



Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers

Submission: Child Welfare Review Panel – 11:00 A.M. Wednesday, June 16, 2010

I. OPENING REMARKS

- Representatives: Carole Bryant MBA CMA MSW RSW, Vice-President of Ranch Ehrlo Society and President of SASW; Noela Crowe Salazar BSW RSW, Director of First Nations Family Helpers, Regina, and Richard Hazel MSW RSW, Executive Director of SASW.
- The Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers (SASW) is a founding member of the Saskatchewan Partnership for Children and Youth from which the Panel heard on April 20th.
- SASW is the voice of the social work profession in this province. *The Social Workers Act* reserves the use of the title “social worker” to only those who are registered social workers, and directs that we operate in the public interest. SASW views all of its activities in the context of public protection. Our four purposes are:
 - **Regulation** through the setting of an ethical code and standards of practice and dealing with any allegations of professional misconduct or incompetence
 - **Advocacy** for social justice
 - **Promotion** of public understanding of this profession
 - **Educative Support** for good and ethical practice
- SASW has a strong interest in child welfare service as most of those working within it are required to hold a social work credential, as is the case across North America.
- Principles:
 1. **Prevention** - Where it is safe to do so, child welfare staff must have available effective services that prevent apprehension of children and youth.
 2. **Neglect** - The bigger factors behind an assessment of parental neglect must be examined and resolved - poverty, housing, mental health and addictions, educational attainment, racism and marginalization.
 3. **Best Practices** - Solutions and plans need to be developed that rely upon best practices and evidence-based practices.
 4. **First Voices** - The ‘first voice’ of the families impacted by the services should be captured in planning and in service delivery.
 5. **National Scope** – Where service challenges are shared across the country, a process should be initiated to examine them at that level and create a national response.

II. OF CONCERN TO THE SASW

1. Child Welfare Workers Need More Safe Alternatives to Child Apprehension and Opportunities to Implement Them

- **Time** – Child welfare workers are often pressed for time to identify, carefully evaluate and access the options that are available. Apprehension becomes the safest path - safest for the children and for the workers. Pressures include opposition or criticism from advocates, politicians, supervisors and managers. Potential legal action is also a threat. It is thought that it would be difficult to do your best work in these circumstances.
- **Resources** – Child welfare workers depend upon the existence of prevention programs that serve the entire population, and though they are in short supply, they are easier to find than critical well-run prevention programs that address established risk situations and that can halt the escalation of problems in the family and safely maintain children in their own home. Foster-care resources will continue to be strained and newly created foster-care alternatives will never be sufficient until safe alternatives to apprehension are developed.
- **SASW** recommends establishing a reasonable, protected caseload size along with more effective options to the apprehension of children such as professional in-home monitoring and support, behaviorally-based in-home parenting skills and one-on-one support for teen parents. Among the primary reference material here is the Canadian Association of Social Workers 2002 Child Welfare Project: “*Creating Conditions for Good Practice*” and subsequent literature reviews on the CASW website. In addition there is the work on best practices by the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium, of which the Ministry of Social Services is already a member.

2. Poverty

- Poverty is exhausting for those living in it. It is a significant driver of business coming to child welfare, and a certain waste of human potential. Poverty, poor housing and unemployment are almost always present in families coming to the attention of child welfare.
- Completed by Cindy Blackstock of the First Nations Family and Child Caring Society of Canada, research in Nova Scotia (where there is a much smaller aboriginal population) showed that 85% of families being served by child welfare have income levels under \$40,000 per year. 95% of admissions to care were from families with income under \$25,000.
- Ms Blackstock also observes that there is not sufficient discernment within the system between neglect and abuse. In her research she concluded that addictions, poverty and housing are big factors in families where parental neglect is assessed to be the reason for children being removed. She is very clear that these three problems are amenable to service responses that could be emphasized over the removal of children. SASW would add that to achieve progress on these major impediments, it will take a scope of vision that includes serious-minded and measurable initiatives and a time-frame that extends well beyond one budget cycle.

