



**Alberta Community and  
Social Services**

# **Family Support For Children With Disabilities**

Brad Rutherford, MLA  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

I am honoured to transmit my report, *Family Support for Children with Disabilities*, to the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, under Section 20(1) of the *Auditor General Act*.

We conducted our work under the authority of the Auditor General Act and in accordance with the standards for assurance engagements as set out in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.



W. Doug Wylie FCPA, FCMA, ICD.D  
Auditor General

Edmonton, Alberta  
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## Related Reports

- [Systems to Manage the AISH Program](#) (October 2016)
- [Systems to Manage AISH Program Assessment of Implementation](#) (June 2021)
- [Income Support Program](#) (December 2019)

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# Report Highlights



The Family Support for Children with Disabilities program reimburses eligible families for family support services and child-focused services based on the assessed needs of each child and family. In 2020-2021, the Department of Community and Social Services provided **\$193 million to over 15,000 families** to fund supports and services through the program p. 2

Caseworkers must use judgment to identify and understand the unique needs and circumstances of each child and their family. **Because judgment is subjective, it creates a risk of inconsistent program delivery the department must manage** p. 5

**Eligible families should receive program supports and services based on their needs, not on who their caseworker is.** Guides, training, and oversight are essential tools to manage the risk of inconsistencies to ensure families receive similar experiences and outcomes p. 4



## We found:

- Assessment guides and service rate guides are not comprehensive p. 5
- The training program is not being delivered effectively p. 7
- Oversight processes of caseworker performance are ineffective p. 9



## We recommend:

The Department of Community and Social Services:

- Review and update guides to increase consistency
- Further develop training processes to ensure staff have the necessary skills and knowledge
- Increase consistency through effective oversight of caseworkers p. 4

# Background

The Department of Community and Social Services funds various programs and services for Albertans, including the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program. In 2020-21, the department provided \$193 million to over 15,000 families to fund supports and services through the program.

The program reimburses eligible families of children with disabilities for family support services and child-focused services based on the assessed needs of each child and family.

Eligible families can get help obtaining aide supports, specialized services and counselling. They can also get help paying for medication, footwear, clothing and respite services that give caregivers a break. The program promotes healthy development of children with disabilities and helps them participate in their communities and reach their potential.

Program staff must use judgment to assess the unique needs and circumstances of each child and family. That subjective assessment creates a risk of inconsistency which the department must manage so assessments and support planning are consistent and effective. That will ensure families receive the supports and services they qualify for—regardless of who their caseworker is.

The department reviewed the program to assess how it is working and released results in December 2021.<sup>1</sup> Inconsistencies in program delivery were a common theme. Supports and services varied depending on who the caseworker was, which should not be a factor.

<sup>1</sup> *Views of the Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) Program: strengths, challenges and opportunities for improvement—Report on the FSCD review engagement*, <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/views-fscd-program-report-on-the-fscd-review-engagement>.

# About This Audit

## Objective and Scope

The objective of our audit was to determine whether the Department of Community and Social Services has effective processes to manage the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program's assessment of needs and support planning when determining supports and services for eligible families.

We audited the department's processes to manage the assessment and support planning for the period of April 1, 2018 to March 31, 2021.

## Criteria

To determine whether the Department of Community and Social Services has effective processes to manage the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program's assessment of needs and support planning, we used the following criteria.

The department should have:

- standardized procedures and guides to complete the assessment of needs and support planning
- a standardized training program to ensure staff have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the assessment of needs and support planning
- processes to provide oversight of caseworkers executing the assessment of needs and support planning process

The *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act* and the *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Regulation* govern the program.

We established the criteria based on the department's program Policy and Procedures Manual, Delegation Training Requirements and best practices for continuous performance management.

Senior management of Community and Social Services agreed these criteria were suitable on June 11, 2021.

## What We Examined

We examined Community and Social Services' processes to manage the assessment of needs and support planning. To assess the operating effectiveness, we:

- examined publicly available documentation and data
- examined policies, procedures, guides, training modules and other relevant documentation
- examined documents and performed walkthroughs of the assessment, support planning, training and oversight processes
- held meetings with key stakeholders to understand their business operations, systems and perspectives of the assessment and support planning
- performed analytics on data extracted from the Online Learning Environment training system
- examined how adherence to program standards is monitored and reported and how identified improvements are implemented

We completed our audit on April 14, 2022.

