

Foster Care Review Report



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the death of a foster child in January 2007, Janis Tarchuk, Minister of Alberta Children's Services, called for a review to examine the circumstances surrounding this tragic death, and to assess Alberta's foster care practice and standards. This review was called under the authority of section 8(2) of the *Government Organization Act*.

Review Process

On February 12, 2007, Minister Tarchuk announced the appointment of a board of experts to explore broad practice themes relating to the foster care program, which emerged through a review of specific case circumstances, program information and leading practices in Alberta and other jurisdictions. As outlined in the Terms of Reference (Appendix A), the Review Board was tasked with the following:

- Examine the practice undertaken by the Child and Family Services Authority to ensure the best interests of the child;
- Comment on the above examination of practice to identify other practices that would improve services and, if appropriate, develop recommendations that could help prevent similar incidents; and
- Examine Alberta's foster care practice and standards in relation to acceptable professional standards and evidence-based best practice and provide recommendations if areas for improvement are noted.

This report presents information regarding Alberta's foster care practice and standards and includes findings and recommendations identified and developed by the Review Board pertaining to Alberta's foster care system. The Review Board also undertook to develop a future vision for foster care in Alberta, intended to serve as a guideline for future enhancement and refinements to the foster care system. A section dedicated to this future vision is also included in this report.

Alberta's Foster Care Program

The Review Board was provided with a range of materials describing the foster care program in Alberta, including current program standards, policies, procedures and trend data. This information ensured a common level of understanding of the following components of Alberta's foster care program:

- Foster Home Screening and Approval
- Foster Parent Training
- Matching a Foster Child to a Foster Family
- Foster Home Monitoring
- When a Child Leaves a Foster Family
- Responding to Allegations in a Foster Home

- Foster Care Financial Supports
- The Alberta Foster Parent Association

Cross-Jurisdictional Comparisons

Foster care programs are developed in each province and territory to best fit the unique structure and needs of the jurisdiction. Although each program is unique, many of the processes and requirements for foster care across Canada are similar, including approval process; pre-service or orientation training and ongoing training for foster parents; respite care for foster parents; maximum numbers of children/youth placed in a home; and minimum requirements for caseworker contact with the foster family and children/youth. This report highlights key similarities and differences between foster care programs in Alberta and other provinces and territories.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the Review Board found that adequate policies, practices and standards are in place and concluded that the foster care system in Alberta is functional and meets acceptable professional standards. In its findings, the Review Board did identify some areas for improvement, including policy components that could be strengthened or clarified, as well as practice inconsistencies that could be addressed to ensure that foster children and youth continue to receive the highest quality of care possible. These findings include the following:

- There is some inconsistency in how the home assessment process is interpreted and applied across the province;
- There is a need to clarify in the policy and guidelines the role of individuals in the foster home, other than the foster parents, who provide care to foster children/youth, and associated assessment requirements with respect to these alternate caregivers;
- Alberta does not have in place specific policy or procedures relating to first-time foster parents that may allow for enhanced assessment of their capacity to foster;
- There is a lack of clarity in policy and inconsistency in practice relating to granting exceptions for maximum placement provisions, particularly for first-time foster parents;
- There are some concerns regarding the sharing and integration of information between intervention caseworkers and foster care support workers.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on the key findings identified through the review process, the Review Board proposed the following recommendations for consideration by Alberta Children's Services:

1. A provincial process should be developed to clarify expectations and improve consistency in the home assessment process.
2. Standards and training for home assessment writers and relevant staff should be enhanced.
3. The Ministry should strengthen the policy to clarify the role of alternate caregivers in the foster home relative to the home assessment process.
4. The Ministry should consider the implementation of an interim approval status for newly approved foster homes.
5. The Ministry should enhance policy to ensure that no additional children or youth, beyond the maximum number permitted, are placed in a foster home with interim approval status without an assessment of the foster parents' capacity.
6. The Ministry should amend its policies and procedures to enhance the assessment of the foster parents' ability to accommodate any additional children/youth over the maximum numbers, prior to any exceptions to the placement numbers being made.
7. The Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) and Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs) should take steps to increase compliance to policy regarding completion of the Placement Resource Feedback Report. This report should be completed and provided to the foster care support worker whenever a child or youth leaves a foster care placement, whether the move was planned or unplanned.
8. The CFSAs and DFNAs should enhance their processes for sharing, coordinating and integrating information between foster care support workers and child intervention caseworkers.

