Chapter 12
Social Services—Monitoring Foster Families

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Social Services uses foster families to provide care for children requiring protection and out-of-home care. The Ministry is responsible for ensuring children placed in foster homes with foster families are well cared for and safe. At March 31, 2019, there were 486 foster homes located across the province.

The Ministry had, other than in the following areas, effective processes to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care.

The Ministry needs to follow its policies and established practice to:

➢ Consistently complete background checks prior to approving new foster families. For one file we tested, the Ministry did not perform a background check in its case management system for two adult children living in the foster home until 14 months after approving the foster family.

   Not completing the necessary background checks for all adult residents in a foster home may result in a potential threat to a child's safety when placed in the home.

➢ Consistently conduct annual home safety checks, and obtain annual criminal record declarations for approved foster families.

   Annual home safety checks and criminal record declarations confirm a foster home remains safe.

➢ Consistently complete annual review reports of foster families.

   Delays in completing annual review reports may result in foster families not receiving timely and necessary training and support, and reduces the ability of the Ministry to take timely action.

In addition, the Ministry needs to require periodic criminal record checks on all adults residing in approved foster homes. For the 30 foster family files we tested, the foster homes were approved between three and 29 years ago, which was the last time criminal record checks were completed. Periodic criminal record checks reduces the risk the Ministry has incomplete or inaccurate information about criminal charges against foster parents, which reduces risks to children in foster homes.

2.0 INTRODUCTION—FOSTER CARE IN SASKATCHEWAN

In Saskatchewan, at March 31, 2019, there were 856 children residing in 486 foster homes located across the province.[1] Each foster home had, on average, 2.3 children. There were 116 of 486 homes that did not have children in care at that time.[2]

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[1] www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first (25 March 2020).
[2] Some foster homes may not have children in care because of the age, number, and special needs of the children requiring care.

In 2018-19, the Ministry of Social Services provided $25.9 million in support to foster care families (e.g., monthly payments for basic expenses, special needs care, therapeutic care).

The Ministry of Social Services provides care for children requiring protection and out-of-home care. *The Child and Family Services Act* requires the Minister of Social Services to investigate reports if there are reasonable grounds to believe a child is in need of protection due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect.

The Ministry may place children in out-of-home care with extended family networks, residential group homes, or foster homes.

The Ministry recognizes, consistent with research, many children placed in foster care have experienced childhood trauma and have complex behavioral, medical, emotional, developmental, and psychosocial needs.[3] Its objective of foster care is to provide the child with a secure family environment to facilitate child development. It uses foster care to provide short-term support for the child and family or long-term placement for the child.

The responsibility of the foster family is to provide foster children with safe, healthy and nurturing relationships, and a family environment, which is considered the most beneficial and desirable.[4]

The Ministry must ensure children placed in foster homes are well cared for and safe. It must ensure foster families receive ongoing support and provide quality of services.

Effectively monitoring children's safety, and providing needed support to foster families is crucial in contributing to foster children's health and well-being.

3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

We concluded that, for the 12-month period ended December 31, 2019, the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes, except in the following areas, to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care.

The Ministry needs to:

➤ **Consistently complete background checks prior to approving new foster families**

➤ **Consistently conduct annual home safety checks, and obtain annual criminal record declarations for approved foster families**

➤ **Require periodic criminal record checks on all adults residing in approved foster homes**

➤ **Complete annual review reports of foster families**

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[3] Moira A. Szilagyi, David S. Rosen, David Rubin, Sarah Zlotnik and the Council On Foster Care, Adoption, and Kinship Care, the Committee on Adolescence and the Council on Early Childhood, *Health Care Issues for Children and Adolescents in Foster Care and Kinship Care*, Pediatrics October 2015, 136 (4) e1142-e1166; doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-2656.
[4] Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, Second Edition Handbook, 2012, p. 2.

Figure 1—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach

Audit Objective: to assess the effectiveness of the Ministry of Social Services' processes, for the twelve-month period ending December 31, 2019, to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care.

The audit does not include the Ministry's monitoring of children who are in the care of residential group homes, First Nation Child and Family Services Agencies, or persons of sufficient interest.[A]

Audit Criteria:

Processes to:

1. Approve foster families
    1.1   Maintain policies and procedures for approving foster families
    1.2   Approve foster families who satisfy Ministry requirements
    1.3   Communicate expectations to approved foster families
    1.4   Give ongoing support (e.g., financial, training) to foster families

2. Oversee foster families
    2.1   Maintain policies and procedures for monitoring foster families and children in their care
    2.2   Keep regular contact with foster families and children in their care (e.g., assign qualified staff, document visits)
    2.3   Periodically review ongoing suitability of foster families (e.g., continue to meet requirements)

3. Address non-compliance
    3.1   Maintain quality assurance processes (e.g., monitor staff compliance with policies and procedures)
    3.2   Evaluate key information (e.g., results of ongoing contact, complaints, critical incidents, foster homes with more than four foster children) about quality of care of foster families
    3.3   Take necessary action promptly (e.g., remove children in serious cases)

Audit Approach:

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry of Social Services' processes, we used the above criteria based on our related work, reviews of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management. The Ministry of Social Services agreed with the above criteria.