## Conclusion

Based on our audit criteria, we conclude the Department of Community and Social Services does not have effective processes to manage the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program's assessment of needs and support planning when determining supports and services for eligible families, and improvements can be made.



### Why This Conclusion Matters to Albertans

Without improving guides, training, and oversight, the risk of inconsistent decision making will remain higher than necessary so families may not have similar experiences and outcomes for their children with disabilities.

## Summary of Recommendations

### RECOMMENDATION:

Review and update guides to increase consistency

We recommend the Department of Community and Social Services review and update its guides to promote clarity and increase consistency when staff use judgment to assess needs and complete support planning.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Further develop training processes to ensure staff have the necessary skills and knowledge

We recommend the Department of Community and Social Services further develop the program training and oversight processes to ensure staff obtain the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the assessment of needs and support planning consistently.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Increase consistency through effective oversight of caseworkers

We recommend the Department of Community and Social Services improve caseworker oversight processes to increase the consistency of the assessment of needs and support planning process.

# Detailed Findings and Recommendations

## Processes to Manage the Assessment of Needs and Support Planning

### Context

Once a family is eligible for the program, a caseworker assesses the family's needs and develops a support plan based on the assessment.

Caseworkers must use judgment to identify and understand the unique needs and circumstances of each child and their family. Because judgment is subjective, it creates a risk for the department. But management can mitigate this risk with processes to manage the assessment and support planning. Consistent and effective processes help ensure families receive the supports and services they qualify for—regardless of who the caseworker is.

### Our findings

#### Key findings

- Assessment guides and service rate guides are not comprehensive.
- The training program is not being delivered effectively.
- Oversight processes of caseworker performance are ineffective.

## Assessment guides and service rate guides are not comprehensive

To mitigate the risk of significant variation when assessing supports and services for families, staff require comprehensive assessment guides and service rate guides when judgment is required.

### Assessment guides

The program Policy and Procedure Manual<sup>2</sup> provides step-by-step instructions on how to perform the assessment and support planning. It is designed to provide a basis for consistent decision-making. Management developed six assessment guides to use in conjunction with the Manual to support consistent and effective decision-making. These guides provide information such as questions to ask and decision-making process charts.

But not all assessment guides:

- are referenced in the Manual and training modules, so staff may not know they exist or when to use them
- outline what documentation is required for support and where it should be stored

And there is no formal process to review and update the assessment guides, nor is there a process to review whether they are effective in making the assessment process consistent.

### Service rate guides

Service rate guides help staff in applying rates for typical child care costs, such as counselling, child care and various aide support. As the table on page 6 indicates, not all regions have rate guides. Rate guides help to reduce subjectivity and without them, the risk is higher inconsistent rates may be applied by caseworkers.

<sup>2</sup> *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Policy and Procedures Manual—February 2022 (Revised)*, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/b024bf72-6d8f-4e8d-9da8-0588c5680864/resource/b58f4d74-18e8-4c1c-a00b-c10730c6e9be/download/css-fscd-policy-and-procedures-manual-2022-02.pdf>.

Regional management establishes service rates for their areas, but the process is ad hoc and varies among regions. Multiple regions have not developed rates for many services, as the table below shows:

## Regions With Service Rate Guides

Service Type	North West	North Central	North East	Edmonton	Calgary	Central	South
<b>Family Support Services</b>							
Counselling	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Sibling Care	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Respite	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
<b>Child Focused Services</b>							
Respite	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Homemaker Services	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Domestic Child Care	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Child Care Supports < 13 Years	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Child Care Supports > 13 Years	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗
Aide in Child Care Facility	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Aide in Day Care for Developmental	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Personal Care Supports	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Community Support	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Behavioral Support	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Developmental Support	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓

Source: Regional Service Rates

### RECOMMENDATION:

Review and update guides to increase consistency

We recommend the Department of Community and Social Services review and update its guides to promote clarity and increase consistency when staff use judgment to assess needs and complete support planning.

## The training program is not being delivered effectively

Training is an essential part of the program to ensure staff have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the assessment and support planning, especially because these duties require judgment.

### Online Learning Environment

The training program consists of mandatory training modules for all staff. The modules are available and tracked through the Online Learning Environment. While the system can be interactive, the department is not using it to its full potential because it is not configured to:

- ensure training is completed
- test staff knowledge
- identify modules that have not been started
- identify if training was completed within the required time frame

### Evidence of training completion

The system has nine core modules and 13 modules specified as delegation training. Staff must complete 21 of the 22 modules within the first six months and the remaining module within the first year. Staff must complete delegation training modules before being able to perform an assessment of needs and support planning.

