

## Chapter 26

# Social Services—Investigating Allegations of Child Abuse and Neglect

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

This chapter sets out the results of our audit of whether the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes to investigate, within a reasonable timeframe, allegations of child abuse and neglect.

Child abuse and neglect refers to circumstances that may be harmful to a child's physical, emotional, or psychological health (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse). Neglect is also failing to provide a child with enough food, proper clothing, shelter, health care, or supervision.<sup>1</sup> In 2017-18, the Ministry received about 15,300 reports of alleged child abuse and neglect. Over 6,000 of these reports resulted in investigations. Timely investigation of allegations of child abuse and neglect is critical to protect the safety of children.

For the 12-month period ended June 30, 2018, the Ministry had, other than the following, effective processes to investigate, within a reasonable timeframe, allegations of child abuse and neglect. The Ministry needs to:

- Undertake timely independent reviews of screening decisions when it decides not to investigate a reported child abuse and neglect allegation. This would help the Ministry confirm that appropriate and objective decisions were made and it takes timely action.
- Complete safety and family risk assessments within required timeframes. Timely safety assessments reduce the risk of a child remaining in an unsafe environment. Timely family risk assessments reduce the risk of the family not receiving ongoing child protection services when there is a high likelihood that the family will maltreat their child in the future.
- Finalize investigation decisions within required timeframes (45 days) to allow for timely supervisor review. Timely supervisor review results in timely ongoing child protection services to children and their families, when needed.

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

Under *The Child and Family Services Act*, the Minister of Social Services is responsible for providing child protection services. The Act provides the mandate for the Ministry to investigate suspected (i.e., alleged) abuse and neglect of children by their parents, guardians, or other adults in the household who provide day-to-day care and supervision of the child. It must determine whether a child is in need of protection, and provide such services where the results of an investigation determines a child needs protection.

The primary responsibility for ensuring the safety and well-being of children lies with each child's parents/guardians. The Ministry only becomes involved when parents/guardians are unable or unwilling to fulfill their parental responsibilities.

<sup>1</sup> [www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/justice-crime-and-the-law/child-protection/child-abuse-and-neglect](http://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/justice-crime-and-the-law/child-protection/child-abuse-and-neglect) (25 April 2018).



In Saskatchewan, as in any Canadian jurisdiction, all people have a legal duty to report suspected abuse and neglect of a child. Children depend on others for their safety and well-being. They have a right to be protected from abuse and neglect.

## 2.1 High Rates of Reported Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan has high rates of police-reported child and youth sexual abuse—the second highest among Canadian provinces—and most offences involve an accused family member and occur in a private residence.<sup>2</sup> Also, according to a 2016 Statistics Canada report, among the provinces, Saskatchewan has the highest rate of police-reported family violence against children and youth (466 per 100,000 followed by Manitoba at 373 and Quebec at 318).<sup>3</sup>

In 2017-18, the Child and Family Services Division of the Ministry received about 15,300 reports of suspected abuse and neglect of a child (2016-17: 15,250 reports).<sup>4</sup> Individuals report suspected child abuse and neglect through phone calls, emails, or letters mailed to the Ministry. The majority of reports come in through phone calls.

## 2.2 Impact of Child Abuse and Neglect Significant

Child abuse and neglect has lasting impacts throughout a child's lifetime. These effects include mental health impacts, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and low self-esteem. It also impacts school attendance and achievement and decreases productivity throughout the child's lifespan.<sup>5</sup>

Abuse can occur within family settings. Family violence has significant health, social, and economic costs. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, family violence can have a range of short- or long-term physical, mental, cognitive, behavioural, social, and economic impacts. For example, it can contribute to depression and anxiety, leaving school, living in poverty, and having limited options for safe and affordable housing. These consequences in turn can contribute to people being more vulnerable to further violence.<sup>6</sup>

The Public Health Agency of Canada also cites research that shows:

- The longer and more severe the abuse, the worse the impacts and the longer the recovery period. For example, if a child lives with abuse or violence in the home, the effects on health can last a lifetime.<sup>7</sup>
- The economic costs of family violence in 2012 totalled \$7.4 billion/year.<sup>8</sup>

Timely investigation of allegations of child abuse and neglect, and timely initiation of action is critical to protect the safety and well-being of Saskatchewan children.