- Many studies have examined the relationship between poverty and poor housing, and poor physical, emotional and social health. Researchers agree that the price being paid at a personal and societal level is high.
- MSS has achieved many improvements to the income service and allowance picture over which they have charge, but such improvements don't do enough to lift residents to a level where they can live with dignity.
- SASW was pleased to note in the May 13, 2010 mandate letter from the Premier to the Minister of Social Services that there is to be support for **“new initiatives and investments that reflect government’s commitment to address and eliminate the conditions that cause poverty”**. This is new, and if it means a concerted effort to deal with income, housing and the things that generate marginalization, then this is big news indeed. Newfoundland/Labrador has found success with such a commitment.
- The new group, “Action for a Poverty-Free Saskatchewan” offers collaboration from the community level on the work necessary to bring the Premier’s direction into focus.

3. Structural Issues

- The system feels like it exists in a bunker. Other community service- providers state it is difficult to form a collaborative working relationship with child welfare staff. Child welfare staff feel they are looked down upon by their colleagues in the Health system, many of whom started their practice years in child welfare.
- Has the necessary relationship between the formal child welfare system and other services for children and youth been thought through and resolved? Schools^{plus} held hope for some of this to be worked through, but it has disappeared.
- If child welfare is to fill its role as a residual service, how might relationships with other government and community services (on or off reserve) be established? Government support and leadership is required.
- SASW recognizes there are big issues with the supply of services at all levels of prevention and within residential care. Most of these are supplied through CBOs, and this service sector is critical to the success of child welfare. It is, however, not well enough coordinated and supported to do what it is asked to do. The dimensions of funding, credentials required and support(administrative and program) from MSS need attention and in this we support the April 21st submission by Ranch Ehrlo that services should operate under principles of quality governance, quality programs and quality resources. Does there need to be an umbrella created for this sector like SARC operates for its service sector?

4. Call for a National Initiative

Most Canadian jurisdictions have recently, or are now, undergoing examination of their child welfare services. Some provinces have had a series of such examinations. The behaviors of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada affect all provinces where First Nations people reside. Some of the dynamics and challenges being experienced in Saskatchewan exist in all child welfare service systems. New ways of doing child welfare must cut across the borders of governments, interests and jurisdictions.

Some of the common issues:

- Paperwork seen as excessive, often having to be left incomplete.

- There are serious recruitment/retention issues.
- The practice environment does not seem to promote openness and transparency.
- Unmanageable numbers of children in care.
- Issues of poverty, marginalization and racism are surely at least national in their scope and affect.

5. Political Will?

- Political will rides on public interest, understanding and support. However, the public does not have an appreciation of what the child welfare service is there to do.
- Child welfare appears isolated and defensive. The only ‘news’ is bad news.
- The popular depiction of a “social worker” is often a child welfare worker who is arrogant, obtuse, bureaucratic and unable to adequately protect those needing safety. This is one place where the futures of social work and of child welfare are strongly linked. We believe that until the public and influential public figures see social work as a place where conflicting values and interests come together and its practitioners negotiate ethical compromises for a multi-cultural, pluralistic society, the profession (and child welfare within it) will continue to be blamed rather than valued for the work it does.
- Strong attention needs to be paid to improve the public’s appreciation and support of child welfare. The Saskatchewan Partnership for Children and Youth supplies one ally with an interest in opening up the child welfare system to better public understanding of its purpose and function.
- Upstream investment is critical to a balanced system. SK investment has never been substantial, and reductions over time have been driven by the balancing of volume pressures within annual budget exercises. In 2008, the Teen and Young Parent program was finally deleted in this context after years of reduction of scope and funding. Little remains. Among many other options, the original versions of the Teen/Young Parent service and the Domestic Abuse Outreach Program should be restored.
- There appears to be low appreciation of the ripple effects of reduction/deletion of upstream services on numbers of children entering care.
- SK statistics show a reduced number of families being served, with an increasing number of children/youth in care. Once in, it is difficult to leave.