Management ensures caseworkers and supervisors complete mandatory training with the following documents:

- **Delegation training forms**—used to evidence completion of training and approval for a caseworker to perform assessment of needs and support planning. Management could not provide many of the delegation forms for a sample of caseworkers and supervisors as noted in the table below:

### Percentage of Missing Delegation Forms

Delegation Form Name	Caseworkers (25 samples)	Supervisors (11 samples)
Delegation Training Competency Achievement	64%	73%
Delegation of Authority	28%	64%

In addition, none of the samples we tested had any audit evidence that the nine core training modules were completed.

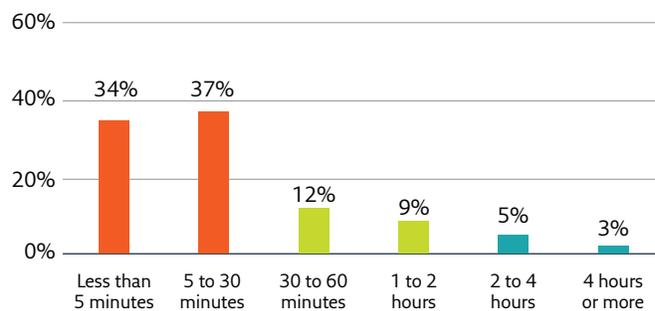
- **Employee performance agreements**—these agreements must be completed annually and highlight a plan for outstanding FSCD training. Management could not provide most performance agreements for a sample of 25 caseworkers. So we could not verify if agreements had training plans or if the mandatory training had been completed.
- **Training compliance reports**—management generates these reports from the Online Learning Environment to ensure mandatory training is completed. In the three years examined in our audit, management generated only one compliance report. It did not:
  - › have complete and accurate data
  - › have information for management to assess if training was completed within the required time frame
  - › indicate where modules had not been started

## Online Learning Environment data

Our analysis on the system’s data from management (including all staff who started training between September 9, 2015 and August 12, 2021) found:

- Only 57 department staff completed all 22 mandatory training modules in the system. Management estimates there were about 260 active staff during the period examined in our audit; 78 per cent of staff had not completed the mandatory training according to the learning system.
- Of the 2,641 program training modules completed,<sup>3</sup> 71 per cent were completed in under 30 minutes and 34 per cent were completed in under five minutes. These timelines are significantly less than the average completion time of three hours set by the department.

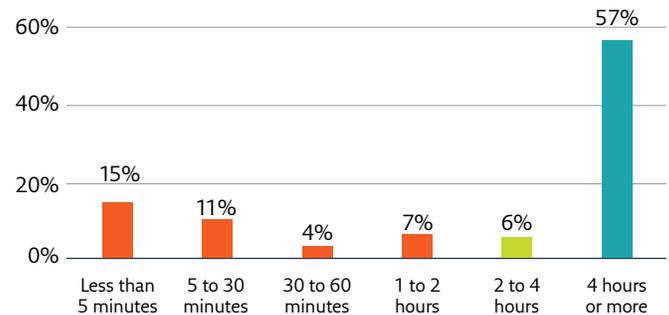
### Training Completion Time for Each Module



Source: Online Learning Environment training data<sup>4</sup>

Training Module 18 is critical—it teaches the assessment of needs process in detail and includes support planning. It outlines the expectations for the staff and answers the “why,” “what” and “how” required to do the assessment. The system shows that 131 staff completed Module 18—only 50 per cent of the estimated 260 staff. Of those who completed the module, 37 per cent completed it in under two hours, yet the estimated completion time is eight hours. In fact, the system reported that 15 per cent of staff completed the module in under five minutes.

### Training Completion Time for Module 18



Source: Online Learning Environment training data

Because staff are completing the training in the system far faster than expected, they may not have the necessary skills and knowledge to consistently perform assessments and support planning.

In addition, the department has invested resources in a system that is not being used to deliver training—which is inefficient.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

Further develop training processes to ensure staff have the necessary skills and knowledge

We recommend the Department of Community and Social Services further develop the program training and oversight processes to ensure staff obtain the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the assessment of needs and support planning consistently.

<sup>3</sup> We excluded instances where modules were completed over more than one day as we could not readily measure the total time taken to complete the module.

<sup>4</sup> Average completion time for modules is based on the lowest estimated completion time extracted from the following program documents: Delegation Training Requirements, Planning Your Learning and Module Learning Outcomes.

