

## Chapter 29

# Social Services—Investigating Allegations of Child Abuse and Neglect

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

In 2022–23, the Ministry of Social Services received over 19,000 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. Ministry caseworkers are responsible for screening all reports and deciding whether to investigate; about 38% of reports result in investigation.

The Ministry has more work to do in regards to investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect. By June 2023, it implemented one recommendation and continues to work on three of the outstanding recommendations made in 2018.

The Ministry documented appropriate reasons for changed screening decisions (i.e., change from investigate to not investigate or vice versa) about child abuse and neglect allegations. This supports the Ministry's decisions about investigating reports of alleged child abuse and neglect, and reduces the risk of inadequately protecting children.

The Ministry has clear policies and procedures, including timeframes, for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect, however, they are not always followed. Our testing found the Ministry did not, within the timeframes required, always attempt face-to-face contact with the child and family under investigation, complete family risk assessments, or finalize investigations.

Making face-to-face contact within prescribed timeframes reduces the risk a child remains in an unsafe environment.

The Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit assesses each of three service areas' compliance with the Ministry's policies and procedures, including the completion of family risk assessments and investigations. However, the Quality Assurance Unit did not require service areas to develop action plans to address untimely completion of risk assessments. In addition, while service area management worked with caseworkers to develop plans to address outstanding investigations, more formal plans are necessary in all service areas—the Ministry had 944 suspected child abuse investigations outstanding for more than 45 days at May 2023.

Delays in completing family risk assessments and investigations may result in children and/or families not receiving needed child protection services promptly when there may be a high likelihood a child will be maltreated in the future.

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

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



Child abuse and neglect refers to circumstances (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse) that may be harmful to a child's physical, emotional, or psychological health. Neglect is also failing to provide a child with enough food, proper clothing, shelter, healthcare, or supervision.

During 2022–23, the Ministry received about 19,100 reported instances of alleged child abuse and neglect. Over 7,200 of these reports resulted in investigations.<sup>1</sup> Timely investigation of allegations of child abuse and neglect is critical to protect the safety of children.

## 2.1 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

In 2018, we assessed the Ministry of Social Services' processes to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect. Our *2018 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 26, concluded the Ministry had effective processes to investigate, within a reasonable timeframe, allegations of child abuse and neglect, other than the matters reflected in our five recommendations.<sup>2</sup> By June 2020, the Ministry implemented one of the five recommendations.<sup>3</sup> This chapter describes our second follow-up audit of management's actions on the remaining four recommendations.

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 carry out this follow-up audit, we interviewed key staff responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect. We also examined the Ministry's IT case management system, reviewed policies and procedures, and examined other key documents (e.g., quality assurance reports). In addition, we tested a sample of intake (i.e., allegations of child abuse and neglect) and investigation reports.

## 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 recommendations, the status of the recommendations at June 30, 2023, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

### 3.1 Appropriateness of Changed Screening Decisions Documented

***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services promptly monitor the appropriateness of changed screening decisions related to child abuse and neglect allegations.*** (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 199, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

**Status**—Intent of Recommendation Implemented

<sup>1</sup> Information from the Ministry of Social Services. Some intake reports could be associated with an investigation that was already underway prior to the start of the fiscal year. In addition, some investigations may have multiple intake reports associated to them.

<sup>2</sup> *2018 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 26*, pp. 191–205.

<sup>3</sup> *2020 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 42*, pp. 295–301.

The Ministry of Social Services documented appropriate reasons for changed screening decisions related to child abuse and neglect allegations.

The Ministry has teams of specially trained caseworkers who receive and screen reports (e.g., calls) of suspected child abuse and neglect and decide whether to investigate. These teams are located in three regions (i.e., service areas) across the province—Prince Albert (north region), Saskatoon (central region), and Regina (south region).

The Ministry allows supervisors to override (e.g., change from investigate to not investigate or vice versa) their staff's intake screening decisions. In these situations, the Ministry expects the supervisor to document, in its IT case management system, the reason for the change.

In Saskatoon, the Ministry has a review team who meets daily to review all intake decisions, including those where the supervisor changed the intake screening decision. These reviews occur the working day following completed intake assessments. The review team includes managers, screening supervisors, and sometimes representatives from First Nations agencies. The Ministry does not have review teams or independent reviews in its other two regions (south and north), rather it relies on the expertise of supervisors to make consistent and appropriate decisions, and to document them.

From April 1, 2022, to May 31, 2023, there were 1,148 instances with changed screening decisions. Of these, we found 1,127 instances where supervisors changed the screening decision from investigate to not investigate, with almost 40% (over 400) of these instances occurring in the two regions lacking review teams.