Foster Care Vision

In the course of its review of Alberta's current foster care system, the Review Board had the opportunity to reflect on a future vision for foster care in Alberta. From this discussion emerged seven broad themes, which the Review Board felt defined the foster care system of the future. These themes are intended to serve as a guideline for future enhancements and refinements to Alberta's foster care system.

The vision of Alberta's foster care system is based on the following key themes:

1. There is a clear understanding amongst the primary players in the foster care system regarding the vision, philosophy and objectives of foster care in Alberta.
2. Relevant stakeholders are consistently involved in decision making and case planning activities regarding the care of children and youth in foster care placements.
3. Information required to make informed decisions regarding the care of children and youth in foster care placements is consistently shared with relevant stakeholders in a timely manner.

4. There is a clear understanding of and respect for the roles and responsibilities of primary players in the foster care system, contributing to positive relationship development and optimal care for children and youth.
5. Alberta's foster homes consistently receive individualized support and assistance to best meet the needs of children and youth in the home.
6. Foster care policy and procedures are consistently understood, interpreted and applied across the province, contributing to a common standard of quality care for children and youth in foster care placements.
7. Alberta's foster care system invests in and supports the development of cultural competence and culturally diverse representation to ensure appropriate supports and optimal care for children and youth in foster care placements.

2. REVIEW PROCESS

Review Board

On February 12, 2007, Minister Tarchuk announced the membership and terms of reference of the Review Board responsible for assessing Alberta's foster care practice and standards. Comprised of seven individuals with extensive knowledge and experience in child welfare issues, the Review Board was chaired by Mark Hattori, Assistant Deputy Minister (Acting) of the Program Quality and Standards Division of Children's Services. While led by an assistant deputy minister, Children's Services brought together independent board members to provide a balance of internal and external expertise and perspectives. For a listing of Review Board members, refer to Appendix A.

Review Scope and Objectives

As outlined in the Terms of Reference (Appendix A), the Review Board was tasked with examining Alberta's foster care practice and standards in relation to acceptable professional standards and evidence-based best practice and providing recommendations if areas for improvement are noted. This report presents findings and recommendations of the Review Board regarding the foster care system in Alberta. During the course of its Review, the Review Board also had the opportunity to reflect on a future vision for foster care in Alberta. The last section of this report presents seven broad themes, which the Review Board felt defined the foster care system of the future.

Development of Findings and Recommendations

Children's Services department staff, on behalf of the Review Board, conducted interviews, research and gathered information regarding foster care in Alberta and in other jurisdictions from a number of sources, including current program and policy information, trend data, and leading practices compiled through various published documents and websites from other child welfare delivery organizations. This information was provided to the Review Board for analysis and deliberation. Based on this information, the Review Board identified findings and drafted recommendations to improve and enhance foster care in Alberta.

The Review Board reviewed and assessed compliance with program standards/expectations and decision-making in relation to the following:

- the foster home assessment process;
- the placement matching process;
- the ongoing monitoring, services and supports provided to the child, family and the foster family;
- the appropriateness and effectiveness of services; and
- the provincial standards and any other procedural obligations.

3. ALBERTA'S FOSTER CARE PROGRAM

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) defines foster care as a planned, goal-directed service in which the temporary protection and nurturing of children takes place in the homes of approved foster families.¹ The CWLA goes on to describe family foster care as an essential child welfare service for children and their parents who must live apart from each other for a temporary period because of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or special circumstances necessitating out-of-home care. Although some children in family foster care are eventually adopted by their foster parents, most return to their birth families.

Overview of Foster Care in Alberta

Alberta's Foster Care Program is based on the belief that a family unit and parent model is the most beneficial and desirable environment for raising a child. A foster family is a temporary placement for a child whose birth family is unwilling or unable to assume full responsibility for the child. Foster care is intended to be a temporary solution as the goal is to return the child to his or her own family as soon as possible, when it is safe to do so.

The supportive atmosphere of a foster home helps a child develop healthy self-esteem, values and behaviours. Foster parents play an important role in providing a temporary place a child in care can call home and supporting children through the hardship associated with separation and loss of family. Foster parents also ensure that a child's mental, emotional, spiritual and physical needs are met and help maintain familial, cultural, social and religious ties.