## Oversight processes of caseworker performance are ineffective

Oversight of caseworker performance helps to ensure consistent and effective service delivery. It also supports continuous improvements and highlights where the department is meeting standards across the province. To oversee caseworker performance, management performs file reviews, monitors compliance with essential program standards and conducts ad hoc reviews.

## File review process

File reviews are completed every quarter to assess caseworker's quality of work and compliance with program standards. The value of the file reviews depends on the extent of the review and the quality of the feedback. But there is no requirement for file review results to be shared with the caseworker. In addition, supervisors may perform quarterly reviews of files they are responsible for, meaning they review their own decisions.

## File review results

Most of the program standard compliance targets were not met, as shown below:

## Provincial Compliance with Program Standards

Program Standard	Target <sup>5</sup>	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021 <sup>6</sup>
1 Timely assessment of needs	85%	✓ 85%	✗ 74%	✗ 76%
2 Personal meeting to assess needs	85%	✓ 88%	✓ 88%	✓ 99%
3a Timely Agreement (new)	85%	✗ 76%	✗ 71%	✗ 63%
3b Timely Agreement (renew)	85%	✗ 67%	✗ 69%	✗ 77%
4 Eligibility demonstrated	100%	✗ 93%	✓ 98%	✓ 100%
5 Information supports services	100%	✗ 93%	✓ 95%	✗ 93%
6 Timely payments	90%	✓ 97%	✓ 96%	✓ 98%
7.1 Youths voice in plan	85%	✗ 40%	✗ 32%	✗ 36%
7.2 Integrated transition plan	85%	✗ 43%	✗ 42%	✗ 55%
7.3 Good transition plan	85%	✗ 72%	✗ 68%	✗ 78%

Source: program standard data provided by the department

Regions must develop annual action plans for program standards where compliance results are more than five per cent below target. Management does not have a process to monitor if regional action plans are implemented. That may contribute to the low compliance rates in the chart above.

Aggregated compliance results are to be reported to the regions quarterly; however, management could not show that it had done this.

<sup>5</sup> Action plans are not required if the program standard result is within 5% of the target. Action plans were not required for fiscal 2019-2020 due to COVID-19 impacts and limited resourcing.

<sup>6</sup> Fiscal 2020-2021 results may be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Ad hoc reviews

Management performs ad hoc reviews based on information from various sources such as: frontline staff, parent advisory committees and leadership groups. During fiscal 2019 through 2021, management conducted two reviews and had the following findings on inconsistencies in the assessment of needs and support planning:

- “There were significant regional variations in the comfort of [the file] reviewers in thinking that the amount of respite provided was appropriate.”<sup>7</sup>
- “Current specialized services policy is overly descriptive and difficult to follow. FSCD Workers infrequently have sufficient knowledge of the specifics and practice tools [such as the Manual and assessment guides] become the primary source of reference.”<sup>8</sup>
- “Dependence on the core training and practice supervision to support competency-based learning of the FSCD Worker has been insufficient.”<sup>8</sup>

The program has not benefitted from these ad hoc reviews. That’s because management has not developed plans to respond to the findings as senior management has not reviewed or finalized these reports.

Management has not used the results of the oversight file reviews and the ad hoc reviews to improve consistency in the assessment and support planning.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Increase consistency through effective oversight of caseworkers**

We recommend the Department of Community and Social Services improve caseworker oversight processes to increase the consistency of the assessment of needs and support planning process.

## Consequences of not taking action

Eligible families should receive program supports and services based on their needs, not on who their caseworker is. But because guides, training, and oversight are inadequate, families may not receive the supports and services they qualify for.

<sup>7</sup> Respite File Review performed from September to December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Multi-Disciplinary Team Process Improvement Project.

## Audit Responsibilities and Quality Assurance Statement

Management of Community and Social Services is responsible for the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program.

**Our responsibility is to express an independent conclusion on whether the department has effective processes to manage the program’s assessment of needs and support planning when determining supports and services for eligible families.**

We conducted our audit in accordance with Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements 3001 issued by the Auditing and Assurance Standards Board (Canada). The Office of the Auditor General applies Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1 and, accordingly, maintains a comprehensive system of quality control, including documented policies and procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards and applicable legal and regulatory requirements. The office complies with the independence and other ethical requirements of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Alberta Rules of Professional Conduct, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity and due care, objectivity, professional competence, confidentiality and professional behaviour.







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