

Child and Family Services Update

Mr. Speaker, taking action to improve services and supports to reduce the number of Indigenous children and youth in the care is a priority for this government. The 2019-2020 Annual Report of the Director of Child and Family Services that I will be tabling later today, shows a continued trend of overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth receiving protection and prevention services under our legislation. This is a national issue, Mr. Speaker and was raised in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children.

To advance the calls for action, the Federal Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families came into force on January 1, 2020. The Federal Act recognizes the inherent rights of Indigenous communities to provide care for their children and youth. It aligns with work that the Government of the Northwest Territories has already been doing. This includes, supporting Indigenous children and youth by helping them stay with their family and community, and reducing the number of children and youth separated from their families only because of financial, health or housing challenges.

Mr. Speaker, we fully support the Federal Act, and we are affirming our commitment to having an ongoing dialogue with Indigenous governments

and communities to ensure that our system advances the best interests of children, youth and families. We will continue to work collaboratively in supporting communities and families to preserve family and cultural continuity for our territory's children and youth.

Mr. Speaker, work is already underway in supporting the implementation of the Federal Act. The Department of Health and Social Services has added a new action into its Quality Improvement Plan to enhance practice standards that align with the Federal Act's national principles. The Quality Improvement Plan, which was released in August 2019, sets out actions that the Department is taking to best meet the needs of NWT children, youth and families. The measurement I am most proud of is that over 90% of children receiving support from Child and Family Services live with their family or in their home community.

Even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department made steady progress with the actions identified in the Quality Improvement Plan. This is important to the GNWT so we have made additional investments to add 20 new positions that ensures we have appropriate resources to help improve compliance, and support children, youth, families and foster caregivers.

Mr. Speaker, the 2018-2019 audits for the Child and Family Services were completed across the system in June. The audits identified pressure points within the regions that need to be resolved to ensure continued service improvements. The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authorities submitted their action plans in response to the audits and are actively working on addressing key areas for service in each of the regions.

The Department has provided funding to foster caregivers and foster care staff from across the NWT to participate in training on best practices on how to better support children and youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Last year, we saw a decrease in the vacancy rate for staff from 25% to 8.6%. The Department and Authorities also expanded staff engagement opportunities through all staff regular meetings, implementation of an anonymous feedback mechanism and satisfaction surveys. This allows for opportunities to better support staff, which we hope will lead to better staff retention. Having a stable workforce in Child and Family Services is instrumental to overall improvement strategies.

Because of the resources required for the GNWT COVID-19 response, the Child and Family Services system experienced delays in the ongoing completion of some quality reviews. However, the pandemic also created opportunities for the Department and Authorities to work with partners on some new initiatives. We partnered with the Foster Family Coalition of the NWT to implement a respite program to support foster caregivers during the pandemic. The Department also expanded support services for families by providing short-term financial support to purchase necessities such as diapers, food, and fuel to meet their basic unmet needs. The Department also extended support services for youth in care and young adults who would have aged out of the Child and Family Services system in the midst of this global crisis.

We will monitor the effectiveness of these initiatives, and how they might be added into the service delivery as part of its commitment towards continual quality improvement.

Mr. Speaker, each year the Department presents an Annual Report of the Director of Child and Family Services. The Report enables the Department and the public to monitor trends to assess whether the actions taken are making a difference for the well-being of NWT children, youth and families. Findings from the report help to grow a more responsive system to the evolving needs of children, youth and families.

The 2019-2020 Annual Report shows some positive indications that we are on the right track. Over the past ten years we have seen a decreasing trend in the number of children and youth under a Permanent Custody Order. We are seeing a positive movement in the strength and resiliency of communities to support families and their children. Over 90% of children and youth who received prevention and protection services were living in their family home or with a foster caregiver in their home community. This change allows for continued connections with family and community while ensuring cultural continuity, which is so important in protecting the identity of the child.

Mr. Speaker, as a government, we have a legal and moral duty to protect the well-being and safety of children and youth, and ensuring their families receive the right kinds of support. To accomplish this, I will maintain an open dialogue with Members, Indigenous governments and communities, as well as key stakeholders to explore opportunities to better support children, youth, and families.

October is Foster Family Recognition month and I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to all foster caregivers across the Northwest Territories.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.