

Chapter 39

Social Services—Placing Minister’s Wards in Permanent Homes

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Social Services has services designed to plan for the long-term development of permanent and long-term wards under *The Child and Family Services Act* and to assist families in adopting children under *The Adoption Act, 1998*.

This third follow-up audit reports that the Ministry of Social Services implemented two of the three recommendations remaining from our 2013 audit of the Ministry’s processes to place Minister’s wards in permanent homes.

By December 2018, the Ministry collected and analyzed information to enable it to determine the effectiveness of its services for permanent and long-term wards in its care. In addition, it set a target to register at least 85% of eligible permanent wards on the adoption registry within 120 days of becoming a ward. However, as of December 2018, the Ministry had not met this target. Delays in placing children on the adoption registry could negatively affect the likelihood that children find an adoptive home.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

Under *The Child and Family Services Act*, the 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.¹

The Ministry is responsible for planning for the long-term development of permanent and long-term wards, including their placement in permanent homes that provide a safe and nurturing environment. On December 31, 2018, the Ministry had 465 permanent wards and 609 long-term wards in its care.²

Permanent wards may be registered for adoption whereas long-term wards may not be registered for adoption. Permanent homes may include placement with extended families, long-term foster families, or adoptive families. Out of those 465 permanent wards, 183 are ages 12 or older.³ As per policy, children 12 years of age or older must consent to a plan of adoption. Under its policy, the Ministry has 120 days from the date of a permanent court order to complete an ‘Exception to a Plan for Adoption/ Adoption Deregistration’ or place such children on its adoption registry.

¹ Long-term wards are children that are unlikely to be adopted, by reason of the age of the child or other circumstances.

² Information provided by the Ministry of Social Services management.

³ Information provided by the Ministry of Social Services management.



2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

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. By March 2015, the Ministry fully addressed four of them.⁴ By February 2017, the Ministry had made progress on implementing the remaining three recommendations; but had not fully implemented them.⁵

This is our third follow-up. To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry’s progress toward 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 audit on our recommendations, we discussed actions taken with management, reviewed relevant documentation (e.g., agreements, trend reports), and examined a sample of files of children whose permanency was established by court order in 2018.

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 December 31, 2018, and the Ministry’s actions up to that date.

3.1 Targets Set for Adoption Program but Not Met

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*, p.170, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Implemented

The Ministry developed measures and targets for its adoption program.

The Ministry established a target to have 85% of eligible permanent wards registered on the adoption registry within 120 days of the children becoming a permanent ward. 120 days is consistent with its policy that requires a caseworker in consultation with a supervisor to decide within 120 days of a child becoming a permanent ward, whether to place the child on the adoption registry or determine other plans such as the child remaining in long-term foster care.⁶

Since 2014, the Ministry gathered information on its adoption program through quality assurance reviews of individual case files.

⁴ *2015 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 31.

⁵ *2017 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 32.

⁶ Long-term foster care is where a child is placed in the custody of the Minister until the child reaches the age of 18.

Having performance measures and targets related to the adoption of permanent wards allows the Ministry to evaluate the effectiveness of its adoption program.

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, p. 173, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Partially Implemented

The Ministry is not placing a sufficient percentage of children on the adoption registry within 120 days. In 2016-17, the Ministry did not achieve its target of placing 85% of eligible permanent wards on the adoption registry within 120 days of the children becoming a permanent ward.

In 2016-17, the Ministry tested a sample of files to assess if they were meeting its target. The Ministry found it registered 17% of permanent wards for adoption within 120 days.

We tested 10 case files from 2018, and found the Ministry registered three of 10 children for adoption within 120 days. All of the files tested documented reasons for the delay in registering children for adoption (e.g., extended family has come forward and an examination is underway, preparation and approval of the foster families that were going to adopt the child). We found 80% of files tested documented reasons for the delay in registering children for adoption in our last follow-up audit.

Our additional audit work of the children that became permanent wards of the Ministry in 2018 found that:

- 7% were registered on the adoption registry within 120 days (50% in our last follow-up audit)
- 2% were registered on the adoption list, but took greater than 120 days
- 91% were not registered on the adoption list, and have been permanent wards for greater than 120 days

To help register children for adoption in a timelier way, the Ministry has, since 2017:

- Begun prioritizing children under the age of five to be registered
- Hired additional staff who are committed to completing the child registration packages, and helping caseworkers complete assessments of adopting families
- Had supervisors and consultants work with case workers to keep the children's case files up-to-date and explain, in writing, why children were not going to be registered for adoption or why children were registered outside the policy timeframes

Delays in placing children on the adoption registry could negatively affect the likelihood that children find a timely and consistent placement (adoptive home). Placing children on the adoption registry in a timely way increases their chance of being adopted as older children may be less likely to be adopted.



3.2 Service Outcome Information Collected and Analyzed for Permanent Wards

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 care. (2013 Report – Volume 1, p. 176, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 17, 2014)

Status – Implemented

In 2018, the Ministry began collecting and analyzing information for five outcomes about services to long-term and permanent wards in its care. As described in **Figure 1**, these five outcomes assess the following five aspects of services the Ministry provides to long-term and permanent wards: Financial Independence, Permanence, Health and Safety, Successful Youth Transitions, and School Performance.

Figure 1 – Description of Five Long-Term and Permanent Ward Outcomes

These five outcomes assess the following about services to long-term and permanent wards:

- **Financial Independence:** The Ministry strives to support long-term and permanent wards to achieve financial independence in adulthood. It works with the Public Guardian and Trustee to ensure qualifying children and youth are set up with a Registered Disability Saving Plan. Additionally, the Ministry supports former long-term and permanent wards obtain educational or vocational training. On December 31, 2018, the Ministry was supporting 142 former long-term and permanent wards through the extension of supports program.
- **Permanence:** Placement stability is important for all wards. Annually, the Ministry examines a sample of children in care, and determined their number of placement moves. This may also be done on a case by case basis. The Ministry also tracks the number of children placed for the purposes of adoption annually.
- **Health and Safety:** Annually, the Ministry tracks the number of children and youth who have died or been involved in high-impact critical incidents while receiving services from the Ministry or who have received services from the Ministry within the preceding 12 months.

In 2018, two long-term wards died while in the care of the Ministry, and eight long-term wards, one permanent ward, and one youth receiving extension of support services were involved in high-impact critical incidents.
- **Successful Youth Transitions:** For those permanent and long-term wards of the Ministry with physical and mental disabilities, the Ministry offers services through their Child and Family Programs Division while the wards are under the age of 18. When those wards become adults (18 and older), the Ministry offers services through their Community Living Services Division. The two divisions actively work together to identify those wards who may transition from one program to the other in order to ensure they experience a smooth transition of services received from the Ministry.
- **School Performance:** The Ministry receives academic information from the Ministry of Education. Through Memorandum of Understandings and a Minister's Order, the Ministries are able to share information to confirm grade level and school attendance. The Ministry, as the guardian of the child, also gets the same information (e.g., report cards, attendance reports) from the child's school as a parent.

Source: Information provided by the Ministry of Social Services management.

Using outcome-based information allows the Ministry to determine whether its services for children in its care are meeting the children's best interests.