

Chapter 32

Social Services—Placing Minister’s Wards in Permanent Homes

1.0 MAIN POINTS

This chapter describes our second follow-up of the actions of the Ministry of Social Services (Ministry) on three recommendations we initially made in our 2013 audit of the Ministry’s processes to place Minister’s wards in permanent homes.

The Ministry is responsible for planning the long-term development of permanent and long-term wards¹ under *The Child and Family Services Act*. This responsibility includes placing Minister’s wards in permanent homes which provide a safe and nurturing environment. At December 31, 2016, the Ministry had 458 permanent wards in its care (December 2012: 593). The average age of these children was ten years (December 2012: nine years).

By February 28, 2017, the Ministry had made progress on the three outstanding recommendations, however further work is needed. It needs to follow its established policy to place children on the adoption list within 120 days. In addition, to know how well its adoption program works, the Ministry needs to develop targets for its adoption program. It also needs to collect and analyze information related to the outcomes of its services to permanent and long-term wards in its care.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In our *2013 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 14, we reported on the Ministry’s processes to place the Minister’s wards in permanent homes. We made seven recommendations to help the Ministry strengthen its processes. In 2015,² we followed up on the status of the seven recommendations and found that, by March 31, 2015, the Ministry had fully addressed four of them.

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.

To perform our follow-up on our recommendations, we discussed actions taken with management, reviewed relevant documentation (e.g., work plans, file evaluation forms), and examined case files.

¹ Permanent wards are children that have been, through a court order, permanently placed in the care of the Minister. Permanent wards generally have a limited continuing relationship with their birth parents. Long-term wards are children that are unlikely to be adopted, by reason of the age of the child or other circumstances. In such cases, courts may order that child be placed in the custody of the Minister until the child reaches the age of 18 years.

² The follow-up was included in our *2015 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 31.



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 February 28, 2017, and the Ministry's actions up to that date. We found that the Ministry is making progress towards implementing the remaining three recommendations.

3.1 Placement of Children on Adoption List More Timely but Targets Still Needed

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 – Partially 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.³

The Ministry was placing children on the adoption list and documenting the reasons for any delays more timely than previously.

From October 1, 2015 to September 30, 2016, the Ministry placed 50% of the children who became permanent wards on the adoption list within 120 days (January 2013 to September 2014: 15%). For those children not placed on the adoption list within 120 days, the Ministry took, on average, approximately 225 days to register children on the adoption list (i.e., approximately 105 days after the 120-day deadline).

For the children's case files we sampled, 80% (0% at March 2015) of the files documented reasons for delays in registering children for adoption. For example, in one case, the delay was due to the time to prepare and approve a foster family that was going to adopt a child.

Placing children on the adoption list as early as possible increases their chance of being adopted as children are less likely to be adopted as they grow older.

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

³ Long-term foster care is where a child is placed in the custody of the Minister until the child reaches the age of 18 years.

In 2014, the Ministry began to gather information on its adoption program from its annual quality assurance reviews. Its quality assurance reviews measure whether permanent wards are registered for adoption, the timeliness of such registrations, and if there is documentation outlining the rationale for not registering a child for adoption.

The Ministry indicated that it plans to use the information collected from 2014 to 2016 to track barriers to timely registrations and to establish targets for its adoption program. It expects to develop an action plan to address the barriers in 2017, along with targets.

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

3.2 Collection and Analysis of Outcome Information Underway

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 – Partially Implemented

The Ministry uses Minister's Orders to send the list of children in its care (long-term and permanent wards) to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education confirms the children are enrolled in school, and provides the Ministry with information that all parents receive (e.g., report cards, attendance reports). This information allows the Ministry to assess whether children in its care are enrolled in age-appropriate school grades.

In November 2015, the Ministry joined the Research and Evidence Based Excellence Unit. This is a joint unit with the Ministry of Justice that conducts research. For example, in August 2016, the Unit started to evaluate current case-planning activities against desired outcomes of reduced recurrent maltreatment. Specific outcomes of this research project are:

- › Reduced reoccurrence of neglect/abuse during and after family services agreements
- › Increased percentage of successful family reintegration plans as measured by a decrease in reoccurrence of neglect/abuse
- › Increased efficiency of workflow

The Ministry is also in the process of developing data sharing agreements with the Ministry of Justice.

In May 2016, the Ministry began an initiative to improve the outcomes for children and youth in group care (i.e., residential treatment group homes). The Ministry is currently collecting baseline data for this initiative.

Collecting and analyzing this information will allow the Ministry to determine whether the services it is providing for children in its care are meeting their best interests.