We examined Ministry's policies, procedures, the IT system, reports, and other records relating to monitoring foster families. We interviewed key staff responsible for monitoring foster families. We also tested various samples of files of foster families (e.g., approved in 2018 and 2019, operating in 2019, closed in 2019).

[A] A person of sufficient interest is a person who is not a parent of the child but who, in the opinion of the court, has a close connection to the child (i.e., extended family member). A child placed with a person of sufficient interest is not in the care of the Minister of Social Services.

4.0   KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1   Well-Defined Policies and Procedures in Place

The Ministry uses the Children's Services Manual to guide how staff approve suitable applicants as foster parents, and monitor foster families and children in their care.

The Manual describes standards and procedures about foster care clearly and in sufficient detail. It includes guidance for Ministry staff about assessing applicants, approving foster families (i.e., completing background checks, a family assessment, home safety assessment, training, and signing an agreement), monitoring foster families (e.g., annual reviews, visits), managing conflicts, and resolving appeals.

The Ministry keeps the Manual up to date. We found all sections of the Manual about foster care to be current (i.e., updated within the past three years).

The Ministry makes the Manual accessible to Ministry staff, its partners (e.g., the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth), and the public.[5] The Ministry communicates Manual updates to its staff and partners via emails. The Manual is available to the public via its website.[6]

Ministry representatives also sit on a national committee to share experiences and practices on foster care to remain aware of current national trends and practices.

Having clear written and up-to-date standards and procedures helps ensure staff responsible for foster care services have a clear understanding of expected processes over providing quality foster care. In addition, it facilitates effective supervision of staff, and monitoring of foster homes.

4.2   Qualified Staff Work With Foster Families

The Ministry has qualified staff for approving and monitoring foster families. It assigns manageable foster family caseloads to these staff.

At March 31, 2019, the Ministry had 65 resource workers (some who may work part-time) involved in approving and monitoring foster families.[7]

The Ministry requires all of its resource workers to hold a Bachelor of Social Work. Resource workers also must complete six modules of core training. This training includes standards and requirements for approving and monitoring foster families.

For five resource workers we tested, each had a Bachelor of Social Work and had completed or were in the process of completing core training.[8] Our review of the Public Service Commission's training report at January 2020 found resource workers also received Ministry-wide training related to topics such as code of conduct and confidentiality.

For 30 foster family files we tested, nine foster families had the same resource worker during 2019. On average, 2.6 different resource workers were assigned to these 30 foster families in 2019, which seems reasonable. Involvement in these files ranged from one to five workers monitoring a foster family in a year. Management noted resource worker turnover is the main reason for changes in resource workers assigned to a foster family. It relates this turnover primarily related to better job opportunities, staff moving, and maternity leaves rather than unmanageable caseloads.

Our analysis of the caseloads of the 65 resource workers at March 2019 found, on average, resource workers monitor about 20 foster families. Based on our analysis, this appears to be a manageable caseload.

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[5] The Saskatchewan Foster Family Association is a non-profit, community-based organization that supports foster parents as caregivers. The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth advocates for the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth in Saskatchewan.
[6] www.saskatchewan.ca/government/government-structure/ministries/social-services#forms-and-publications (26 March 2020).
[7] The March 31, 2019 number was the most current information available from the case management IT system. We expect the March information to be comparable to December 2019.
[8] The Ministry did not have records to show two resource workers completed core training as they were hired in 2003 and 2005. The Ministry is not required to keep records past seven years. We consider the risk that these workers did not have core training to be low.

Having qualified staff with manageable caseloads helps ensure foster families receive ongoing support and provide quality services to children in their care.

4.3 Foster Family Approval Standards Not Always Followed

The Ministry does not always follow its standards to approve foster families.

The Ministry has dedicated staff (resource workers) for approving foster families. They are responsible for assessing foster-family applicants' ability, skill, and willingness to work in partnerships with the Ministry and children's families to ensure the safety and best interests of children placed in their care. The Ministry expects staff to use the Children's Services Manual which includes the Ministry's requirements for approving foster families (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2—Ministry's Requirements for Approving Foster Families

> ➤ Requesting a **criminal record check/vulnerable sector check** for each applicant and any other adult 18 years of age or older, including adult children, living in the home
>
> ➤ Conducting a **Ministry record check** in its case-management IT system to identify any previous involvement with the Ministry
>
> ➤ Evaluating **five references** about applicants to assess their suitability to foster
>
> ➤ Receiving **medical reports** certifying there are no health or physical conditions inhibiting the family's ability to care for foster children
>
> ➤ Conducting a **mutual family assessment** or home study to assess ability of applicant(s) to care for children and age, number and special needs of children that are appropriate for the foster family
>
> ➤ Conducting a **home safety check** to assess safety and suitability of space in the home and surroundings by using the safety checklist
>
> ➤ Requiring applicants to receive **pre-service training**; 27 hours on Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) and three hours on Saskatchewan Aboriginal Culture
>
> ➤ Use the Ministry's case-management IT system to track key information about approved foster families and children placed in their care

Source: Adapted from the Ministry of Social Services Children's Services Manual.