<sup>2</sup> [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/14008-eng.pdf](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/14008-eng.pdf) (20 April 2018).

<sup>3</sup> [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54893-eng.pdf](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54893-eng.pdf) (20 April 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Number obtained from Ministry's IT case management system (Linkin).

<sup>5</sup> [www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/health-social-impacts-family-violence.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/health-social-impacts-family-violence.html) (20 April 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> [www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/economic-burden-family-violence.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/economic-burden-family-violence.html) (20 April 2018).

## 3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

We concluded that for the 12-month period ended June 30, 2018, the Ministry of Social Services had, except for the following areas, effective processes to investigate, within a reasonable timeframe, allegations of child abuse and neglect. The Ministry needs to:

- Undertake timely independent reviews of decisions when it decides not to investigate a reported child abuse and neglect allegation
- Complete assessments (i.e., safety and family risk) within required timeframes
- Finalize investigation decisions within required timeframes (45 days) to allow timely supervisor review

Figure 1—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach

<p><b>Audit Objective:</b> Assess whether the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes, for the 12-month period ending June 30, 2018, to investigate, within a reasonable timeframe, allegations of child abuse and neglect.</p> <p><b>Audit Criteria:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Determine which allegations of abuse/neglect to investigate</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1 Track key information about allegations</li> <li>1.2 Provide staff with clear guidance on handling reported allegations (e.g., manuals, policies and procedures)</li> <li>1.3 Screen allegations in a timely and appropriate manner (e.g., immediately)</li> <li>1.4 Allocate appropriate resources (e.g., qualified staff, call reporting lines, after-hour coverage)</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. <b>Investigate reported allegations</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1 Provide staff with clear guidance on conducting investigations</li> <li>2.2 Conduct and document the investigation in a timely and appropriate manner (e.g., conduct home visits, complete risk and safety plans)</li> <li>2.3 Approve investigation conclusion</li> <li>2.4 Promptly initiate action based on results of investigation</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. <b>Monitor overall results</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Analyze key performance information (e.g., timeliness of screening, conducting investigations, and initiating actions)</li> <li>3.2 Take action on results (e.g., adjust policies and procedures, retrain staff)</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>Audit Approach:</b></p> <p>To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the <i>CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance (CSAE 3001)</i>. To evaluate the Ministry’s processes, we used the above criteria based on our related work, reviewed literature including reports of other auditors, and consulted with management. The Ministry’s management agreed with the above criteria.</p> <p>We examined the Ministry’s risk assessment processes, IT system, policies, and procedures that relate to screening and investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect. We tested a sample of 63 intake reports (including those initiated by after-hours service providers) and 30 investigations to determine whether the Ministry investigated and responded timely to reported child abuse and neglect.</p> <p>The audit did not extend to the First Nations Child and Family Services agencies’ child abuse and neglect investigation procedures. The Ministry has contracted 17 First Nations Child and Family Services agencies to provide child protection services for children and families living on reserve. It monitors the delivery of these services. See our Protection of Children Follow-up in Chapter 46 for the results of our audit work on the Ministry’s related monitoring processes.</p>
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## 4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Up-to-date Child Protection Services Manual and Decision-Making Support Maintained

The Ministry uses a Child Protection Services Manual and Structured Decision Making tools to guide how staff screen (i.e., decide which reported allegations to investigate), and investigate allegations of reported child abuse and neglect. An investigation determines whether a child is in need of protection.

The Ministry maintains an up-to-date Child Protection Services Manual. The Ministry last updated the Manual in February 2018. It makes the Manual accessible to Ministry staff, its partners (e.g., police, First Nation Child and Family Services Agencies, after-hours service providers), and the public. The Ministry communicates Manual updates to its staff and partners via email.