Sometimes, it is not possible for children to return to their families. In these situations, caseworkers work with the child and family to develop a plan for them to live in the best permanent home possible – this could include living with a relative, significant other, private guardian or adoptive family.

Alberta's ten Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) and 18 Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs) are mandated to deliver foster care services to meet the local priorities and needs of children, youth, families and communities throughout the province. A caseworker from a CFSA or DFNA becomes involved with a family when:

- The family seeks help because it is having difficulty protecting or caring for their child; or
- A member of the community reports his or her concern about a child's safety or well-being.

After meeting with the child/youth and family and assessing their needs, the caseworker ensures the safety of the child/youth and makes recommendations about further involvement with the family. The child is removed from the family only when all

¹ Child Welfare League of America. (2007). Family Foster Care Program. Retrieved August 22, 2007, from CWLA Website: <http://www.cwla.org>

reasonable attempts to protect and meet the child's needs within the family have failed or when the child's safety is threatened.

As of July 2007, there were approximately 2,353 foster homes providing quality care to 4,790 children and youth receiving protection services in Alberta. Foster children come from all cultural backgrounds, and can be any age ranging from newborn up to 18. They may have behavioural, emotional, learning or physical challenges. Some foster children have been mentally, sexually and/or physically abused. Others may have been abandoned, or can no longer stay with their families because their natural parents do not have the skills to look after them. But almost always, these children are hurt, confused, angry, frightened and in desperate need of care, nurturing and stability.

Foster parents are at least 18 years old and come from varying religious, cultural and racial backgrounds. Like other families in Alberta, foster homes may be headed by two parents, one parent, or a same-gender couple. Foster care may also be provided by an extended family home with several generations living together. Foster parents may rent or own their own home, be retired or employed outside of the home. Regardless of the composition of the foster family, each foster parent and family member in the home expresses a desire to work with others to care for the child or youth.

Foster parents are integral members of a team, which optimally includes the child, natural family, foster family, foster care support worker, intervention caseworker, community and agency services providers, band designate (for First Nation children), and Metis Resource Person (for Metis children). Foster parents work with the rest of the team to ensure the necessary supports and services are provided to the child or youth in their care, to keep them safe and help them develop to the best of their abilities.

Foster Home Screening and Approval

To apply to become a foster parent in Alberta, the applicant must be a resident of Alberta, at least 18 years old, free of any major illness or trauma during the previous year and must demonstrate emotional, physical and financial stability.

Interested applicants can contact their CFSA, DFNA or local recruitment agency to attend a foster care awareness session. After the foster care awareness session, the applicant is interviewed and screened for basic eligibility requirements. Following this, the applicant is required to attend orientation training, complete an application, participate in a home assessment and obtain a licence to foster.

Section 105.2 of the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* requires that any person who operates a "residential facility" must acquire a residential facility licence issued by the Minister under that Act. All foster homes in Alberta must meet strict licensing and program requirements in order for children to be placed in the home. A foster care licence will not be issued until all requirements under the *Enhancement Act* including the *Residential Facilities Licensing Regulation* and policy requirements have been met.

Before a foster home licence can be issued, the following screening activities for potential foster parents are required.

Background Checks

A criminal record search and child intervention record check are required for all applicants and all adults residing in the prospective foster home. The child intervention check determines if the applicant has been involved in any child protection concerns identified in the province of Alberta. If the criminal record search or child intervention record check reveals criminal or child protection involvement, a more detailed review of the circumstances is undertaken to assess the impact this may have on the family's current suitability to provide care.

In addition to the above background checks, applicants are also required to provide the names of three personal references who have known the applicant for at least three years. Of these, one must be a relative. At least two of the references are interviewed as part of the approval process. References are asked to describe the following:

- The applicant's personality, interests, strengths, weaknesses, reasons for wanting to foster, values and methods of discipline;
- The applicant's ability to meet the child's emotional, social, physical and intellectual needs;
- Situations where the reference has witnessed the applicant interacting with children or youth;
- How comfortable the reference would be leaving his or her child/youth with the applicant for an extended period;
- Any personal problems that the applicant might have such as financial, marital, alcohol, drug or family violence;
- How the applicant might deal with stress or crises, including whether he or she deals with problems alone or by using a support system such as friends, relatives or a church;
- In cases where the applicant has other children, how those children would respond to another child coming into the family; and
- If they would recommend the applicant as a foster parent, if they have any other concerns about placing a child/youth in the home, or if they have any other information to help make the decision.

