programs help prepare youth for their future and identify ways to improve high school graduation rates.

Outcome-based information will allow the Ministry to determine whether its services for children in its care are meeting the children's best interests.