The standards and procedures described in the Manual establish a clear framework and minimum service levels for Ministry staff involved in the delivery of child protection services. For example, the Manual's section on intakes (i.e., screening of reported allegations) and investigations describe standards and procedures for receiving, screening, and investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect within certain timeframes.<sup>9</sup>

The Ministry also uses a Structured Decision Making model as its risk assessment model for its child protection services.<sup>10</sup> This model is a case management model widely used in the United States and Canada. It incorporates a set of evidence-based assessment tools and decision guidelines designed to provide consistency and legitimacy in assessment and decision-making processes (e.g., whether to remove a child from their current household environment). **Figure 2** sets out the purposes of this model.

**Figure 2—Purposes of the Structured Decision Making Model**

- To help caseworkers assess whether and to what extent any children are in immediate danger of serious physical harm
- To determine what interventions should be initiated to provide appropriate protection
- To establish criteria for emergency removal if sufficient protection cannot be provided

Source: The Structured Decision Making System for Child Protective Services, *Policy and Procedures Manual*. <http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/17/72929-The-Structured-Decision-Making-System-for-Child-Protective-Services.pdf> (4 October 2018).

The Ministry has adopted customized assessment tools (e.g., intake assessment, response priority assessment, safety assessment, family risk assessment) related to the Structured Decision Making model based on extensive consultation with the Children's Research Centre. The Ministry communicates on an ongoing basis with the Centre and child protection agencies of other provinces to keep its practices current.

<sup>9</sup> Intakes involve Ministry staff talking directly with those reporting child abuse and neglect allegations to understand the situation and determine what services the Ministry needs to provide (if any).

<sup>10</sup> The Children's Research Centre, a division of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, developed the licensed Structured Decision Making model. The National Council was established in 1907 to assist private and public agencies serving delinquent youth. It conducts research, evaluates programs, and develops case management systems for more than 200 state, country, and federal agencies.

The Ministry assigns reports that proceed past initial screening (i.e., are screened in) to regional caseworkers in its Child and Family Services Division for investigation. The Ministry's policy expects caseworkers to investigate and conclude whether the allegation is substantiated, and if so, whether the child is in need of protective services (i.e., put under the care of the Minister of Social Services). Policies also expect face-to-face contact between Ministry staff and the child and caregivers during investigations.

Investigations often involve co-ordination with others (e.g., schools, health care providers, policing services). In 2017, the Ministry entered into the revised Saskatchewan Child Abuse Protocol with other key government ministries (Health; Justice; Education; Government Relations; Parks, Culture and Sport) and the Saskatchewan Association of Police Services to enable officials of these agencies to prevent, detect, report, investigate, and prosecute cases of child abuse and support children who have been abused.<sup>11</sup>

We found that the Ministry's child protection staff use the assessment tools to guide case decisions throughout all phases of intakes and investigations.

The Ministry uses an IT case management system, called Linkin, to track and record the completion of various steps (e.g., completed assessments, case notes) of intakes and investigations of reported child abuse and neglect allegations.

The Ministry gives new child protection staff extensive training on the Manual, assessment tools related to the Structured Decision Making model, and use of its IT case management system.<sup>12</sup> This training is mandatory. If staff desire a refresher, they can participate in the Ministry's monthly training sessions about its child protection processes. The training sessions cover all aspects of response to reports of alleged abuse and neglect including conducting investigations, and providing protective services to a child.

## 4.2 Personnel Available to Handle Reports of Alleged Child Abuse and Neglect

The Ministry has specific staff dedicated to screening and investigating reports of alleged child abuse and neglect received during the weekdays. In addition, the Ministry contracts service providers for after-business hours services including screening reports of alleged child abuse and neglect for three communities.<sup>13</sup> In other communities, after business hours the Ministry expects reporting of an allegation of child abuse and neglect to local police, RCMP, or the Ministry's emergency duty workers.

The Ministry has three teams of specially trained caseworkers that receive and screen reports (e.g., calls) of suspected child abuse and neglect and decide whether to investigate. These three teams are located in three regions (i.e., service areas): Prince Albert, Regina, and Saskatoon. Prince Albert serves the north region of the province; Saskatoon the central region; and Regina the south region. These caseworkers work Monday to Friday from 8 am to 5 pm.

