

# Human Services—Administrative Support Systems for Child Intervention Services Follow-up

## SUMMARY

Our 2007 audit and this follow-up examine administrative systems the department has to support child intervention services, such as agency accreditation and case file review. We did not evaluate the work done by caseworkers or the department's external reporting system. The original recommendations are centered on the monitoring systems that provide assurance that child intervention standards are adhered to consistently. These administrative systems are important since they provide oversight, identify trends and provide feedback to frontline caseworkers.

In 2007 we made five recommendations to the then Department of Children Services<sup>1</sup> and Child and Family Services Authorities to improve administrative systems that support child intervention services.<sup>2</sup> In 2010 we found the department had implemented one of the recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

In this audit we conducted further follow-up work and found the four remaining recommendations have been implemented. The Department of Human Services:

- has implemented a new process to approve accrediting bodies and will be directly contracting with, and receiving written results reports from, them
- reviews targeted case files of strategic interest to it and sends the results to caseworkers and their immediate supervisors, to provide them with feedback. It has improved how it shares information about contracted agencies.
- has trained staff on the new provincial casework practice standards
- enters licensing, contract and other information needed to monitor and evaluate agencies' adherence to contract provisions and their facilities in its new electronic information system

## AUDIT OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

Our objective was to determine if the department had implemented four recommendations that remained outstanding since 2007. All four recommendations deal with administrative systems that support child intervention services through accreditation, contract monitoring and case file reviews.

Neither the original audit nor this follow-up examined programs used to deliver services to children through family enhancement services or protective services—including family intervention, kinship care, foster care or residential care.

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<sup>1</sup> Now Child and Family Services, part of the Department of Human Services.

<sup>2</sup> *Annual Report of the Auditor General of Alberta: 2006–2007*, pages 63–89. Three recommendations were directed to the department and two to the authorities.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—April 2010*, pages 135–136.

At the time of the original audit in 2007 there were 10 Child and Family Services Authorities. The *Building Families and Communities Act*<sup>4</sup> dissolved these authorities on January 1, 2014. Program delivery responsibilities and our original audit findings remain relevant in the new organizational structure.

In performing the audit, we:

- examined documentation, policies and processes at the department and in the regions<sup>5</sup>
- examined and tested the system the department uses for monitoring and reporting results of case file reviews
- examined the department's systems to evaluate contracted agencies and share these results internally
- interviewed management and staff at Child and Family Services and in the 10 regions
- examined a sample of agency contract files

We carried out our work between July and October 2013. We examined policies and processes in place from January 2012 to June 2013. Our audit was conducted in accordance with the *Auditor General Act* and the standards for assurance engagements set by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

## BACKGROUND

If the department determines that a child's security or development is at risk, it places them into one of two intervention streams—family enhancement services or protective services.

Under family enhancement services, children remain in their family setting. The department works with the child and family to provide the required support services.

Under protective services, the child is cared for by the Crown and placed in a setting external to their immediate family. The placement depends on the child's age and needs, and the availability of services. These arrangements can include kinship care,<sup>6</sup> foster care,<sup>7</sup> group homes and treatment facilities.

A department caseworker is assigned to each child receiving intervention services. The worker develops a plan for the child, assists with getting them the services they need, maintains regular contact and ensures they are placed in a safe environment.

Typically the programs and residential supports for children in either intervention stream are delivered by contracted agencies, which for the most part are not-for-profit agencies or organizations. Some of these agencies operate in multiple regions and provide a variety of services and programs at a number of different facilities using their own staff. Regions enter into separate contracts with the agencies for each type of service and program. Each agency must be accredited by a recognized third-party accrediting agency before it can be contracted. Each facility operated by an agency to deliver a particular program or support such as a group home or treatment facility must be individually licensed by the region in which it is located.

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<sup>4</sup> Royal Assent given December 11, 2013 and came into force January 1, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> We visited five of the 10 regions, which accounted for 87 per cent of total intervention services expenses in 2012–2013: Region 6 (Edmonton); Region 7 (North Central); Region 3 (Calgary); Region 1 (Southwest); Region 4 (Central).

<sup>6</sup> A family home approved to provide care because of a family connection or significant relationship to the child.

<sup>7</sup> Foster parents can either contract directly with a region for their services or be affiliated with a specific agency that has the contract with a region to provide foster care services. They are individually licensed by the region in which they are located.