We found the Ministry's foster care requirements for approving foster families align with good practice.

We tested 10 foster families, approved by the Ministry in 2018 and 2019, for compliance with requirements relating to approving foster families. We found:

➤ Eight of 10 files met all of the requirements as outlined in **Figure 2**.

➤ Notes on one file and in the Ministry's case-management IT system indicated that staff completed the mutual family assessment even though the file was missing the physical copy of it.

➤ One file did not have the required Ministry record checks and criminal record checks conducted.

    The Ministry requires its staff to perform a Ministry record check, that is check its case-management IT system to see whether all adults living in the house had any previous involvement (e.g., history of child abuse, neglect) with the Ministry. If there was any

concern with the history, the Ministry may deny the application. All adults in the home must also have a criminal record check done.

In this one file, while Ministry resource workers completed the Ministry record check for the two main applicants at the time of the approval, they did not do the check for two adult children living in the foster home until 14 months after approving the foster family.[9]

Furthermore, in this file, another adult joined the foster home three months after the foster family was approved. Ministry resource workers did not perform the Ministry record check on the new adult in the foster home until 10 months after joining the home. We also found that the new adult in the foster home did not have a criminal record check completed until nine months after joining the home (see **Section 4.6.2** for other instances found of when the Ministry did not conduct timely criminal record verifications).

For this file, the Ministry did not find any concerning involvement nor any criminal history for any of these three adults, once staff eventually completed these checks.

Not completing all the necessary background checks for all applicants and adult residents in a foster home prior to approving a home may result in a potential threat to a child's safety when placed in the home. Not having criminal record checks done on adults joining the foster home after it has been approved may also result in a potential threat to a child's safety.

1. **We recommend the Ministry of Social Services complete all required background checks prior to approving foster families.**

For 10 files of new foster families we examined, the Ministry took, on average, almost seven months to complete the entire approval process (from application date to approval). For these files, the approval process ranged from four to 11 months. We found these timeframes reasonable because of the complexity of the cases and additional time necessary to sufficiently assess the ability of applicants to provide a protective and nurturing environment, and meet children's needs.

Once a foster family is approved, the Ministry signs a service agreement with the family (i.e., foster care agreement). We found the Ministry uses a standard agreement template. This template clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of both the Ministry and the foster family.

For example, the agreement makes the Ministry responsible for maintaining regular contact with the foster family to support the child's placement, provide support and consultation services, and provide training to the foster family. Once approved and after children are placed in care, foster parents receive a monthly payment to cover the costs associated with raising the child(ren) in care (e.g., food, shelter, clothing, personal items, transportation, and recreation). The Ministry may also provide, depending on the developmental needs of a child, additional funds to cover additional expenses (e.g., medical, educational, cultural activities).[10]

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[9] The Ministry approved the foster family in October 2018. Staff performed the Ministry record check on the two adult children in December 2019.
[10] Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, Second Edition Handbook, 2012, p. 8.

The agreement makes the foster family responsible for providing care, acceptance, and nurturing to a child. The family is also responsible to facilitate visits with birth parents and with the Ministry, complete training, and ensure that the child lives in a safe environment.

We found for each of the ten approved foster families we tested, the signed service agreement between the Ministry and the family clearly outlined the roles and responsibilities of each party.

Agreements provide a basis for a common understanding, and monitoring of performance.

4.4   Foster Families Regularly Visited

Ministry resource workers visit approved foster families as frequently as required.

The Children's Services Manual requires resource workers to visit an approved foster family in their home a minimum of once every six months. The purpose of these visits is to ensure that foster families are able to maintain the expected standards of care and meet the terms of approval and the foster home agreement.[11]

For each of the 30 foster family files we tested where the family was fostering for more than two years, staff visited each foster family at least once every six months.

Visiting foster families on a regular basis allows for effective monitoring of the foster children's safety, health, and well-being.

4.5   Foster Families Receive Training While Fostering

The Ministry provides ongoing training for foster families to help them care for children, and provide a safe and secure environment. In addition, it actively monitors whether families take training.

The Ministry covers all expenses for foster families to take the training (e.g., travel cost, babysitting). In 2018-19, it spent about $800,000 on this training.

The Ministry has a long-term formal partnership with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, to help the Ministry recruit, train, and support foster families. Each quarter, the Association tracks and provides the Ministry with the number of foster parents that have completed the mandatory training. The Ministry uses this information to update its case-management IT system.

Once approved, the Ministry requires foster families to complete training outlined in **Figure 3** within the first year of fostering. If a foster family does not complete mandatory training within a year, the Ministry may make a decision to extend the time for a family to complete training or close the home.

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[11] Ministry of Social Services, *Children's Services Manual*, Section 4.4.8: Foster Home Assessment and Review, p. 240.

