

Chapter 21

Social Services—Monitoring Foster Families

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Social Services used 445 foster families to provide care for 912 children requiring protection and out-of-home care as of November 2023.

By January 2024, the Ministry implemented one recommendation and continued to work on the other three outstanding recommendations we first made in 2020 about monitoring whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care.

The Ministry still needs to complete all required background checks on all adults in a foster home prior to approving new foster families. While we found the Ministry consistently checks its records to identify whether foster care providers had previous involvement with the Ministry (e.g., history of child abuse or neglect), we found it did not have criminal record and/or vulnerable sector checks for two new foster families tested. Not completing the necessary background checks for all adults in a foster home prior to approving new foster homes may result in a potential threat to a child's safety when placed in the home.

The Ministry also does not consistently follow its requirement to obtain ongoing criminal record and vulnerable sector checks every three years for all adults residing in approved foster homes. Our testing found the Ministry did not have criminal record and/or vulnerable sector checks within the last three years for 23 foster families. These checks reduce the risk the Ministry has incomplete information about criminal charges against members of foster families, which helps to create safe and secure environments for children in foster homes.

The Ministry began delivering training to Ministry resource workers in 2022 related to completing annual reviews of foster families. Ongoing training can aid staff in conducting quality annual reviews, including supporting staff compliance with policies and providing opportunities to share good practices and efficiencies. However, the Ministry still needs to improve its completion of review reports of foster families annually, as required by Ministry standards. Our testing found the Ministry did not complete an annual review report for 16 foster families during 2023; annual reviews are used to identify support needed to provide quality care to children placed within homes.

In addition, supervisory review and formal approval (i.e., signatures) of the annual review reports continues to be considerably late (up to 44 weeks after report completion). Delays in completing annual review reports may reduce the Ministry's ability to offer foster families timely and necessary training and support.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Ministry of Social Services is responsible for providing 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 of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect of children, if reasonable grounds exist to believe a child needs protection. 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.¹ 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 November 30, 2023, 912 children were living in 445 foster homes. Each foster home had, on average, two children. Of 445 foster homes, 97 homes did not have children in care at that time. There is an increasing number of children living in fewer foster homes—at September 2021, 858 children were living in 488 foster homes.²

In 2022–23, the Ministry provided \$33.8 million in support to foster families (e.g., monthly payment for basic expenses, special needs care).³

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.⁴

The Ministry must ensure children placed in foster homes are well cared for and safe, and foster families receive ongoing support and provide quality care. Effectively monitoring children's safety and providing needed support to foster families is crucial in contributing to foster children's health and wellbeing.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our second follow-up audit of management's actions on four outstanding recommendations we first made in 2020.

In 2020, we assessed the Ministry of Social Services' processes to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care. Our *2020 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 12, concluded the Ministry had effective processes, except in the areas reflected in our six recommendations.⁵ By November 2021, the Ministry implemented two of six recommendations.⁶

¹ Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, *A Guide for Caregivers: Third Edition Handbook*, 2021, p. 7.

² Information provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, *A Guide for Caregivers: Third Edition Handbook*, 2021, p. 6.

⁵ *2020 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 12*, pp. 155–173.

⁶ *2022 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 26*, pp. 249–255.

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 our follow-up audit, we interviewed key Ministry staff, examined policies and procedures, and assessed 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 January 31, 2024, and the Ministry of Social Services' actions up to that date.

3.1 Not All Required Background Checks Completed Prior to Approving New Foster Families

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, we found the Ministry continues to require staff to complete two background checks. Staff are responsible for:

- Requesting a criminal record check and vulnerable sector check for each applicant and any other adult 18 years of age or older, including adult children, living in the home⁷
- Conducting a record check in the Ministry's case-management IT system to identify any previous involvement with the Ministry (e.g., history of child abuse or neglect)

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

The Ministry approved 36 new foster families during 2023–24.

