

Annual Report from the Director of Child and Family Services

Mr. Speaker, protecting children from abuse and neglect, and providing services aimed at keeping families healthy, safe and intact, are fundamental priorities for this government. This is a priority for me personally as well. Since joining the Legislative Assembly in 2007 as both a regular MLA and Minister, I have worked to ensure our child and family services system is built around the philosophy that the best supports for children are strong and resilient families.

Our government has actively supported this philosophy through investments in early childhood development, strengthening our response to mental health and addictions, supports for on the land programming, addressing poverty, and engaging with communities in the development of community wellness plans. With the collaboration of our partners, we have also taken proactive steps to shape a better future for children, families, and communities served by the child and family services system.

Mr. Speaker, the Director of Child and Family Services, as part of their responsibility under the Child and Family Services Act, produces an annual report that details the activities undertaken over the year in this important program area. The report also outlines a number of key trends in the child and family services system over a ten- year period. This offers a transparent process to track progress and to help identify areas in need of focused attention. Mr. Speaker, later today I will table the 2017-2018 Annual Report of the Director of Child and Family Services.

Mr. Speaker, the 2017-2018 Annual Report shows a broad range of statistical data and trends relating to the number of children and families who have had

interactions with our system through either child protection or prevention services. I would like to highlight some of these trends for you which can be found in more detail in the report:

- The rate of children under 16 years old receiving services is decreasing, whereas the rate of children 16 -18 years old receiving services is increasing;
- The proportion of children removed from their home is decreasing;
- The rate of voluntary service agreements is increasing; and
- The rate of children in permanent care is decreasing.

Mr. Speaker, the report shows that over the past ten years more children are remaining in the care of their parents while families receive services. For example, in 2008-2009, only 19% of children were receiving services in the home, but in 2017-2018, 30% of children received services while remaining in the care of their families. Supporting families to keep them together is a priority, and these figures show we are successfully doing this more often now than we did before.

On April 1, 2016, as a result of changes to the Child and Family Services Act, Extended Support Services Agreements were introduced so that youth reaching the age of 19 who had been in permanent care could continue to receive needed supports and services as young adults, up to the age of 23. The number of youth taking advantage of these services has steadily grown and in 2017-2018, 78% of young adults leaving permanent custody chose to sign on to receive continued supports and services. In total there were 27 young adults who voluntarily signed an Extended Support Services Agreements in 2017-2018.

Mr. Speaker, Plan of Care Agreements are also used by the child and family services system with families in which there is a child protection concern and the family wants to work collaboratively to address the concern. In 2017-2018, 37% of all children receiving services were the subject of Plan of Care Agreements, and this number has remained steady over the past decade.

One area that has increased significantly over the past ten years, Mr. Speaker, is the rate of children and families receiving support through Voluntary Services Agreements. Voluntary Services Agreements are designed to strengthen families and support the healthy development and wellness of children and youth. In 2017-2018, 27% of all children receiving services did so through a Voluntary Services Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, over the past several years we have been focusing on building a culture of quality and improving services and outcomes for children and their families in the child and family services system by engaging in an internal audit process. The 2017-2018 Annual Report includes a summary of the most recent annual internal audit.

It is clear through our internal audit results that workers are focusing on prevention services, as we have a high volume of Voluntary Services Agreements, Support Services Agreements and Extended Support Services Agreements. Child and Family Services Workers have noted that these agreements build positive relationships with families and encourage them to reach out when they need support services.

The internal audit also shows areas where we clearly need to improve, as there were insufficient compliance rates on many audited items across the child and family services system. Interviews with lawful caregivers and children are not consistently being done in accordance with our policies and standards. Critical information for assessing the suitability of foster care services is not always completed or up to date. File organization and documentation also needs improvement.

Mr. Speaker, we acknowledge our weaknesses and we are moving towards improving the system and supporting Child and Family Services Workers capacity to effectively deliver services that meet the needs of children and families requiring child and family services.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the report includes a summary of major developments and future directions for the child and family services system. This section of the report helps to inform our residents about the work going into system-wide improvement, including the implementation of new standards and practices.

Mr. Speaker, this work is primarily guided by Building Stronger Families: An Action Plan to Transform Child and Family Services which was released in 2014 and is now going into its fifth year of implementation. The Building Stronger Families Action Plan was developed in response to an external audit of the child and family services system in 2014.

Mr. Speaker, through Building Stronger Families, we have taken action to transform and improve the quality of child and family services for our children, youth and their families. This includes the introduction of tools to support staff decision-making and case management as well as improvements to system-wide information systems. These actions, as well as other work to train and support front line staff, strengthen our quality assurance processes to ensure that continuous improvement is embedded in our child and family services system. While we have put in place the building blocks for a stronger system, I recognize that there are still significant challenges we need to address.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the work of Child and Family Services Workers. They are required to intervene in extremely difficult and complex situations, their workload is high and staff is called upon to balance the overarching need to protect children and youth from abuse and/or neglect, while paying close attention to other critically important principles and values, including the importance of keeping the child within their family or extended family.

Child and Family Services Workers need the support of supervisors, managers and senior managers, and they also rely on an array of resources, including but not limited to foster families, extended families, and specialized care providers and

supports. I would like to thank our staff for their work over the past year which is well represented in the 2017-2018 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, while there are many challenges ahead for the child and family services system, I have no doubt that we will continue to progress as a system, and as a society, to make a real difference in the lives of children, youth and families in the Northwest Territories.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.