For each of the two instances we tested where a supervisor changed the screening decision from investigate to not investigate in the central service area, we found the supervisor documented the decision and the review team in Saskatoon adequately reviewed the override and agreed with the supervisor's decision.

For each of the eight instances we tested where a supervisor changed the screening decision from investigate to not investigate in the south or north service areas, we found the supervisor documented appropriate reasons for changing the screening decision (e.g., lack of evidence to substantiate allegation).

Documenting appropriate reasons for changed screening decisions helps the Ministry support decisions about investigating reports of alleged child abuse and neglect. This reduces the risk of children remaining in unsafe environments where they are at risk of abuse and neglect.

## 3.2 Face-to-Face Contact Not Always Occurring as Required

***We recommended 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.*** (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 201, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

**Status**—Partially Implemented



The Ministry of Social Services did not always attempt to make face-to-face contact with the child and family within required timeframes during investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect. We found six out of 30 investigations where staff attempted contact but made contact later than expected; in one of these instances, there was no evidence the caseworker ever made contact with the child at all.

The Ministry requires caseworkers to attempt first contact with the child (who is the subject of the report) and their family the same day or within five calendar days of starting an investigation, depending on the severity of the allegation.<sup>4</sup> This contact, along with a safety assessment, helps caseworkers to determine the safety of children (i.e., safe, safe with services, or unsafe) who are the subject of alleged abuse or neglect.

We tested 30 investigations and found the following:

- For two of 12 investigations classified as requiring immediate response, Ministry caseworkers did not attempt to make face-to-face contact the same day as required.

In one instance, there was no evidence the caseworker attempted to make contact with the child, but they completed a safety assessment on the same day the Ministry assigned them to the investigation. The child's parents accepted the safety plan.<sup>5</sup>

For the other instance, it took the caseworker five days to make contact with the children. In this instance, we found the caseworker did not complete a safety assessment at the time of face-to-face contact. The Ministry left the children in the care of the family and it did not document whether the caseworker deemed the home safe for the children.

- For four of 18 investigations classified as non-immediate response, Ministry caseworkers did not attempt to make face-to-face contact within five days as required—it took the caseworkers between 8–88 days to make contact with the children. In each of these instances, we found caseworkers completed the safety assessments at the time of face-to-face contact, and determined children were safe (i.e., no immediate safety threats identified).

In each of the six instances where we found contact was later than required or not done at all, reasons for the delays were not documented in the Ministry's IT case management system.

The Ministry sets timeframes for face-to-face contact to keep children in these situations safe. Not attempting to make contact with a child and family within the prescribed timeframes, and completing safety assessments, increases the risk the child remains in an unsafe environment.

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<sup>4</sup> The Ministry requires staff to complete a response priority decision-tree for each maltreatment criteria type selected (e.g., physical abuse, emotional abuse). Response priority levels are either immediate response (i.e., same working day) or non-immediate (within five calendar days).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

### 3.3 Action Plans Required for Untimely Family Risk Assessments

***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services complete family risk assessments for child abuse and neglect investigations within required timeframes.*** (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 202, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

**Status**—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services does not always complete family risk assessments within required timeframes. In addition, the Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit does not require service areas to develop action plans addressing untimely completion of risk assessments.

The Ministry requires caseworkers to complete a family risk assessment within 30 days of assigning them to an investigation. These are instances where caseworkers determined a child abuse or neglect report warrants an investigation.

A 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) and influences the decision on whether to provide ongoing Ministry services to the child and/or family. Therefore, the Ministry requires a caseworker to complete the assessment before concluding an investigation of alleged child abuse and neglect.

For 18 of 30 investigations we tested, caseworkers did not complete the family risk assessments within 30 days as required.

- In eight instances, caseworkers did not complete the family risk assessment and did not document the reasons for delays in the IT case management system. At the time of our testing in June 2023, lateness ranged between 21–391 days.
- In seven instances, caseworkers completed the family risk assessments late (lateness ranged between 13–277 days) and did not document the reasons for delays in the IT case management system.
- In three instances, caseworkers appropriately documented the reasons for the delays in the IT case management system (e.g., unable to locate parents, unable to locate an older child, another ongoing investigation) and completed the risk assessment once able.

The Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit conducts annual reviews of child protection files in each service area to monitor compliance with standards and procedures in the Ministry's *Child Protection Services Manual*. These quality assurance reviews assess compliance with Ministry standards and procedures related to intakes and investigations of suspected child abuse and neglect.