Figure 3—Mandatory Training for Approved Foster Families^A

> ➢ PRIDE Core In-service Module One-The Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children at Risk (12 hours), offered online^B
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> ➢ PRIDE Core In-service Module Two-Using Discipline to Protect, Nurture, and Meet Developmental Needs (9 hours), offered online
>
> ➢ Standard First Aid and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR Level B) recognized by Saskatchewan Occupational Health and Safety (17 hours), renewed every three years, offered in-class
>
> ➢ Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) (3 hours), offered online and in-class
>
> ➢ Trauma Competent Caregiver Training (16 hours), offered online and in-class

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Social Services, Children's Services Manual, Section 4.4.6: Foster Parent Training.
^A The Ministry facilitates PRIDE training. The Saskatchewan Foster Family Association coordinates the other mandatory training.
^B PRIDE is a licenced model of practice for the development and support of foster families, which is widely used internationally and in Canada (e.g., Nova Scotia, Ontario, Newfoundland). Saskatchewan adopted this training model in 2007.

In our testing of 27 foster family files with placements of children, we found:

➢ 23 foster families completed the mandatory training

➢ Four foster families were working towards completion

In addition to the mandatory training, the Ministry offers foster families additional PRIDE modules based on an assessment of the needs of foster families. See the list of additional PRIDE Modules in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4—Additional PRIDE Core Training Available for Foster Families

> ➢ Addressing Developmental Issues Related to Sexuality
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> ➢ Responding to the Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Abuse
>
> ➢ Supporting Relationships Between Children and their Families
>
> ➢ Working as a Professional Team Member
>
> ➢ Promoting Children's Personal and Cultural Identity
>
> ➢ Promoting Permanency Outcomes
>
> ➢ Managing the Fostering Experience
>
> ➢ Understanding the Effects of Chemical Dependency on Children and their Families
>
> ➢ Understanding and Promoting Infant and Child Development
>
> ➢ Understanding and Promoting Pre-teen Development

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Social Services, *Children's Services Manual*, Section 4.4.6: Foster Parent Training.

The Ministry uses its annual review of individual foster homes to identify the need for additional training. The additional training is designed to provide foster families with ongoing support and professional development.

Foster parents with specialized training are better positioned to provide appropriate care for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs.[12] Furthermore, evidence shows children's outcomes are better when they receive specialized and therapeutic foster care.

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[12] C. Schwartz, C. Waddell, Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly, Vol. 6, NO. 3 2012, 2012, www.childhealthpolicy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/RQ-3-12-Summer.pdf (18 March 2020).

4.6 Monitoring of Foster Families Needs Improvement

The Ministry does not always complete all aspects of annual reviews of foster homes as required.

The Children's Services Manual requires the Ministry to review each foster family at least annually. An annual review includes performing a home safety check, obtaining criminal record self-declarations regarding any criminal charges or convictions, completing the annual review report, and signing an annual service agreement.

The Ministry completed all aspects of an annual review for only five of 30 foster family files we tested where the family was fostering for more than two years.

4.6.1 Home Safety Checks Not Always Done Annually

The Ministry does not always conduct home safety checks in foster homes annually as required.

Annual home safety checks confirm a foster home remains safe. The Ministry requires staff to complete them: at least annually after approval of the foster home, when the foster family moves to a new home, or when a significant change in the home impacts the health or safety of individuals in the home (e.g., renovations to the home, significant damage to the home caused by flood).

When doing the check, resource workers are to use a standard home safety checklist to assess sleeping and bedroom accommodations (e.g., no more than two children should be in a room), fire safety (e.g., properly installed functioning smoke alarm), firearm and weapon safety (e.g., storage of firearms in accordance with federal legislation), and general home safety (e.g., handrails installed where needed).

For seven of the 30 foster family files we tested, staff did not complete the annual home safety checklist for 2019. Six of them were last completed in 2018 and one in 2016.

Not performing home safety inspections annually as required increases the risk that children in the care of foster families may not reside in a safe environment.

> 2. **We recommend the Ministry of Social Services consistently follow its standard to conduct annual home safety checks at foster homes.**

4.6.2 Criminal Record Check Standards Not Always Followed

The Ministry does not always receive annual self-declarations of any criminal charges or criminal record checks for new adults in a foster home as required. In addition, it does not require periodic criminal record checks for foster families.

As noted in **Section 4.6**, the required annual review includes obtaining criminal record self-declarations regarding any criminal charges or convictions. The Ministry relies on foster families and other adults residing in the homes to self-declare any criminal charges by signing a Criminal Record Declaration annually.

For eight of the 30 foster family files we tested, there were no criminal record declarations completed for foster parents and any other adults in the foster home for 2019. For five of these eight files, criminal record declarations were last completed in 2018. For the other three files, the criminal record declarations were last completed in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

In addition, for one file we tested, one foster family completed criminal self-declarations three months after the annual review report was completed. And, as we noted in **Section 4.3**, the criminal record check for one adult who joined the foster home after approval was completed nine months late.

Not requiring timely completion of annual criminal record declarations of all adults residing in the foster home may increase the risk of children not living in a safe environment and potentially being mistreated.