## FINDINGS

**Standardize accreditation process for agencies providing child intervention services—implemented****Background**

The department requires an agency to be accredited by an approved accrediting body before it can be contracted to provide child intervention services. In 2007<sup>8</sup> we found the department did not have a process to ensure that accrediting bodies' standards aligned with its expectations for child intervention services or have agreements to access the accrediting bodies' findings and reports.

**Our audit findings**

In 2013 the department developed a selection process to evaluate and recognize accrediting bodies and contract with them to accredit agencies. Its request for proposals<sup>9</sup> set out 17 organizational and program standards<sup>10</sup> for which an accrediting body would need to demonstrate having equivalent standards in assessing an agency. The request for proposal also required a contracted accrediting body to provide to the department a quarterly written summary of accreditations completed and in progress, and a synopsis of concerns and risks identified with any specific agency. Three accrediting bodies were selected through this process.

**Improve compliance monitoring processes—implemented****Background**

As part of its compliance monitoring, the department conducts twice yearly case file reviews. A sample of active files for children receiving services in both intervention streams from each region are assessed for adherence by caseworkers to child intervention standards,<sup>11</sup> using standardized checklists. In 2007<sup>12</sup> we found no indication that the department used risk-based sampling to select files. Frontline staff in the regions received minimal feedback from this review process. We also found the department did not receive full and consistent information from the regions on their monitoring of contracted agencies.<sup>13</sup>

**Our audit findings****Targeted file reviews**

The department continues to use a statistically random method to select active files from the population of children receiving services in both intervention streams for its compliance monitoring. It also conducts additional targeted file reviews regarding:

- areas of strategic interest to the department
- trends noticed from an analysis of the regular file review process or other data sources, either occurring province-wide or within a specific region

<sup>8</sup> *Annual Report of the Auditor General of Alberta: 2006–2007*, Vol. 1, no. 7, page 82.

<sup>9</sup> RFP Number AB-2013-00743. Issue date: February 11, 2013. Closing date: March 4, 2013.

<http://vendor.purchasingconnection.ca/Opportunity.aspx?Guid=2F373362-48A6-4016-B9B7-EB66F030A4A0>

<sup>10</sup> These are core/organizational standards (5); program/service area standards (5) and standards in priority areas (6).

<sup>11</sup> The standards are 1) emergency response and safety; 2) initial client contact; 3) planning and permanency; 4) caseworker contact; 5) cultural connectedness for aboriginal children and youth; and 6) placement.

<sup>12</sup> *Annual Report of the Auditor General of Alberta: 2006–2007*, Vol. 1, no. 8, page 83.

<sup>13</sup> Licensing, monitoring and contract management of individual agencies is the responsibility of the regions. The department acts in a coordinating or oversight role.

These targeted reviews are conducted either in conjunction with the regular file review process, as supplemental questions to the checklists or as a separate, stand-alone review using additional risk-specific file samples and a separate checklist with specifically focused questions. For example, a recent review added questions specific to family violence to the checklists used during 2011 and 2012. The impetus for this review came from a 2008 study<sup>14</sup> that listed family violence as one of the top two reasons for individuals being involved in the child welfare system. The department felt this review would help it gain a better understanding of the dynamics concerning family violence and demographics in families it was involved with.

#### Providing feedback from case file reviews

Reviewers are now required to email completed review checklists to the caseworkers associated with a particular file, as well as to the caseworkers' immediate supervisors. This gives front line workers the ability to know what the reviewers' findings and comments were (both positive and in areas for development) and an opportunity to challenge or explain any noted areas of non-compliance. It also gives supervisors an opportunity to identify and work with their subordinates to improve case file practices. We spoke with caseworkers and supervisors at the five regions visited about this process. Their comments were overwhelmingly positive. Copies of checklists and emails are saved in a separate, restricted-access provincial standards monitoring database. They are not placed in case files.

#### Sharing of information between department and regions

One of the primary means the department has to regularly obtain and share information with the regions about contracted agencies is through its participation in the CFSD Contracting Group,<sup>15</sup> which meets every two months. The senior contract managers from each region are members of this group, as is a senior manager from the department. The meeting provides a forum where information relevant to the provision of child intervention services can be made available, shared and discussed. As well, each regional manager can discuss challenges they face regarding the contracting, monitoring or service delivery of agencies in their region—some which may have contracts with other regions. This is intended to create a collaborative process to identify solutions for these concerns and identify if they are shared by other regions.