The Ministry has set a long-term target of 85% for completing family risk assessments. While we found the Ministry monitors the timely completion of family risk assessments in its annual reviews, its target does not consider timeliness. We think it should. These reviews should also include requiring service areas to develop action plans for untimely completion of family risk assessments. Action plans may help the service areas focus efforts toward addressing root causes (e.g., resource capacity) to delayed completion of family risk assessments.



Delays in completing family risk assessments means delays in finalizing investigations. This may result in children and/or families not receiving needed child protection services promptly when there may be a high likelihood of a child being maltreated in the future.

### 3.4 Plans to Address Outstanding Investigations Not Always Formalized

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***We recommended the Ministry of Social Services finalize investigations of reported suspected child abuse and neglect within required timeframes to allow timely supervisor review.*** (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 203, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

**Status**—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services did not always finalize investigations within 45 days as expected. Supervisor reviews of submitted investigations were also not always timely. Service area Directors and Managers work with caseworkers to develop plans to address outstanding investigations, but they do not always formalize plans and the number of outstanding investigations continues to grow.

The Ministry requires caseworkers to complete assigned investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect within 45 days of initiation.

The Ministry's investigation process requires caseworkers to:

- Complete investigative findings (i.e., conclude whether the child is in need of protection or the family requires ongoing services) within 30 calendar days of being assigned an investigation
- Close (i.e., conclude the child and/or family does not need ongoing services from the Ministry) or transfer the case to ongoing protection services within 15 calendar days following the investigative finding

Supervisors must review and approve the investigative decision and document their review in the IT case management system.

For 21 of 30 investigations we tested, caseworkers did not finalize the investigation within required timeframes. We found:

- Six investigations remained open at the time of testing. At June 2023, lateness ranged from 6–272 days. Caseworkers only documented reasons for the delay in the IT case management system for one of these investigations (i.e., providing ongoing support until the family/child was more stable as child was getting medical care).
- 15 investigations were completed late—lateness ranged from 3–356 days. For only four of these investigations, caseworkers documented in the IT case management system the reasons (e.g., obtaining additional information from third parties, high caseload for caseworker) for delays in finalizing the investigations.

In addition, for three of the 15 late investigations we tested, supervisors approved the investigations late—between 22–56 days after the caseworker submitted it. We found two

supervisors adequately documented reasons in the IT case management system for the delays in approving the investigations (e.g., requesting additional information). In one instance, the caseworker transferred the case for ongoing protection services.

The Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit assesses whether staff complete investigations within Ministry timeframes. We found the Unit's findings consistent with our testing results (e.g., investigations not always completed within 45 days).

To help monitor outstanding investigations, the Unit sends monthly reports to the Directors and Managers of each service area. The monthly reports set out the number of outstanding investigations for each service area, as well as how long investigations are outstanding.

The Directors and Managers are responsible for developing plans to address the large number of outstanding investigations. As shown in **Figure 1**, in May 2023, the Ministry had 944 total investigations outstanding over 45 days, with almost 34% exceeding 180 days. This number has increased from the year prior (at June 2022).

**Figure 1—Number of Outstanding Investigations in Each Service Area**

Service Area		45–60 Days	61–90 Days	91–120 Days	121–180 Days	>180 Days	Total
South	June 2022	65	73	51	50	24	<b>263</b>
	May 2023	55	84	48	44	5	<b>236</b>
Centre	June 2022	43	52	26	18	14	<b>153</b>
	May 2023	45	81	64	50	14	<b>254</b>
North	June 2022	56	84	65	93	112	<b>410</b>
	May 2023	17	42	35	61	299	<b>454</b>
Total	June 2022	<b>164</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>826</b>
	May 2023	<b>117</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>944</b>

Source: Adapted from monthly reports provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

Directors and Managers noted they work with caseworkers to develop plans to address outstanding investigations. However, we found processes differ between the Ministry's service areas. For example:

- In one service area, we found the Director monitored the number of investigations closed in a month, as well as the plans to close investigations during the next two months. The Director also assisted in allowing caseworkers to have days to work on closing investigations, and approving overtime (where necessary), to complete the work.
- In another service area, the approach was more informal. The Director meets with staff (managers, supervisors, caseworkers) to discuss different plans to address outstanding investigations (e.g., specific days to complete required paperwork and close investigations). Currently no plans are documented, however, management indicated plans will be documented in late September 2023.

Not finalizing investigations within required timeframes and having late supervisor approval may result in delaying ongoing child protection services to families with children who may be at risk of neglect and abuse. Having formal plans to address outstanding investigations can help caseworkers to manage their workloads and ensure they close investigations within required timeframes.