3. **We recommend the Ministry of Social Services obtain annual criminal record declarations for all adults residing in approved foster homes.**

We also found the Ministry did not require foster parents and other adults residing in the home to provide it with updated criminal record checks on a periodic basis after its initial approval of the foster home. For the 30 foster family files we tested, the foster homes had operated between three and 29 years since first approved which was the last time criminal record checks were completed. Other jurisdictions require foster families to have periodic criminal record checks. For example, in British Columbia, foster families are required to have criminal record checks done every three years.

Only requiring criminal record information through self-reported declarations may increase the risk of the Ministry having incomplete or inaccurate information (e.g., a foster parent may not disclose a criminal charge), which may put children in foster homes at risk.

4. **We recommend the Ministry of Social Services require periodic criminal record checks on all adults residing in approved foster homes.**

4.6.3 Required Annual Review Reports Not Always Completed

The Ministry does not always complete the annual review reports as required.

As noted in **Section 4.6**, the required annual review includes completing an annual review report, and signing an annual service agreement with the foster home being reviewed. In general, the review is to assess whether a foster family still meets the Ministry's requirements for fostering.

The Ministry requires resource workers to complete an annual review report once they complete their assessment, collect all the necessary documentation (e.g., home inspection checklist, criminal record self-declarations), and meet with foster families about the results of the review.

As part of the annual review, the resource worker is to assess the foster family's strengths, skills, and/or supports needed according to five competencies: protecting and nurturing children, meeting children's developmental needs, supporting family relationships,

connecting children to nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime, and working as a member of a professional team.

In addition to the results of the annual review, the report outlines approval history, significant events in the last year, and the assessment of other workers or agencies involved with the family (e.g., child care workers, school).[13]

The annual review report is to be shared with the foster family to help identify the skills, supports, and any additional training they may require to meet the needs of the children in their care.

The Ministry requires the foster family being reviewed, the resource worker carrying out the review, and related supervisor to sign the report once it is complete, and submit for senior management review. Management expects the annual review report to be signed within two weeks after it is complete.

For each of the 30 foster family files we tested, resource workers regularly (i.e., every six months) met with the foster families, and had their meetings recorded in the case-management IT system. During these meetings, foster families were able to voice their concerns or ask for additional supports. For seven of 30 foster families we tested, annual review reports were done and signed within required timeframes.

However, for the remaining 23 foster family files we tested:

➢ For 14 foster families, no annual review reports were done in 2019.

➢ For nine foster families, a foster family or supervisor signed the annual review report much later than expected even though the reports were done within required timeframes. For these nine files, reports were signed between three to five months after the report was complete.

Delays in completing annual review reports, which formally assess a foster family's strengths and weaknesses, may result in foster families not receiving timely and necessary training and support to provide quality care to children placed within their homes. Additionally, not doing assessments or delays in finalizing annual review reports showing a foster family is no longer suitable for fostering reduces the ability of the Ministry to take timely action (e.g., close a foster home).

5. **We recommend the Ministry of Social Services consistently follow its standard to complete annual review reports of individual foster families.**

Management indicated the omission and delays in completing annual review reports, and delays in signing the reports, are the result of staff turnover, vacancies, and staff missing details when writing an annual review report. Management identified a need for ongoing training with respect to conducting annual reviews.

Ongoing training may aid staff to correctly conduct annual reviews and prepare reports within required timeframes. It would also help to build capacity for staff to serve as mentors

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[13] Child care workers work in a co-operative partnership with families and caregivers to meet the needs of children in out-of-home care and prepare the child for return to his/her family.

and support for foster families. In addition, training supports compliance with policies and standards, and provides opportunities to share good practices and efficiencies.

6. **We recommend the Ministry of Social Services train staff responsible for monitoring foster families specifically on conducting annual reviews.**

Each year, the Ministry expects foster families to sign a new service agreement with the Ministry. This agreement outlines roles and responsibilities for both parties.

Ten of 30 foster families we tested did not have signed service agreements with the Ministry in 2019. Since the Ministry uses a standard template, the agreement terms do not change from year-to-year. Therefore, the roles and responsibilities would not change from the previous agreement signed.

4.7   Quality of Care Concerns Acted Upon Promptly

The Ministry promptly follows up on any identified concerns with the quality of care provided in foster homes.

The Children's Services Manual establishes a clear process for resource workers to follow when concerns about a foster family's ability to provide care for a child is identified. For example, if a resource worker learns about such a concern (e.g., from a school, from a child care worker), then the resource worker must review the circumstances of the situation (e.g., interview the child, talk to the school, visit the foster home, interview the foster family), and complete a formal review (i.e., a documented report) if required. The final formal review report is reviewed and signed by the resource worker, supervisor, and foster family.

Depending on the results of the review, the resource worker and related supervisor decide on actions necessary (i.e., increase supervision of the foster home, impose conditions on the foster home, or close the home).