The department recently created an online site where the regional senior contract managers can post summaries of the annual contract monitoring and evaluation reviews they compile on each contracted agency. A template developed by the department is used. The senior manager from the department reviews these summaries to identify any trends or concerns to take back to the contracting group for additional analysis and discussion.

The department also uses the contracting group as a means to solicit feedback and discussion on matters relevant to all regions. A recent example is the workforce alliance funding process. This impacted all regions since it required them to amend existing contracts with agencies to ensure they used any additional money for staff wages. The senior contract managers at the regions we visited all agreed the contracting group is an important vehicle for facilitating two-way communication between themselves and the department.

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<sup>14</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2008. <http://cwrp.ca/sites/default/files/publications/en/CIS-2008-rprt-eng.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> This group was previously known as the Provincial Contract Managers Committee. The new group was formed in 2012 with new terms of reference, after Child and Family Services became part of Alberta Human Services.

## Improve training processes and feedback to caseworkers on file preparation and case file monitoring reviews—implemented

### Background

In our original audit<sup>16</sup> caseworkers told us policies and standards about how files should be managed and documented were not always easy to follow and it was not always clear how they should document their work. Caseworkers also felt there needed to be improvements in how the results of case file reviews were communicated back to them.

### Our audit findings

#### Casework Practice Model

In 2008 the department implemented a new province-wide standardized approach to casework practice, the Casework Practice Model.<sup>17</sup> CPM consists of four successive stages—intake, assessment, intervention and closure. Each stage has prescribed timelines and decision points designed to require ongoing assessment if the child still needs intervention services. Supervisors monitor the status and progress of each caseworker's assigned files through the department's information system, which identifies when a file is overdue on the timeline or decision point for the particular stage it is at.

#### Case file preparation and maintenance training

All new caseworkers receive delegation training, a six-part training program delivered by the department. It comprises both online self-learning and three to four days of classroom instruction taught in Edmonton and Calgary. One module covers casework practice considerations and includes simulations and scenarios around the CPM regarding intake, case assessments and case planning. The regions we visited also provide supplemental staff training on file management and documentation, including how and when to do contact notes (which now must be entered into the information system).

All staff can access the online Enhancement Policy Manual,<sup>18</sup> which sets out policy and procedural requirements for delivering intervention services. The manual sets out expectations on when, how and where information should be recorded, including what information is expected to be included in contact notes. A chapter on casework practice incorporates the principles and timelines of the CPM.

## Improve evaluation of agencies by coordinating monitoring activities and sharing the results with the department—implemented

### Background

Contract management, and licensing of contracted agencies and their facilities, is the responsibility of regions. This work is done by the regions' various licensing and contract officers. In 2007<sup>19</sup> we found that the department's staff working in 10 decentralized functions had a problem with the timely sharing of information. We also found that the regions did not provide consistent information on agency performance to the department.

### Our audit findings

#### Sharing of information

Licensing information for each facility that provides child intervention services is now entered into the department's information system. This includes date of issue and expiry of the licence, any associated restrictions or conditions, which agency operates it, confirmation of background checks and other

<sup>16</sup> *Annual Report of the Auditor General of Alberta: 2006–2007*, Vol. 1, page 87.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.calgaryandareacfsa.gov.ab.ca/home/documents/ProgramsServices/The\\_Casework\\_Practice\\_Model.pdf](http://www.calgaryandareacfsa.gov.ab.ca/home/documents/ProgramsServices/The_Casework_Practice_Model.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> [www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/Enhancement-Act-Policy-Manual.pdf](http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/Enhancement-Act-Policy-Manual.pdf) (revised as of July 1, 2013)

<sup>19</sup> *Annual Report of the Auditor General of Alberta: 2006–2007*, Vol. 1, page 88.

required assessments being done. This information can be accessed by any authorized employee and is not isolated within a paper file at a specific location.

Other information entered into the database includes:

- copies of investigation reports into serious incidents involving children in care (filed by facility)
- contact notes from any onsite facility visits conducted by regions' licensing and contract officers
- summary details of contracts with agencies

All regions we visited have established processes to ensure licensing and contracting officers and other staff responsible for ensuring the safety of children in care meet on an ongoing basis to share information.

#### Sharing results with the department

Department staff share information through participation in the CFSD Contracting Group and use of an online document sharing site.