<sup>11</sup> *The Saskatchewan Child Abuse Protocol* demonstrates a commitment by the Government of Saskatchewan and police services to ensure that all efforts to protect children from abuse and neglect are integrated, effective and sensitive to the needs of children.

<sup>12</sup> The Ministry requires Ministry caseworkers (i.e., child protection staff) to hold a Bachelor of Social Work degree.

<sup>13</sup> Mobile crisis services include integrated and comprehensive social and health crisis intervention services (e.g., addictions, domestic violence, child protection services).



The Ministry has contracted three different mobile crisis centres to provide after business hours services (e.g., after 5 pm on weekdays, weekends, and holidays) for the communities of Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina. By contract, each centre is to receive calls, conduct intakes, and, where warranted, immediately respond to reports of suspected child abuse and neglect consistent with the Ministry's standards and procedures.

The Ministry makes phone numbers available for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect. It advertises the availability of these numbers on the Government of Saskatchewan website and in phonebooks.

The Ministry receives about 15,000 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect each year (see **Figure 3**). The majority of reports come in through phone calls. The number of reports by service area vary with the south service area receiving about 50% of total reported allegations. Management indicated that mobile crisis services receive about one-third of reported child abuse and neglect allegations.

**Figure 3—Number of Reported Allegations by Service Area For the Past Three Years**

Service Area	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Central	3,645	3,717	3,851
North	3,737	3,913	4,063
South	7,485	7,618	7,353
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,867</b>	<b>15,248</b>	<b>15,267</b>

Source: Ministry of Social Services data.

In instances where a report meets the criteria for child abuse and neglect, and the Ministry decides to investigate, it assigns the investigation to a Ministry caseworker (see **Figure 4**). At March 2018, the Ministry had about 180 child protection caseworkers for which a part of their responsibilities includes investigating suspected child abuse and neglect. The Ministry has about 19 offices located throughout the province from which these caseworkers work. The Ministry selects caseworkers to investigate based on caseload and proximity to the child and family.

Staff from one service area routinely assist staff in another service area in managing higher levels of workloads (investigations and child protection cases) or where higher than expected staff turnover occurs. For example, during 2017-18, staff from the south service area assisted staff from the north service area in investigating reports of alleged child abuse and neglect so that appropriate investigations took place within required timeframes.

Also, from time-to-time, to distribute workloads better, the Ministry reassigns communities from which a service area handles calls. For example, in 2018, the central service area assumed from the north service area, responsibility for calls originating in the North Battleford and Lloydminster communities.

### 4.3 Screening Process Well Established But Consistent Independent Review and Approval of Screening Decisions Needed

The Ministry follows well-established processes to handle the receipt and screening of reports of alleged child abuse and neglect (intakes). But independent review of decisions made in completed intake assessments were not always done or done within the expected timeframe, and reasons for changed decisions about whether to investigate were not always documented.

#### Intake Assessments Completed As and When Expected

The Ministry's Structured Decision Making model and Manual requires caseworkers (i.e., Ministry staff and contracted service providers who screen reports) to screen all reports of alleged child abuse and neglect using an intake assessment. This assessment determines whether a report of alleged child abuse and neglect meets the criteria for investigating, and if so, how quickly an investigation must be initiated (i.e., priority level based on the response priority assessment).

Caseworkers must complete the intake assessment immediately using the criteria upon receipt of a report of the alleged child abuse and neglect (or within three days in the instance where additional information is required). **Figure 4** provides examples of criteria and sets out the standard response priority levels.

**Figure 4—Examples of Criteria for Investigating Reports of Alleged Child Abuse and Neglect and Response Priority Levels**

Some criteria have an automatic immediate response. For instance, the following require immediate response and investigation:

- Death of a child/another child at home
- Severe non-accidental injury
- Severe neglect

For all others, the Structured Decision Making model requires staff to complete a response priority decision tree for each maltreatment criteria type selected (e.g., physical abuse, emotional abuse). Where the final screening decision is screened in, response priority levels are as follows.

- Immediate—Same working day as receipt of the report
- Five days—Within five calendar days of the receipt of the report

Source: Ministry of Social Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*.