If the applicants have school aged children, the school is also contacted to obtain information pertaining to the applicant's desire to foster.

First Aid

All foster parents must have completed and maintained a valid first aid certificate within six months of the licence being issued.

Safety Environment Assessment

The applicant must meet all requirements indicated in a safety checklist that includes specific requirements for maintaining a safe home environment, including safe storage of all medications, firearms and other weapons. A safety assessment is conducted upon initial issuance of a licence and as part of the annual licensing renewal process. In addition, the applicant must provide evidence that the foster home will be operated in compliance with applicable health and safety legislation, as well as proof of general liability insurance for the residence.

Medical Report

The applicant must provide a medical report from a physician or registered nurse, who has known the applicant for at least two years, concerning the general physical and mental health of the applicant. This report provides a medical opinion regarding the capacity of the applicant to foster.

Home Assessment

The home assessment process provides information regarding the capacity of the applicant to provide a safe and suitable home for a child or youth in foster care. The home assessment is an interactive process, completed through interviews and a family questionnaire, that addresses a variety of topics such as family history; ability and willingness to increase skills; ability to work as a team; problem solving capability; parenting skills; home safety; family finances; motivation for fostering; and ability to access resources required by the children and foster family.

Policy requires that the home assessment is conducted by an individual, employed either by Children's Services or an agency contracted by Children's Services, who is registered with the Alberta College of Social Workers, or who is assessed by the Ministry to possess the education and experience required to conduct a home assessment.

A number of components make up the home assessment process, including self-assessments completed by the prospective foster parent, separate interviews with any resident over the age of 12 and interviews with the family as a unit. Information gathered through the home assessment process is documented in a home assessment report. The process for reviewing and approving the home assessment report varies, but includes, at a minimum, approval by a manager or home assessment committee.

Caregiver Orientation Training

Caregiver orientation training is mandatory for prospective foster parents prior to a home assessment being conducted and a licence being issued (see Foster Parent Training section).

Issuing a Foster Home Licence

Once an applicant meets the program and licensing requirements to foster, a residential facility licence is issued and the applicant is approved to accept placements of children and youth into their homes. The licence is issued for a maximum of one year, and states the maximum number of children who can reside in the home. Exceptions to this maximum placement number cannot exceed the licensed capacity for the home and must comply with all licensing requirements.

In some cases, a conditional license may be issued. This means that some of the licensing requirements have not been met and a license has been issued with conditions which must be met within a specified period of time. Please note, however, that prior to the issuance of a conditional licence, the caseworker must deem that these outstanding conditions do not place a child at risk. Foster parents are provided ongoing support, through the term of the conditional licence, to ensure that the conditions are met within the specified period or sooner if possible. The foremost consideration, in these cases, is always ensuring that children are not placed at risk.

While there is no probationary period for new foster parents in Alberta, there are two levels of foster parent classification based on training and skill level (see Foster Parent Training section below).

Foster Parent Training

Foster parents are responsible for nurturing, supporting and guiding children and youth who have specialized needs and behavioural difficulties that often go beyond the everyday parenting experiences. To assist foster parents in providing quality care, the CFSA or DFNA provides ongoing training to develop foster parenting skills. The modules that comprise foster parent training are listed in Appendix B. Foster parents are reimbursed for all training-related costs, including transportation, accommodation, meals and babysitting.

Caregiver Orientation

Caregiver orientation training is mandatory for prospective foster families. This training is 24 hours in length and consists of eight, three-hour modules. Topics include child development; the special needs of children in care; duties and responsibilities of foster parents; and supports provided to foster parents. The training also explores the applicant's motivation for fostering.

Level 1 Training

All new foster parents start at Level 1. Level 1 foster parents must meet basic requirements, complete orientation to caregivers training and complete an additional nine hours of training each year. Core training for Level 1 foster parents is delivered through 31 three-hour modules which are grouped according to the following eight core competencies (for additional detail refer to Appendix B):

- A. Working with Legislation, Policies and Procedures
- B. Facilitating Transitions
- C. Identifying Influences on Child Development
- D. Guiding Behaviour of Children and Youth
- E. Managing the Environment of Children
- F. Maintaining a Child's Culture
- G. Working with the Child's Birth Family and Significant Others
- H. Managing the Fostering Experience

Level 1 foster homes are licensed for a maximum of two foster children/youth.

