

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

May 6, 2008

MANAGEMENT OF ABORIGINAL CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

Introduction

The care and safety of children are responsibilities first and foremost of their parents and their extended family. Beyond that, however, the Child, Family and Community Service Act of British Columbia requires anyone who believes that a child may be neglected, abused or otherwise in need of protection to promptly report the matter to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The ministry must then assess reports of abuse or neglect and, if needed, step in. If the child is Aboriginal, the government must consider preserving his or her cultural identity and should involve Aboriginal people in planning and delivering care services to ensure their cultural appropriateness.

According to ministry figures for 2006/07, of the approximately 1 million children living in British Columbia that year, 4,615 were found to be in need of protection – a number that is relatively unchanged from previous years and is proportionately consistent with experience in other provinces.

Of major concern is the fact that while Aboriginal children account for only 8% of children in British Columbia, they make up 51% of children in the province's care. This is considerably higher than the national average of 30-40%.

Like most jurisdictions, the Province is facing growing pressures to address past and present inequities in the lives of Aboriginal children. In 2007, the government stated a goal that of ensuring "children and youth in BC have their developmental needs met and are supported by healthy families and inclusive communities." As part of accomplishing that, the government has turned its attention to the Aboriginal children who make up more than half of those it serves.

Scope of Our Audit

The purpose of our audit was to determine how well the Ministry of Children and Family Development is managing British Columbia's efforts to provide effective, culturally appropriate and equitably accessible child protection services for Aboriginal¹ children and their families. Specifically, we assessed whether the Aboriginal child protection

¹ In this report, Aboriginal refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The Province of British Columbia recognizes anyone who identifies him or herself as Aboriginal.

program is appropriately designed, resourced, managed and reported on to meet the goals set for it. Concurrently, the Auditor General of Canada has carried out a similar audit of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's management of its responsibilities for child protection in British Columbia (as well as in several other provinces).

Child protection is one part of the child welfare services managed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development. We focused our audit on the high risk, high impact component of child welfare: child protection for children who may be at high risk of harm.

Our interest was mainly on conditions since April 2006, when the *B.C. Children and Youth Review* (the "Hughes Review") called for significant improvement in the province's child protection system, especially for Aboriginal children and their families. We began our audit in spring 2007 by meeting with key Aboriginal groups and the ministry and completed it in November 2007. We examined the work of the ministry's central office and five regions. We also discussed the ministry's work with 10 of the 24 Aboriginal agencies delegated by the Province to deliver child welfare services. In auditing the current mix of service delivery – part by delegated Aboriginal agency, part by the ministry – we looked both at how the ministry itself delivers services and how it supports and monitors the delegated Aboriginal agencies.

The scope for this audit did not include examining the results to date of the government's efforts concerning Aboriginal governance of child welfare services or directly auditing the delegated Aboriginal agencies.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The Ministry of Children and Family Development has attempted to work collaboratively with Aboriginal organizations and the federal government to deliver effective, culturally appropriate and equitably accessible child protection services, mainly through Aboriginal agencies to Aboriginal children and their families. However, several challenges (some anticipated, some not) have slowed the transfer to Aboriginal agencies of responsibility for delivering services.

As a result, many of the child protection needs of Aboriginal children and their families continue to remain unmet. A more strategic approach is needed if Aboriginal child protection goals in British Columbia are to be met.

Although access to good child welfare services alone cannot resolve some of the problems faced by Aboriginal and First Nations children and families, whether on or off reserves, the services are essential to protect these children from abuse or neglect. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and First Nation's children in care – and the indications that outcomes are poor – call for all parties involved in the child welfare system to find better ways of meeting their needs.

Our report contains 10 recommendations intended to improve the delivery of child protection services for Aboriginal children.

The ministry's Aboriginal child protection service delivery approach is only partly successful at delivering effective, equitably accessible and culturally appropriate services, mainly through Aboriginal agencies

Only eight of the 24 delegated Aboriginal agencies have qualified to deliver full child protection services. Becoming qualified to deliver full child protection services has been too difficult for small agencies. This means it is likely the ministry will, for some time, have to continue providing some child protection services in many locations across the province. *We recommend the ministry, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, determine whether transfer of all child protection services to Aboriginal agencies is still viable and, if not, adjust the service delivery approach to support some continued ministry service that meets the needs of Aboriginal children and their families.*

Standards developed to guide culturally appropriate child protection are already being used by delegated Aboriginal agencies but not by the ministry. *We recommend the ministry adopt the protection standards used by Aboriginal agencies as their own for Aboriginal children and their families.*

The ministry information does not measure whether a child's needs were met or if good outcomes are achieved. *We recommend the ministry, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, develop and monitor measures that determine whether a child's needs are met and if good outcomes are achieved.*

The ministry has not identified the needs and resources required for Aboriginal child protection services

The ministry has not had sufficient data and analysis on the level of child protection services needed by Aboriginal children and their families. *We recommend the ministry, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, obtain province-wide, community-by-community knowledge of Aboriginal child protection needs.*

As well, the ministry has not been able to reasonably determine staff resources required specific to Aboriginal children and their families. *We recommend the ministry, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, determine the resources (including social workers and support services) required to meet those needs in a culturally appropriate way.*

For these reasons, the ministry has been unable to determine the cost to deliver culturally appropriate child welfare services. As a result, it has been unable to develop a persuasive business case to negotiate for both provincial and federal funding. Thus, the ministry faces funding gaps of these critical labour and resource-intensive services. *We recommend the ministry make a persuasive business case for the funding needed to deliver the services in an effective way.*

There is also a shortage of Aboriginal social workers, Aboriginal service providers and supports for both the ministry and delegated Aboriginal agency programs. *We recommend the ministry, in partnership with Aboriginal agencies, develop Aboriginal human resources to meet the needs of both the ministry and delegated Aboriginal agencies.*

The ministry's change management practices are not in step with its current service delivery goals

The ministry's management of the significant change to a child protection system that delivers culturally appropriate, equitably accessible and effective services, mainly through delegated Aboriginal agencies, has been of only limited success. Despite the intent to work collaboratively to support delegated Aboriginal agencies, some ministry change practices are seen by some of them as not being in the spirit of building the partnership to make the shift. Furthermore, since the ministry continues to provide child protection to Aboriginal children, "culturally appropriate practice" needs to be better defined within the ministry and supported and required by management if this approach shift is to be successful. *We recommend the ministry, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations establish an effective change management strategy.*

The lack of an effective collaborative approach by the provincial oversight groups means there is limited action taken even when information is collected on non-compliance, gaps and other problems. Tripartite groups such as the Partnership Table and the Joint Aboriginal Management Committee have been established to help carry out this function, but their roles are loosely defined, and they are used more to air concerns than to seek solutions. *We recommend the ministry, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, collect and evaluate meaningful information on any child protection service delivery gaps; and find solutions to close those gaps.*

The ministry does not report on how well Aboriginal child protection services are being delivered

Only limited information is provided in the ministry's Annual Service Plan Report. Without adequate reporting of the costs, successes and challenges of the Aboriginal child welfare program (including child protection) the ministry is not providing adequate accountability information about the impact services are having on the children. *We recommend the ministry provide information to the Legislative Assembly and the public on the costs, successes and challenges of the Aboriginal child welfare program, consistent with the BC Reporting Principles.*

For more information, please contact:

Office of the Auditor General, 8 Bastion Square, Victoria, B.C. V8V 1X4
Tel: 250 387-6803 or Toll free *Enquiry BC* at 1 800 663-7867 (in Vancouver 604 660-2421)
A copy of the full report is available on our website at: <http://bcauditor.com>