

Child Welfare Act Review Response

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta (PAA) values the opportunity to respond to the Child Welfare Act Review. Many psychologists work in this area and support the Child Welfare Act Review to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of Alberta's children, youth and families. The Psychologists' Association of Alberta recognizes that Albertans value independence, fairness, respect for individuals, and respect for diversity in our community. Albertans also value children and the need for them to have the opportunity to grow and develop physically and psychologically to achieve their potential as adults. The PAA also agrees that the safety and well being of children and youth is vital in the Child Welfare Act.

The opinion of the child should be taken into account when making decisions under the Act but psychologically it is important for the child not to believe they are making the decision or choosing or making choices regarding their family situation. The Act must ensure that the interests of the child are protected; the child is respectfully listened to but that concerned adults make it clear to the child that they will make the decision regarding their best interests.

Psychologists also concur that families have the primary responsibility to care for their children as this is in their best interests psychologically. The needs of the children must be considered before decisions are made regarding the preservation of the family. The PAA also concurs that caution must be exercised when removing a child from the care of their family and this should be done with the psychological well being of the child considered carefully. All individuals involved with the Child Welfare Act need to be treated with respect, dignity and consideration.

The PAA believes that children's best interests would be served through the coordinated teamwork of social workers and individuals involved in the Child Welfare Act as well as educators and health professionals. This teamwork could focus on assisting children and families before the problems become critical, as they would be addressed in their community. This teamwork has the potential to encourage families to seek assistance with the understanding that the assistance would be to preserve their family. It is the opinion of the PAA that the Child Welfare Act can be seen as respectful of ethnic and cultural diversity in our communities by involving them and ensuring that it is respectful of all individuals.

Although the Child Welfare Act primarily addresses the protection of children, early intervention can prevent the need for this involvement. It would be in the best interests of children if preventative measures were defined and addressed in the Act to ensure financial and

administrative support to address this important need of children. Co-operation with schools, health clinics, and other community services would best address the needs for children that do not include protection concerns. It may be possible for the Department to address prevention and early intervention by co-operating with community programming such as "Success by Six". A coordinated effort would be best for the children who need assistance while remaining within their family setting.

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta agrees with the definition of a child needing protection under the Child Welfare Act. Parents need to be held accountable for abuse and/or neglect of their children with the view to rehabilitation, as this is a psychological and social problem in most cases. Specific training to deal with reports of abuse and neglect is required for investigating this area. A team approach including social workers, psychologists and police would best meet the needs of the children. All professionals involved in this area should receive specialized training to ensure that the best interests of the children and families are protected.

The PAA believes that the best way to support parents in addressing concerns that involve protection for their children is a supportive approach with the possibility of different professionals being involved to address different problems. Co-operation of the parents is essential and this needs to be ensured by honesty and clear direction for the parents regarding the needs of their children. Prior to addressing parental needs and responsibilities, parents need to address major problems in their personal lives such as addictions. The best use of resources would be to address these problems first, followed by a team of professionals assisting them to learn and understand their role and responsibility in caring for their children. Positive and appropriate extended family members can be very helpful in this process especially with very young parents.

Mediation and therapy are seen to be the best ways to address parent-teen conflicts when protection is not an immediate issue. In addressing parent-teen conflicts other professionals may need to be involved as they often include the school system and the police. The best way to ensure and support parents to remain involved and responsible for the care of their children is to define the system as a supportive and co-operative process not adversarial. This could be achieved through other professionals' involvement as they may be seen as more neutral if the Department contracts them but are not employees. A unique mediation system to reduce adversarial conflict between the child welfare system and the parents would be of great benefit financially and for addressing the needs of the children.

The PAA believes that the most effective way to work with children, youth and families is to provide consistent support and guidance for both the children and the parents. When the child comes in to care, and when change in placements occur, the process needs to be direct with an understanding of the difficulties faced with these dramatic changes in their family settings. When children are returned home, the same consistent support needs to be involved for a considerable length of time to ensure they do not return to care. It may be to the advantage of each child to have an advocate within the system who would assist at critical transition points.

Stable and caring foster homes for children and youth are critical for the growth and development of the child. Professional support for foster parents to deal with the unique

problems they face would assist in providing stability for children. In some situations, guidance and counselling for the foster parents is a valuable alternative to counselling the children directly.

Psychologically, two years is seen to be a reasonable time to resolve protection concerns and the possibility of returning to the family after a child has been in the care of the Department. Policies and procedures regarding this decision would be of assistance to all involved. The parents need a clear understanding of the process from the beginning of Child Welfare involvement. A faster way to assess and put resources into a family setting that addressed protection concerns would enhance the possibility that a child can return safely home in as short a period of time as possible.