For each of the four foster family files with identified concerns of quality of care in the foster home (either from the child care worker or resource worker's own observation) the Ministry appropriately followed up on the concerns.[14] Three of the concerns in the files we tested related to the cleanliness of foster homes, and one to an accusation of a foster parent not providing needed necessities (e.g., clothing) to a youth in care.

For these four files we tested, we found:

➢ The assigned resource worker immediately followed up with the foster family (e.g., visited the foster home) and interviewed all necessary parties. In each of the four cases, no child was required to be removed from the home.

➢ For one concern, the resource worker conducted a formal review which concluded the home would continue to be approved with a condition it be kept clean

➢ For the other three concerns, the Ministry found them to be insignificant.

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[14] We examined case-management IT records of contacts between resource workers and 30 foster families in the IT system and found four foster family files with identified concerns of quality of care (either from the child care worker or resource worker's own observation).

In addition, the Ministry has a thorough process to investigate and act upon any allegations of child abuse and neglect in foster homes. In our testing of 30 foster family files, we did not find any instances of such allegations.

The Ministry also tracks the reasons why foster homes close. Reasons may include other family commitments, retired from fostering, and Ministry-imposed closures. The Ministry may close foster homes as a result of investigations, conflicts with the Ministry, and homes not participating in formal reviews, implementing formal-review recommendations, or not being able to meet competencies required for fostering.

During 2018-19, the Ministry closed 12 foster homes because of identified issues with the home's ability to provide proper foster care.[15]

For three instances we tested with issues in foster homes prior to closure, the Ministry took prompt action to keep the children in the home safe, and to investigate and address valid allegations and concerns. We found:

➢ One instance related to alleged child abuse. The Ministry promptly removed the children the same day allegations were made. The Ministry's formal review led to closing the foster home.

➢ The second instance of closure related to allegations with the quality of care. The Ministry promptly removed the children the same day allegations were made. Based on the results of the formal review, the Ministry did not close the home. However, the foster family decided not to continue fostering.

➢ The third instance related to the foster family requesting a change to the service it provided (i.e., be approved as a respite group home). The Ministry's formal review included suggestions to improve the family's care of children. At the time of the formal review, no children were in the care of the foster family. The foster family disagreed with the results of the formal review, did not sign the review, or co-operate with the Ministry. The foster family decided not to continue fostering.

Promptly following up on any concerns with the quality of care foster families provide ensures children remain well cared for and safe.

4.8 Reasonable Financial Support Provided to Foster Families

The Ministry provides reasonable financial support to foster families.

The Ministry sets the basic maintenance rates paid to foster families. As shown in **Figure 5**, the rate is based on the age of a child and the geographic location of the family. The rate is higher for children and families living in the north (e.g., Beauval, La Ronge, Turnor Lake) as living costs are higher.

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[15] At the time of our audit, only the 2018-19 information was available. We confirmed that the process for closing homes remained the same up to December 31, 2019.

Figure 5—Basic Monthly Maintenance Rates for Foster Families

Age of children	0-5	6-11	12-15	16+
Southern Rates	$689	$722	$814	$918
Northern Rates	$728	$814	$917	$1,051

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Social Services, *Children's Services Manual*, Section 6.2 Foster Care Maintenance Rates, Initial Placement Rates.

The Ministry designed the basic rates to cover the cost of raising a child. The basic monthly rates outlined in **Figure 5** includes cost for food, clothing, education (e.g., school supplies), personal care (e.g., toiletries), transportation (e.g., bus pass, routine travels), household operations (e.g., cleaning supplies), recreation (e.g., toys, memberships), and a spending allowance for children above six years old.

Beginning October 2019, the Ministry implemented an additional monetary incentive system for foster parents to develop further foster parenting skills. Foster families who complete all of the mandatory training described in **Figure 3** receive an additional $500 per child a month. This system aligns additional financial support to foster parents with their completion of specialized foster care training. The Association estimates about 70 percent of all foster families will qualify for such additional financial support.

The Ministry also provides additional financial support for children with high needs (e.g., affected by developmental and/or physical disabilities). These special rates range from an additional $100 to $1,100 per month per child based on the child's assessed needs. A director approves provision of the special rates.

In addition to basic and special rates, the Ministry also reimburses foster families for other expenses incurred while fostering, such as babysitting expenses, organized activities, and counselling.

For 30 foster family files we tested, foster families received, on average, $1,500 of monthly financial support per child in their care in November 2019. This included basic rates, special rates, reimbursements, and the additional $500 payment per child for completing mandatory training.

For 20 foster families we tested for the month of November 2019, the Ministry paid the additional $500 per foster child to eligible families.

When we compared Saskatchewan's basic monthly maintenance rates to those in nine other Canadian jurisdictions, we found Saskatchewan had the third lowest rates.[16] However, with the addition of $500 per child in October 2019 for eligible foster families, Saskatchewan leads other Canadian jurisdictions on the amount of monthly financial support it provides foster families.

Providing reasonable financial support to foster families positively contributes to foster children's health and well-being.

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[16] We used 2017 rates for four provinces due to lack of public information available for more recent years.