Caseworkers are to prioritize reports of alleged child abuse and neglect; they may decide:

- To investigate the report the same day as receipt (referred to as “screened in” for investigation with immediate response)
- To investigate the report within five days of receipt (referred to as “screened in” for investigation with non-immediate response)
- Not to investigate (referred to as “screened out”)

Caseworkers may also determine that additional information must be gathered (usually within three working days of the receipt of the report) to determine whether an investigation is warranted.



For almost all of the 63 reports of alleged child abuse and neglect we tested, the Ministry and/or the contracted service providers completed the intake assessments as and when required.

Ministry staff are to record all reports of child abuse and neglect and complete intake assessments in the Ministry's IT case management system.

Contracted service providers, by contract, must give the Ministry reports and related assessments (e.g., intake assessments) before 9 am the following day, or on Monday morning for reports received during a weekend. In the event a service provider receives a report of alleged child abuse and neglect that warrants immediate response, its staff initiates an immediate investigation.

We found the contracted service providers sent reports and related assessments to the Ministry within the required timeframes. Ministry staff entered reports from them into its IT case management system, as expected.

### **Independent Reviews of Completed Intake Assessments Not Always Done or Done within Reasonable Period**

Deciding whether to investigate an allegation of child abuse and neglect further can have significant ramifications to a child's safety if the Ministry makes the wrong decision. Consequently, the Ministry requires, for all reports, a supervisor who is not the individual who completed the assessment to review the appropriateness of the decision made in the intake screening assessment. It calls this independent review a supervisor review.

Supervisors are to review and approve, by making a notation in the IT case management system, all screening decisions (including intake and response priority assessments). For example:

- Where the completed intake assessment recommends an immediate response, supervisors must approve within the same working day
- Where the intake assessment recommends a non-immediate response, supervisors must approve within two working days
- Where the intake assessment recommends no investigation (screened out), the Ministry's Manual does not specify the timeframe in which a supervisor must approve these reports. We expected the supervisors would review and approve the recommendation within two working days (i.e., within the same timeframe as a non-immediate response).

Our testing of 63 reports found that independent reviews are not always occurring consistently or timely.

For 1 of 63 reports of alleged child abuse and neglect we tested, the supervisor did not review and approve the intake assessment decision. In 2 other reports we tested, the same person made and approved the intake assessment decision. For all 3 of these reports, the decision was no investigation.



For another 3 of 63 reports we tested, where the intake assessment decision was no investigation, the supervisor review and approval did not occur until one to two weeks after the intake assessment was complete.

Independently reviewing intake assessments within a short timeframe after their completion confirms the Ministry has made appropriate and objective decisions related to reported child abuse and neglect allegations. Not doing timely independent reviews of intake assessments increases the risk of the Ministry not appropriately protecting children.

1. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services have independent review and approval of screening decisions within two working days when the Ministry decides not to investigate a child abuse and neglect allegation.**

### **Reasons for Overrides of Screening Decisions Not Always Documented**

The Ministry allows supervisors to override the screening decisions made by staff on completed intake assessments (e.g., change from investigate to not investigate or vice versa). Supervisors may change the decision if they are aware of additional history of the family and/or deem the risk of the situation differently than the intake assessment indicates. In these situations, the Ministry expects the supervisor to document, in its IT case management system, the reason for the change.

To enhance its screening processes, the Ministry created review teams in Saskatoon (2015) and Regina (2017). For example, in Saskatoon, the review team discusses reports assessed as not requiring an immediate investigation (non-immediate), or no investigation (screened out). These reviews occur the working day following completed intake assessments. The review team includes screening supervisors, mobile crisis centre staff, and sometimes representatives from First Nations agencies. Prince Albert plans to implement a review team in fall 2018.

For 2 of 63 reports we tested with an override, the rationale for change from the recommended action was not sufficient. In both cases, supervisors changed the recommended action from investigating the report (non-immediate response) to not investigating (screened out). When we brought these cases to management's attention, management found that the supervisors' changes were not appropriate and the reports should have been investigated. In both cases, the Ministry has had ongoing contact with the children and families since the overrides and conducted appropriate follow-up.