The goal of providing the right service by the right professional at the right time may involve other professionals contracted by the Department. Psychologists have much to offer in this decision. Children need to believe that their opinions are heard and respected in all aspects of child welfare. A consistent social worker or child advocate throughout the process may enhance this. Psychologically it is important that they know they will be listened to but they will not be deciding questions regarding their placement and/or returning home.

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta strongly supports the concept of finding permanent homes for children and youth through adoption when their family cannot care them for. More Albertans may be able to adopt these children if resources, both financial and psychosocial would be provided until the child is eighteen. Children who need support as they move into early adulthood need to be encouraged to remain in school, to develop appropriate life skills, and to transition to community services to meet their individual needs. A more direct relationship between the Department and community services is in the best interests of these youth.

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta supports improving services to Aboriginal communities and ensuring they are partners in planning and delivering services to their children. It is important to listen to their needs and as much as possible to ensure the needs are met through Department policy. It is also important to recognize the individual differences within the Aboriginal communities as well as the individual needs of the children involved.

The Children's Advocate role of representing the views, rights and opinions of children and youth receiving child welfare services, as well as investigating complaints and supporting the child or youth in expressing their wishes and opinions, is important for children. Psychologically it is important that an advocate provide guidance and support to the child and/or youth in expressing their wishes and opinions much like a responsible parent. The possibility of the Children's Advocate being involved consistently with children, especially at significant transitions, in their involvement with Child Welfare, would be in the best interests of children as they would have an identified person to question about their situation, go to with complaints and concerns, and ensure that they are respected and their opinions are heard. Other ways to ensure that children, youth and families are aware of their rights would be appropriate booklets and/or short videos that are appropriate for different age groups.

The Child Welfare Act needs to address appeals by having a process with independent professionals and community representatives. Processes such as independent mediators used to resolve differences of opinion would be beneficial to the clients and the Department. The rights of privacy for children, youth and families need to be addressed but superceded by the best interests of the children involved. All professionals involved with the family should have access to important information to enable a coordinated effort to resolve the situation.

Continuous access to counseling and financial support similar to foster homes should be made available to adoptive families to ensure successful adoption of a child. First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities need to be involved in decisions affecting their children and part of a team of professionals making these decisions. Alberta also needs clear requirements and processes for international adoptions with the possibility of exceptional circumstances also being addressed. The Government needs to be involved in the legal issues surrounding adoption in Alberta. Private agencies should be involved in the assessments and home studies needed to process international adoptions. Since a privately arranged adoption needs to be approved by the Court, the Court should be able to request assessments or home studies if necessary. Respect also needs to be given to the parent arranging for a private adoption. The cost involved in adoption services through licensed agencies makes it affordable to most but not all Albertans. When it is in the best interests of the child to be placed in a home where finances are a concern, there should be a policy to subsidize these families such as occurs through other subsidy programs.

The important medical and family information about a child's birth parents needs to be available to the parents that are adopting the child as well as kept on file so the child can access this information if necessary in the future. The current legislation strikes an appropriate balance between the rights of birth parents to privacy and confidentiality and the rights of adopted persons to access their personal history. More information and history should be available to the adopted person, especially medical and mental health history without revealing the identity of the birth parents. The legislation should provide opportunities for open adoptions but this should be cautioned to ensure that the best interests of the child are being met.

The Children's Services Ministry should be part of a co-operative approach with other ministries such as Health and Wellness and Learning to ensure appropriate supports are provided to families with children who have disabilities. Educational, psychological and social concerns need to be part of any definition regarding supports for families with children who have disabilities.

In order to provide for "the best interests" of children, and to support and strengthen families, it may be necessary to call upon a number of service providers and professionals. Psychologists are uniquely qualified in the areas of counselling and assessment and can be of assistance in meeting this objective. The designation "chartered psychologist" is government regulated. The minimum requirements for being chartered as a psychologist include: a Master's degree in psychology (6+ years of university), a one-year (1600 hour) internship, successful completion of a standardized examination used across North America, and successful completion of an oral examination. Many members of the PAA exceed these requirements and have completed a doctorate degree. Psychologists have advanced knowledge in personality and counselling theories, mental health research, developmental issues, family systems, psychopathology and assessment. Many lesser

skilled professions offer "counselling" which is generally limited to a narrow range of techniques that may, or may not, reflect theoretical underpinnings of a well established profession, or research-proven methods. It is essential that families have access to the most qualified help available for assessment and psychotherapy (individual and family). In the long run, providing the most appropriate intervention, at the appropriate time will generate cost-savings both for clients and publicly administered health and welfare programs due to the greater effectiveness and efficiency when a chartered psychologist provides services.

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta applauds the Provincial Government for seeking feedback on this most important issue. It is hoped that the feedback contained in this response will be seriously considered and services to families in need will not be eroded by "downskilling" to lesser-qualified service providers.

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