6. Systemic Racism:

- National research reveals that 80% of children in care are of First Nations or Metis extraction. It is the expressed view of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society that leaving this unaddressed is simply playing about the edges of the wider picture. This is one of the impacts of inherited history and the record of leaving to the child protection system the responsibility of responding to the resulting family disruption and loss of parenting ability.
- Research by the Ontario Association of Social Workers showed 22% less funding for child protection services on Reserves that provinces spend for the same services off-Reserve. It was further identified that the shortfall is more acute in the area of supporting children to live safely at home. All of this contributes to the

fact that there are more First Nations children living “in care” now than at the height of the residential schools era by a factor of three.

- Greater support is critical for First Nations and Metis communities to address child welfare issues so that capacity is at least on par with the majority of communities.
- There is a Human Rights Tribunal underway now on the subject of under-funding by Canada of child welfare services on reserve. SASW has signed on as one of now over 5,000 “witnesses” who have signed on to watch the progress of this challenge. There is also the matter of “Jordan’s Principle” being adopted by all Canadian jurisdictions. We understand that Saskatchewan’s commitment to Jordan’s Principle is a conditional commitment and thus there remains risk of children being stuck in the system while jurisdictional funding issues are debated.

7. Support for Child Welfare Workers To Do Their Job

- The conditions for good practice are not yet in place. The practice environment has many challenges that get in the way of recruitment/retention.
- Children’s Advocate has characterized the attitude in the Saskatoon office as resistant. Generally, some program directions and policies are seen as optional.
- Lack of public, political and employer support is only part of this picture. The perception of many who are established in their practice in social work, as well as social work students is that this is the last kind of social work they would want to do and they give no encouragement to colleagues to get into it.
- To do their best work, front line staff need to know they are secure, respected and supported in the work they are called to do. They also need a sense of participation in the process of planning and change.
- We do acknowledge that the Ministry has begun to address some of this set of challenges, and SASW remains willing to assist and collaborate both as a part of the Partnership and more directly. Much remains to be done.

8. The Profession of Social Work

- Well over five hundred child welfare staff must bring a social work credential with them to qualify for employment. SASW recommends that there be a requirement by the employer for professional registration of those staff. There is now support for voluntary registration in that there is reimbursement of annual fees available to those who choose to register.
- Health Regions already have this requirement for their social work positions and this creates an uneven professional environment with child welfare. About 15% of current child welfare staff have elected to register, and many do not because they do not know their fees can be paid and because they do not want to have another organization (beyond their own and the Office of the Child Advocate) to which their clients may complain about their actions.
- Child welfare should be a professional service in every sense of the word “professional”.

- One consequence of doing this may be that a professional organization would then represent all social workers (and those who are practicing social work and are qualified to be registered) in the child welfare field and provide them with a stronger voice and professional support along with greater professional pride and identity.

III. CONCLUSION

- SASW has highlighted its interest in eight areas in the hope that what we have set down will support the presentations of others and will highlight the issues we see as critical:
 - 1. Develop safe and effective options to apprehension of children.**
 - 2. Deal with poverty, racism and marginalization in a decisive way.**
 - 3. Provide a reasonable structure within which child welfare can function and not be relied upon to deal with non-child-welfare issues.**
 - 4. Work with other jurisdictions to develop a shared vision for the future of child welfare.**
 - 5. Open the service to public transparency, understanding and participation. Set a developmental path for child welfare with a multi-year scope, and determine whether this might be done on a non-partisan basis.**
 - 6. We need to pay sharp attention to inequities for First Nations and Metis families.**
 - 7. Child welfare staff need to see and feel management support for the work they do.**
 - 8. Child welfare should be seen to be a fully professional service where its staff members are registered professionals.**

- SASW reiterates its continued commitment to work collaboratively in the setting of new directions for child welfare in and beyond Saskatchewan.

June 14, 2010