

## Chapter 26

# Social Services—Monitoring Foster Families

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

At September 2021, the Ministry of Social Services used 488 foster families to provide care for 858 children requiring protection and out-of-home care.

By November 2021, the Ministry improved some of its processes to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care. It implemented two of the six recommendations we initially made in 2020.

The Ministry consistently conducted annual home safety checks and obtained annual criminal record self-declarations for newly approved foster families.

However, the Ministry still needs to consistently complete background checks on all adults in a foster home to identify any previous involvement (e.g., history of child abuse, neglect) with the Ministry prior to approving new foster families. For one file we tested, the Ministry did not perform a background check until 11 months after approving the foster family. Not completing the necessary background checks for all adults in a foster home may result in a potential threat to a child's safety when placed in the home.

The Ministry now requires periodic criminal record checks (i.e., every three years) on all adults residing in approved foster homes. However, the Ministry has not yet developed policies and procedures, or an implementation plan for obtaining periodic criminal record checks. These checks reduce the risk the Ministry has incomplete or inaccurate information about criminal charges against members of foster families, which reduces risks to children in foster homes.

The Ministry improved its compliance rate for completing annual review reports of individual foster families since our original audit in 2020. Our testing showed the Ministry had a 90% compliance rate compared to 53% in our original audit.

However, annual review reports are not always completed on time, and supervisory review and formal approval (i.e., signatures) of the reports are considerably late. The Ministry plans to provide additional training on completing annual review reports in 2022–23. Delays in completing annual review reports may result in foster families not receiving timely and necessary training and support, and reduces the Ministry's ability to take timely and appropriate action.

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Social Services provides care for children requiring protection and out-of-home care. *The Child and Family Services Act* requires the Ministry of Social Services to investigate reports when there are reasonable grounds to believe a child is in need of protection due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or neglect. Children come into care under the authority of the Act either through voluntary agreement between the Ministry and



the biological parents, or by a court order.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry may place children in out-of-home care with extended family networks or within the child's cultural community, residential group homes, or foster homes.

At September 30, 2021, there were 858 children living in 488 foster homes.<sup>2</sup> Each foster home had, on average, 1.8 children. There were 120 of 488 homes that did not have children in care at that time.<sup>3</sup>

In 2020–21, the Ministry of Social Services provided \$31.1 million in support to foster-care families (e.g., monthly payment for basic expenses, special needs care).<sup>4</sup>

The responsibility of the foster family is to provide foster children safe, healthy and nurturing relationships, and a family environment with the goal to provide opportunities for the healing, growth, development, and support of the children so that they may be reunited with their biological family.<sup>5</sup>

The Ministry must ensure children placed in foster homes are well cared for and safe, as well as that foster families receive ongoing support and provide quality 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.

## 2.1 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This audit assessed the status of six recommendations made in our *2020 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 12, about the Ministry of Social Services' processes to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care. We concluded for the 12-month period ended December 31, 2019, the Ministry had, other than the areas identified in our six recommendations, effective processes.<sup>6</sup>

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. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To complete this follow-up audit, we interviewed key Ministry staff, and examined policies, procedures, and other records relating to monitoring foster families. We also tested a sample of foster families' files.

## 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 November 30, 2021, and the Ministry of Social Services' actions up to that date.

<sup>1</sup> Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, *A Guide for Caregivers: Third Edition Handbook*, 2021, p. 7. [www.sffa.sk.ca/files/pdfs/SFFA-Handbook-3rd-Edition-2021-09-28.pdf](http://www.sffa.sk.ca/files/pdfs/SFFA-Handbook-3rd-Edition-2021-09-28.pdf) (11 March 2022).

<sup>2</sup> [www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first](http://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first) (1 December 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Information provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, *A Guide for Caregivers: Third Edition Handbook*, 2021, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *2020 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 12*, pp. 155–173.

### 3.1 Not All Required Background Checks Completed

***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services complete all required background checks prior to approving foster families.*** (2020 Report – Volume 1, p. 160, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)

**Status**—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services does not complete all the required background checks prior to approving new foster families.

Before approving applicants to become foster care providers, the Ministry requires staff to complete two background checks. Staff are responsible for:

- 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 (e.g., history of child abuse, neglect) with the Ministry

If any criminal charges or past history concerns arise, the Ministry may deny the fostering application.

The Ministry approved 52 new foster families between September 2020 and August 2021.

We tested five new foster families and found all five files had criminal record checks completed for all adults residing in the homes prior to Ministry approval for fostering.

However, we found staff did not always complete the Ministry record check on all adults residing in the home prior to Ministry approval for fostering. We found:

- In one file, during our initial testing of five foster families, staff completed the Ministry record check 11 months after the Ministry approved the family for fostering. There were no concerns when staff finally completed the Ministry record check.
- In one file, during our testing of an additional five foster families, staff completed the Ministry record check five days after the Ministry approved the family for fostering. There were no concerns when staff completed the Ministry record check.

Not completing the required Ministry record check 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.

### 3.2 Periodic Criminal Record Checks Will Be Required

***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services require periodic criminal record checks on all adults residing in approved foster homes.*** (2020 Report – Volume 1, p. 164, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)

**Status**—Partially Implemented



The Ministry of Social Services determined all adults in foster homes should provide criminal record checks every three years, but it has not yet formalized the process for doing so.

At the time of our original audit in 2020, the Ministry did not require foster parents and other adults in the foster home to provide it with periodic criminal record checks after its initial approval of the home. This meant some foster homes had been fostering for 29 years since first approved and the Ministry had not obtained an updated criminal record check.<sup>7</sup>

In 2020–21, the Ministry analyzed the criminal record check practices in other Canadian provinces and found many provinces require periodic criminal record checks for foster families. For example, in British Columbia, foster families are required to have criminal record checks done every three years.