For 1 of these 2 reports we tested with an override, the review team inadvertently missed reviewing the override. For the other report, a review team did not exist in the related service area.

Documenting reasons for changes to screening decisions helps show why they are legitimate and appropriate. It provides a basis when reviewing decisions, and where necessary, defending them. Reviews help ensure the Ministry makes the right decisions when it comes to investigating reports of alleged child abuse and neglect, and children do not remain in unsafe environments.

2. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services promptly monitor the appropriateness of changed screening decisions related to reported child abuse and neglect allegations.**



## 4.4 Process to Investigate Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect Well Established but Not Always Followed

The Ministry has a well-established process to investigate reports of alleged child abuse and neglect, but the process is not always followed.

Having robust and timely investigations to determine whether a child is in need of protection, or a child and/or family requires ongoing services is key.

The Ministry, through its Child Protection Services Manual and use of the Structured Decision Making model, expects caseworkers to complete the following key steps within prescribed timeframes. It expects caseworkers to finalize, and supervisors to review the investigation decision within 45 calendar days of assignment to a caseworker (see **Figure 5**).

**Figure 5—Key Steps Required in Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations**

Key Step	Maximum Number of Days to Complete Step
Attempt face-to-face contact with child and family	Immediately (for immediate response) or within 5 days of initiation of investigation (for non-immediate response)
Complete a safety assessment	Same timing as face-to-face contact
Complete a safety plan (where safety decision is “safe with services”)	Same timing as face-to-face contact
Complete a family risk assessment	Within 30 calendar days of assignment of investigation to caseworker
Document findings and finalize investigation decision in the Ministry’s IT case management system (i.e., close or transfer case to child protection services for ongoing services)	Within 45 calendar days of assignment of investigation to caseworker
Supervisor reviews and approves the investigation decision	Within 45 calendar days of assignment of investigation to caseworker

Source: Ministry of Social Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*.

Our review of the Child Protection Services Manual and model found they give staff sufficient guidance on how to conduct investigations and the information to gather. They include clear and understandable procedures for staff to follow.

Over 40% of allegations reported resulted in an investigation.<sup>14</sup> Typically, the Ministry undertakes about 6,000 investigations a year with about one-third resulting in the Ministry taking a child into its care. As shown in **Figure 6**, the number of investigations initiated each year has increased over the past three years.

**Figure 6—Number of New Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations and Children Entering the Ministry’s Care for the Past Three Years**

Year	New Investigations	Children Entering Care
2015-16	5,634	1,865
2016-17	6,141	1,892
2017-18	6,716	1,864

Source: Ministry of Social Services data.

<sup>14</sup> 6,000 investigations/15,000 reported allegations = 40%.

## Timely Face-to-face Contact with Child and Family Needed

The Ministry did not always attempt to contact the child and family within required timeframes during investigations of reported child abuse and neglect.

When investigating reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, the Ministry requires caseworkers to attempt first contact with a child who is the subject of the report and their family immediately or within five days of starting the investigation. The Ministry expects caseworkers to complete, following Ministry standards and procedures, a written safety assessment, and if appropriate, a safety plan before leaving the home.

The Ministry safety assessment tool assists caseworkers in determining the safety of children who are the subject of alleged abuse or neglect. As set out in **Figure 7**, the tool has three categories—is the child “safe”, “safe with services” or “unsafe”?

**Figure 7 – Categories of Safety of a Child**

- **Safe** – there are no immediate safety threats
- **Safe with Services** – there are identified safety threats, but there are protective capacities and there are safety interventions that can be put in place to allow the child(ren) to safely stay in the home
- **Unsafe** – there are identified safety threats, there may or may not be protective capacities but there are no possible safety interventions that can be put in place to allow the child(ren) to safely stay in the home

Source: The Structured Decision Making System for Child Protective Services, *Policy and Procedures Manual*.

Caseworkers are to prepare a written safety plan if they assess the presence of a safety threat, and the safety decision is “safe with services”. The safety plan sets out actions to mitigate the safety threat. The Ministry requires both the caregiver and caseworker to sign the plan before the caseworker leaves the home.