4.9   Additional Support Provided to Foster Families When Needed

The Ministry, with help from the Saskatchewan Foster Family Association, recruits and supports foster families.

The Association works to raise awareness in the communities about the role of foster parenting and the needs of children and youth in care through its online presence, hosting informational sessions, and quarterly newsletters.[17] Through a recruitment program called Foster New Beginnings, the Association helped the Ministry to recruit 71 foster families in 2016-17, 56 in 2017-18, and 55 in 2018-19. The Association plans to recruit at least 50 foster families in 2019-20.[18]

Despite the recruitment efforts and as shown in **Figure 6**, the number of Saskatchewan foster families has gradually declined by 10 percent over a five-year period. During the same period, the number of children in foster care has also decreased. At March 31, 2015, there were 1,092 children in foster care compared to 856 at March 31, 2019.

Figure 6—Number of Foster Families in Saskatchewan
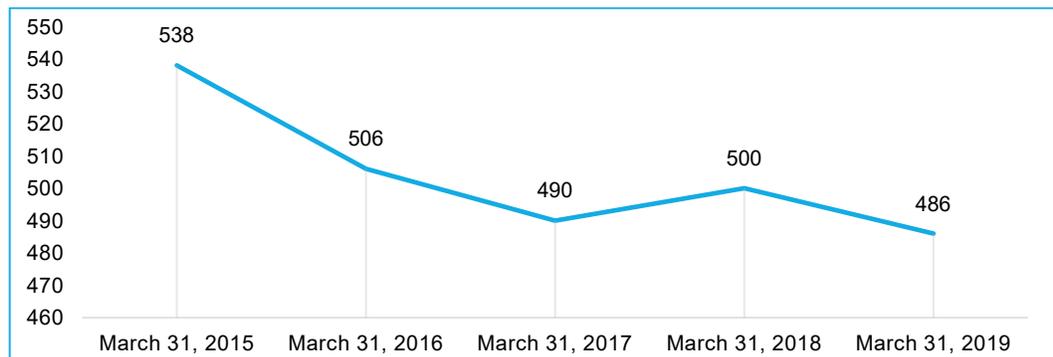
Source: www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first (25 March 2020).

Management told us several factors influence the declining number of foster homes. These include less interest in fostering, both parents working, and aging foster parents.

To retain more foster families, the Ministry, in collaboration with the Association, strives to give more support to foster families. For example:

➢ Beginning in 2017, the Ministry increased its supports for foster families in the first year of fostering. Ministry staff visits or phones the foster family every two weeks in the first three months of fostering to check on the family and to provide support it needs. The Ministry reduces this contact with a foster family over time (e.g., visit every 3 months) as a family becomes more comfortable in their role.

➢ After assessing a family's needs, the Ministry, through the Association, offers each foster family access to in-home support for child-care, flex hours (e.g., to support family visits), and domestic duties (e.g., laundry, meal preparation). This support aims to relieve some of the stress a foster family may experience. In 2018-19, the Ministry provided $4.65 million to the Association of which $3.6 million was for in-home support services to foster families.

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[17] www.sffa.sk.ca/resources-for-foster-parents/sffa-advisor-newsletter (25 March 2020).
[18] Saskatchewan Foster Families, Annual Report 2019, p. 2.

In 30 foster family files we tested, 17 foster families requested some additional support. In each of the 17 cases, the Ministry approved and provided the requested support.

The Ministry plans to continue its partnership with the Association to address recruitment and retention challenges in fostering. It recognizes when there are not enough foster families, vulnerable children in need of care are impacted the most (e.g., children may be placed in residential group homes, siblings may be separated, children may need to move to another area).

4.10 Foster Homes with More than Four Foster Children Actively Monitored

The Ministry approves the placement of more than four children in a foster home consistent with its standards, and actively monitors these foster homes.

At March 31, 2019, 33 foster homes had more than four children in their care.[19]

The Children's Services Manual limits the Ministry's placement of children into a foster home to a maximum of four children unless certain conditions exist. These conditions include where it is an emergency placement, placement of a sibling group, placement of children in a home in which they have lived previously, or in the case of short-term respite provision.

Under these certain conditions, a supervisor has authority to approve placement of more than four children for two weeks, but only if child care needs are at a manageable level and the family has available support. If a child needs to stay longer, the supervisor reviews the conditions of placement and is required to approve the placement every two weeks until another placement is found. When a child has been staying with a foster family for over six months, then the placement for such child is approved every 90 days.

Of the 30 foster family files we tested, five foster homes had more than four children for some period of time. Each of these five files showed the supervisors provided appropriate and timely approval of such placements, and the Ministry had regular contact (via phone calls and visits) with the families.

Actively monitoring foster homes with more than four children confirms that foster children remain safe and well cared for, and foster families obtain the support they need.

4.11 Compliance with Standards and Actions Taken Systematically Monitored

The Ministry uses systematic quality assurance program reviews of foster family files of each Ministry service area, and reviews of critical incidents to monitor compliance with standards and procedures.

The Ministry has three service areas (south, centre, and north). Each are involved in approving and monitoring foster care homes and services.