Based on the analysis, in October 2021, the Ministry decided to require all adults in foster homes to provide criminal record checks every three years. However, the Ministry has not yet developed policies and procedures for this, or an implementation plan.

Requiring regular criminal record checks decreases the risk of children in foster homes residing in an unsafe environment. It also increases public confidence in the Ministry providing safe and secure environments for children in its care.

### 3.3 Key Aspects of Foster Family Annual Reviews Completed as Required

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***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services consistently follow its standard to conduct annual home safety checks at foster homes.*** (2020 Report – Volume 1, p. 163, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)

**Status**—Implemented

***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services obtain annual criminal record declarations for all adults residing in approved foster homes.*** (2020 Report – Volume 1, p. 164, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)

**Status**—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services completes key aspects of foster homes' annual reviews as required.

The Children's Services Manual requires the Ministry to review each foster family at least annually. Part of this review includes performing a home safety check and obtaining criminal record self-declarations regarding any criminal charges or convictions.

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<sup>7</sup> 2020 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 12, p. 164.

Home safety checks confirm a foster home remains safe. Resource workers 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 and functioning smoke alarm)
- Firearm and weapon safety (e.g., storage of firearms in accordance with federal legislation)
- Water safety (e.g., supervision of children when they are in, on, or around water, appropriate covering of swimming pools and hot tubs)
- General home safety (e.g., handrails installed where needed, drinkable water available)

The Ministry also relies on foster families and other adults living in the home to self-declare any criminal charges or convictions by signing a criminal record declaration annually.

We found staff completed the annual home safety checklist and obtained the criminal record self-declarations for all 30 foster family files we tested.

Performing home safety checks and obtaining annual criminal record self-declarations for all adults living in a foster home decreases the risk of children living in an unsafe environment and for potentially being mistreated.

### 3.4 Annual Review Reports Not Completed or Reviewed Timely

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

*(2020 Report – Volume 1, p. 165, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)*

**Status**—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services improved its compliance with completing annual review reports of individual foster families. However, annual review reports are not completed timely and supervisory review and formal approval (i.e., signatures) of the reports are considerably late.

The Ministry requires resource workers to complete an annual review of each foster family to assess whether the family still meets the Ministry's requirements for fostering.<sup>8</sup> As part of the review, resource workers 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.

<sup>8</sup> Annual reviews are completed within a calendar year.



The Ministry requires resource workers to complete an annual review report once they complete their assessment, collect all the necessary documentation (e.g., home safety check, criminal record self-declarations), and meet with foster families about the review's results. Management expects the resource worker and supervisor to sign the annual review report within two weeks after it is complete.

We tested 30 foster family files and found:

- Four foster families did not receive a 2020 annual review report even though supporting documentation (e.g., home safety check) was gathered. At time of testing (September 2021), the 2021 annual review report had not yet been completed either.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, these foster families fostered children for almost two years without the Ministry formally assessing whether the family still meets its requirements for fostering.
- Twenty-six foster families received an annual review report in 2020 or 2021.

Based on our testing, we found the Ministry significantly improved its compliance rate for completing annual review reports since our original audit in 2020. Our testing showed the Ministry had a 90% compliance rate compared to 53% in our original audit. It also showed the Ministry exceeded its 85% compliance rate goal.

However, we found that resource workers do not always complete annual review reports timely. Out of 26 completed annual review reports, 10 were done between 3–30 weeks after meeting with foster families and receiving supporting documentation.

In addition, supervisors did not always sign the annual review reports within two weeks after the reports were complete as expected. We found 12 out of 26, or 46%, of completed annual review reports were signed more than three weeks after report completion (ranging from 3–49 weeks late) or not at all (two annual review reports). Management indicated reasons for delays in completing and signing annual review reports related to workers needing extra time to edit the reports after initial supervisory review, staff working from home, staff turnover, and vacations.

Lack of timely supervisory review and approval (i.e., supervisory signature) of annual foster family reviews, reduces the Ministry's ability to take timely and appropriate action (e.g., to provide training or remove children from a home) in cases when a foster family is no longer suitable for fostering or needs additional support.

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.

<sup>9</sup> In one case, the Ministry attempted to contact the family multiple times to complete the annual review report. There were no children in care in 2020 or 2021, and the Ministry was working on closing this foster home at November 2021.

### 3.5 More Training on Conducting Annual Review Reports Needed

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

*(2020 Report – Volume 1, p. 166, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)*

**Status**—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services provided staff with some training related to monitoring foster families, but plans to deliver training more specific to completion of annual reviews and final reports.

In spring 2021, the Ministry delivered online training to resource workers, supervisors, and managers related to monitoring foster families. The training covered such topics as establishing and maintaining relationships with foster families, completing annual reviews, formal reviews if concerns with quality of care identified, and investigations at foster homes. There were 59 staff registered for the training, but only 46 attended.

The Ministry is developing training material for its resource workers with greater emphasis on applying critical thinking and integrated practice strategies during completion of annual reviews.<sup>10</sup> This may help workers complete quality annual review reports and decrease delays in completing and reviewing the reports (see **Section 3.4**). It plans to develop training materials by the end of 2021–22 and provide training to resource workers, supervisors, and managers in 2022–23.

Ongoing training may aid staff to conduct quality annual reviews and prepare reports within required timeframes. It would also help to build capacity for staff to serve as mentors and support for foster families. In addition, training supports compliance with policies and standards, and provides opportunities to share good practices and efficiencies.

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<sup>10</sup> Integrated practice strategies is a child welfare casework approach designed to help all key stakeholders involved with a child (e.g., foster parents, parents, extended family, child welfare workers, supervisors, and managers) to keep a clear focus on assessing and enhancing child safety at all points in the case process.