Caseworkers remove children from a home and place them in a safe place where they decide a child is “unsafe”.

For all six safety assessments we tested that required a safety plan, each had an adequate plan signed by both parties, as required.

For 15 investigations we tested that were classified as requiring immediate response, each documented face-to-face contact between the Ministry caseworker, child, and family, and a safety assessment was completed the same day as the reported allegation as required.

For 2 of 15 investigations we tested that were classified as non-immediate response, Ministry caseworkers did not attempt to make contact with the child and their family, and as a result did not complete the safety assessment within 5 days as required. One instance was 3 days late, and the other was 16 days late.

The Ministry has set timeframes for the timing of contact to keep children in these situations safe. Not making contact with a child within the prescribed timeframes increases the risk the child remains in an unsafe environment.

3. **We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services attempt to make face-to-face contact with the child and family involved in a reported child abuse and neglect allegation within required timeframes to assess the child’s safety.**



## Family Risk Assessments Not Always Completed Within Required Timeframes

The Ministry does not always complete family risk assessments within required timeframes.

The Ministry requires caseworkers to complete a family risk assessment within 30 days of assignment of the investigation.

The family risk assessment estimates the likelihood of a family abusing or neglecting a child in the future (e.g., in the next 12-18 months). This assessment influences the decision on whether to provide ongoing Ministry services to the child and/or family. Therefore, the caseworker must complete it before concluding an investigation of suspected child abuse and neglect.

For 3 of 30 investigations we tested, caseworkers completed the family risk assessments late (i.e., after the required 30 days). For 1 investigation, staff completed the family risk assessment 43 days late. For the other 2 investigations, staff had not completed the family risk assessments at June 30, 2018, and the required 30 days had passed—with one being 2 days late and the other already 76 days late.

We also found that for another investigation, staff did not complete a family risk assessment even though its IT case management system indicated that the investigation was closed.

Delays in completing family risk assessments results in delays in finalizing investigations. Not having a timely, completed family risk assessment may result in a family not receiving ongoing child protection services timely, when there is high likelihood that the family will maltreat their child in the future.

### **4. We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services complete family risk assessments for child abuse and neglect investigations within required timeframes.**

## Investigations Not Always Finalized Within Required Timeframes

The Ministry did not always finalize investigations within 45 days as expected.

Ministry staff are to complete assigned investigations of suspected child abuse and neglect within 45 days of initiation. Its investigation processes require caseworkers to:

- Complete investigative findings (i.e., conclude whether child is in need of protection, or family requires ongoing services) within 30 calendar days of receipt of investigation assignment
- Finalize the investigation and document findings in its IT case management system within 45 calendar days of receipt of investigation assignment

Once completed, staff are to indicate in the IT case management system either that the investigation is closed (i.e., investigation is complete, and child and/or family does not need ongoing services from the Ministry), or, where ongoing services are needed, transfer the responsibility for the case to child protection caseworkers responsible for providing

those services. In addition, supervisors must review and approve the investigation decision, and document their review in the IT case management system.

For the 28 completed investigations we tested, the final investigation decision was appropriate given the information in the IT case management system. Where the Ministry decided to take action (e.g., apprehend a child, provide ongoing services), we found it was done within expected timeframes. For each of these investigations, we also found supervisors approved the investigation decision.

However, for 9 of 30 investigations we tested, caseworkers did not finalize the investigation within required timeframes. Consequently, the supervisors' review of the investigation decision was also late. For 6 of these investigations, caseworkers appropriately documented, in the IT case management system, the reasons as to why completion of the investigations was delayed (e.g., extra time needed to locate applicable parties, delayed receipt of police report).

For the remaining 3 investigations, staff did not document the reasons for delays in the IT case management system. One of these 3 files was finalized 43 days late. The remaining 2 investigations were not finalized, as of June 30, 2018, with lateness of 2 and 76 days.

Our testing results were consistent with the Ministry's data. As shown in **Figure 8**, as at June 30, 2018, 44% investigations (521 out of 1,180) were not finalized (i.e., open) within the Ministry's required 45 days of which 7% of those were open for more than 180 days.