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[19] The March 31, 2019 number was the most current information available from the case management IT system. The Ministry continued to monitor foster families with more than four children to December 2019.

The Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit conducts annual program reviews of foster family files in each service area. The Unit is not involved in program delivery.

We found the Unit has a well-established process to carry out its reviews and to report its findings. Its process includes the following:

➢ The Unit uses a standard template to assess a random sample of files in each service area. It assesses each file's compliance with Ministry standards set out in the Children's Service Manual. Its template includes standards related to approving and monitoring foster families (e.g., having all background checks done prior to approval of foster family, completing annual review reports yearly, and doing home safety checks annually).

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

➢ For each review, the Unit prepares a findings report. The report includes recommendations to help staff improve compliance with standards.

➢ The Unit reviews findings reports with service area management prior to issuance. The Ministry requires service area management to provide a written response and action plan to address recommendations. The Unit includes the response and action plan in the final reports.

Each year, senior management receives and reviews the reports. The Ministry uses these reports along with its other interactions with service areas to monitor whether service areas complete the planned actions.

We found the Unit followed its established processes. The 2018 reports of each service area and completed 2019 reports each included key findings, recommendations, and planned actions to address the recommendations.

The Ministry expects the Unit to finalize the review reports within 90 days after the period of review. We found, for 2018, two of three service area reports were finalized within 90 days as expected. The review of the third service area was not finalized until nine months after the period of review; management indicated this was because of turnover. For 2019, two of three service area reports were finalized within 90 days as expected. At January 31, 2020, the quality assurance review was underway for the third service area.

We found the nature and extent of the Unit's reviews sufficient and robust. When we compared the results of our testing of foster family files to the Unit's 2018 results (see **Figure 7**), we found the results were comparable in nature.

Figure 7—Comparison of Provincial Auditor and Quality Assurance Unit Compliance-Rate Testing Results

Children's Services Manual Standard	Provincial Auditor Compliance Rate Results December 2019[A]	Quality Assurance Unit Compliance Rate Results 2018[B]
Criminal record checks completed on all adults in the home	90%	98%
Ministry record check completed	90%	98%
Mutual Family Assessment completed	90%	96%
Home safety record completed during annual review	77%	82%
Criminal record check or self-declaration completed during annual review	70%	79%
Annual review report completed in the past 12 months	53%	76%
Annual agreement signed	67%	75%

[A] Compliance rate results are based on sample size of 10 files for tests relating to approving a foster home (greyed rows); and 30 files for annual reviews (other rows).
[B] Source: Ministry of Social Services quality assurance reports. The Quality Assurance Unit sample sizes ranged from 50 to 57 files.

In addition, the Ministry requires the Quality Assurance Unit to review all critical incidents that happen to a child who is in foster care. It differentiates critical incidents by the level of impact on the health and safety of the child as low (e.g., illness or injury that does not require or requires minimum medical attention like fever or bumps), medium (i.e., injury or condition that needs medical treatment like surgery, casting) or high impact (i.e., injury or condition that results in child's death).

The Unit assists the Ministry in tracking medium and high impact critical incidents. The Unit aggregates medium impact incidents, and looks for lessons learned. For high impact incidents, the Unit reviews the case to determine whether a more comprehensive review is needed.

The Ministry reports all 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 twelve-month period ending December 2018, there were 75 medium impact critical incidents related to children living in foster homes.[20] Of the incidents, 76 percent were related to physical health (e.g., child admitted to a hospital with asthma) and 19 percent were related to mental health (e.g., youth experiencing depression). We found that none of the medium impact critical incidents were a result of poor quality of care or maltreatment by foster families.

For the same period ending December 2018, there were no high impact critical incidents related to the care children received in foster homes. There were also no deaths related to children in foster care in 2018 or 2019.

Systematic reviews of foster family files and critical incidents provide for timely identification of and response to Ministry non-compliance with standards and procedures.

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[20] At December 31, 2019, the results for the twelve-month period ending December 2019 were not available.

4.12 Tracking and Reporting Foster Care Information Evolving

The Ministry tracks and reports key information with relation to foster care and foster homes, and plans to do more.

The Ministry primarily uses its case-management IT system, along with the quarterly reporting from the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, to track information about foster care. For example, it tracks and reports number of children in care, number of foster families, training completed by foster families, and cost of foster care.

We found the Ministry's analysis of this information was limited. The Ministry fully recognizes it needs to do more analysis, but notes, although it has the data within its case-management IT system, at December 2019, the reporting functionality of this system is limited. It notes this system was designed primarily to help its staff manage cases (e.g., document ongoing contacts with children in care).

The Ministry shared its plans to increase the reporting functionality of its case-management IT system (in the next one to three years). It expects to have the ability to report more on children in care and their needs (e.g., number of children with special needs); and foster care providers (e.g., by level of specialization, age).

Having more detailed reports may enable the Ministry to better analyze information, which may help it focus its foster home recruiting and training efforts to target areas with gaps, and better identify where to provide foster families with support.

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