We tested files for four new foster families and found the Ministry did not consistently follow its requirements to conduct background checks before approving foster families. While we found staff checked Ministry records in its case-management IT system for all foster

⁷ A vulnerable sector check is when police check to see whether a person has a record suspension (pardon) for sexual offences. www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/types-criminal-background-checks (4 April 2024).



families tested, we found the Ministry did not have complete criminal record and/or vulnerable sector checks for two of the families approved as foster families.

Not completing the required background record checks for all applicants and adult residents in a potential foster home prior to approval, may result in a potential threat to a child's safety when placed in the home.

3.2 Periodic Criminal Record Checks Inconsistently Completed

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 updated its policies and procedures to formally require periodic criminal record checks, including vulnerable sector checks, on all adults residing in approved foster homes. However, staff are not consistently following this new requirement.

We found the Ministry updated its policies and procedures in June 2022 to formally require criminal record checks, including vulnerable sector checks, on all adults residing in approved foster homes every three years.⁸

We tested 30 foster family files and found the Ministry did not have complete criminal record and/or vulnerable sector checks within the last three years for 23 foster families tested.

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

3.3 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 did not consistently follow its standard to complete timely annual review reports of foster families. In addition, supervisory review and formal approval (i.e., signatures) of the reports continues to be considerably late (up to 44 weeks after report completion).

The Ministry requires resource workers to complete an annual review of each foster family to evaluate whether the family still meets the Ministry's requirements for fostering children.⁹

⁸ Ministry of Social Services, *Children's Services Manual*, p. 303.

⁹ Annual reviews are completed within a calendar year.

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.¹⁰

The Ministry requires resource workers to complete a report once they finish their annual review assessment, collect all documentation (e.g., home safety check, criminal record self-declarations), and meet with each foster family about the review's results. Management continues to expect resource workers and supervisors to sign the annual review reports within two weeks after completion.

We tested 30 foster family files and found:

- 16 foster families did not receive an annual review report during 2023, despite these foster families having children in their care. The last review report for two of these foster families was within the 2020 calendar year.
- During 2023, 14 annual review reports were not completed in a timely manner.

We found resource workers did not always complete (i.e., sign) the annual review reports within two weeks of completion—resource workers signed six reports between 4–23 weeks following the review period—before submitting them for supervisory review and approval. In addition, supervisors did not always sign the annual review reports within two weeks after receiving the reports—supervisors signed 11 reports between 2–44 weeks after report completion.

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 needs additional support or is no longer suitable for fostering children.

Delays in completing annual review reports, which formally assess foster families' 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.

3.4 Training for Annual Review Reports Occurring

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—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services provided staff (e.g., resource workers) with appropriate training related to completing annual reviews.

¹⁰ These are the five core competencies in the Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) model of practice for the development and support of foster and adoptive families.



Since our 2022 follow-up audit, the Ministry began delivering training to its staff with a focus on applying integrated practice strategies (IPS) when completing annual reviews.¹¹ We found the training provides resource workers with sample questions they can use when conducting annual reviews. The questions cover areas such as a foster family's use of alcohol or drugs, family relationships, physical and mental health, household routines, financial condition, and cultural understanding. The training also includes information about documentation required for resource workers to complete an annual review (e.g., agreements with foster families).

We found the Ministry offered its IPS training to out-of-home care staff (e.g., resource workers, supervisors) in January 2022, October 2022, and April 2023. As of February 2024, we found 58% of the Ministry's out-of-home care staff attended the training. The Ministry indicated those staff yet to attend the training are primarily newer staff and expected them to attend the next training session in April 2024.

Ongoing training promotes conducting quality annual reviews and preparing reports within required timeframes (see **Section 3.3**). It can also help to build capacity for staff to serve as mentors and support for foster families. Finally, training supports compliance with policies and standards, and provides opportunities to share good practices and efficiencies.

¹¹ Integrated practice strategies are 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.