**Figure 8—Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations Open More Than 45 and 180 days as at June 30, 2018, by Service Area**

Service Area	Number of Cases Open <sup>A</sup>			
	Total	Greater than 45 days	Greater than 180 days	% Greater than 180 days
South	584	235	19	3.3%
Central	274	90	4	1.5%
North	322	196	56	17.4%
Total	1,180	521	79	6.7%

Source: Ministry of Social Services data.

<sup>A</sup>Open means investigation is not finalized.

Not finalizing investigations within required timeframes results in late supervisors' review and agreement with investigation decisions. This may result in delayed ongoing child protection services to children and families in need.

- We recommend that the Ministry of Social Services finalize investigations of reported suspected child abuse and neglect within required timeframes, to allow timely supervisor review.**

## 4.5 Investigations and Intakes Actively Monitored

The Ministry uses various reports from its IT case management system to actively monitor the status of child abuse and neglect intakes and investigations, and adjust resources as necessary.



Management reviews various investigation and intake caseload reports from its IT case management system each month. For example, these reports show the number of active investigations and the length of time investigations have been open (see **Figure 8**).

The reports also show investigation caseloads by service area, office, unit, supervisor, and caseworker. Based on analysis of the reports, management identified issues with relevant staff, and adjusted caseloads as needed. For example, management's detailed review of a certain office determined reasons for delays in finalizing investigations. The review resulted in the closure of a number of investigations.

The Ministry also adjusts staffing levels based on the analysis of reports. To manage 20 unfilled child protection caseworkers at March 31, 2018, management shifted responsibilities and resources between service areas (see **Section 4.2**).<sup>15</sup> For example, the Ministry had staff from other regions travel to the north service area to conduct investigations and provide ongoing protection services to help address staff shortage in the north in 2017.

## 4.6 Compliance with Standards Monitored and Actions Taken

The Ministry monitors compliance with standards and procedures through reviews of child protection files in each service area and reviews of critical incidents.

The Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit conducts annual reviews of child protection files of each services area to monitor compliance with standards and procedures in the Child Protection Services Manual. These quality assurance reviews assess compliance with Ministry standards (including timeframes) related to intakes and investigations of suspected child abuse and neglect. For example, they assess whether staff completed safety assessments within expected timeframes, and where safety threats existed, staff completed an adequate safety plan. They also determined whether staff completed family risk assessments within Ministry timelines.

The Quality Assurance Unit shares the preliminary review results, and any immediate concerns with the related service area management. If reviews identify items requiring immediate attention (e.g., completion of assessments required, need for additional documentation in the IT case management system), the Unit requires service area management to advise the Unit of actions taken.

We found the quality assurance findings consistent with our testing results (e.g., family risk assessments not always completed timely). We found the nature and extent of these reviews sufficient and robust.

In addition, the Ministry reviews all critical incidents that happen to a child who has received child protection services from the Ministry in the last 12 months prior to the incident. Critical incidents include death of a child or critical injury that will have a lasting effect on a child's life.

<sup>15</sup> Investigating child abuse and neglect is only a portion of childcare and child protection workers' assigned duties. Workers also provide ongoing services to children in care and families requiring support.

The Ministry reports critical incidents to senior management, the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth, and the Office of the Chief Coroner (in cases of death).

For the 12-month period ending December 2017, there were 24 critical incidents related to children who received child protection services from the Ministry in the last 12 months (six-month period ended June 30, 2018: 8 critical incidents).

The Ministry conducts initial reviews of critical incidents. The initial review examines information surrounding the incident (e.g., was the incident self-inflicted, the result of an act or omission of the caregiver), and determines whether to further investigate (i.e., do a comprehensive review). Comprehensive reviews usually result in recommendations for change, which the Ministry monitors for implementation.

Annually, the Ministry produces a report of all critical incidents and recommendations to address common themes (i.e., root causes). This report is shared with the Ministry's senior management. Our review of the annual report for 2017 found that the Ministry concluded critical thinking, in conjunction with accurate use of Ministry Structured Decision Making tools, was crucial to proper screening and investigations of reported alleged child abuse and neglect.

## 5.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

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