Level 2 Training

Foster parents can apply to be reclassified to Level 2, which would allow them to care for children or youth with higher needs, such as disabilities, addictions and behavioural issues. The required training to move to Level 2 classification consists of module-based core training courses and additional training that is individualized based on the unique needs of the child in the foster parent's care and the individual learning plan of the foster parent. Level 2 foster parents are required to attend a minimum 12 hours of supplementary training each year. Level 2 foster homes can care for a maximum of four foster children/youth.

If a foster parent requests a reclassification, it must be determined that they have completed all the core training; understand the performance expectations at Level 2; and demonstrate the competency of the higher classification, as assessed by the foster care support worker.

Matching a Foster Child to a Foster Family

When a child needs a foster care placement, all efforts are made to match the child with a foster home that has compatible strengths; the same race/ethnicity and religious background; is located in the child's home community; and allows for siblings to be placed together.

The *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* states that any decision concerning the placement of a child outside the parental home should take into account the following:

- the benefits to the child of a placement within the child's extended family;
- the benefits to the child of a placement within or as close as possible to his or her home community;
- the benefits to the child of a placement that respects the child's familial, cultural, social and religious heritage;
- the benefits to the child of stability and continuity of care and relationships;
- the mental, emotional and physical needs of the child and the child's mental, emotional and physical stage of development; and

- whether the proposed placement is suitable for the child.

In finding foster care placements for children, Children's Services seeks the most family-like setting that will best meet the particular needs of the child. Foster families participate in the matching decision and help ensure that a child placed in their home fits with their family. During the initial assessment of the foster home, the home assessment explores the foster family's interests in fostering, the characteristics of the child or youth desired by the family, and other factors that determine suitability of the home as it relates to a specific child or youth who is in need of a placement.

Before a child is placed in a foster home, the foster family is provided with information to help decide whether or not to accept the placement. This typically includes any relevant information pertaining to the child and his or her family. In most situations, pre-placement visits are arranged by the caseworker to help all parties get a sense of whether the match will be successful, and to ease the transition from one caregiver to another. In emergency situations or placements of a very brief nature, pre-placement visits may not occur.

Depending on the classification level of the foster home, there can be up to a maximum of four foster children placed in each foster home. Every effort is made to keep siblings together. When this is not possible, foster parents may be asked to assist in maintaining contact between siblings. In some cases, a foster child may be placed with other foster children in the home. Other times, the child may be placed on their own in a foster home because of their needs or the needs of the foster parents.

Under special circumstances, exceptions may be made to the maximum number of foster children permitted by the foster home licence. For example, every effort is made to place children together with their siblings; a foster home that has been licensed for two children may receive an exception to the maximum numbers to allow for three siblings to be placed together. If a child is returning to care, efforts are also made to place them in their last foster home to ease the transition and provide a familiar setting. Other circumstances that may warrant exceptions to maximum numbers include considerations for ethnic or cultural factors and placing a teenager who has a child.

Before any exception to the maximum placement number can be made, the foster home must meet all licensing requirements and be assessed to determine whether the home has the capacity, both in terms of skills and physical space, to handle additional children. Any request to exceed the maximum placement number must be approved by a Manager; the process to assess and approve exceptions to maximum placement numbers in foster homes varies from region to region. Once an exception to maximum placement numbers is approved, the foster home licence must be revised in accordance with the licensing requirements. In these circumstances, a Foster Care Support Plan, which identifies any additional supports to be provided to the foster home to assist the family in caring for additional children or youth, must be completed.

Foster Home Monitoring

Monitoring of foster homes in Alberta occurs on an ongoing basis and through a variety of activities including regular contact, annual evaluations, monitoring to standards and foster care satisfaction surveys.

Regular Contact

In Alberta, a foster care support worker is dedicated to work with each foster family. The foster care support worker is required to make contact with the foster parents, either over the telephone or in person, at least once per month, and must have face-to-face contact with the foster parents at least once every three months. These contacts and visits help to ensure that foster parents have the supports and resources they need to provide appropriate care. The foster care support worker continuously monitors and evaluates the foster home through these regular contacts and visits.

An intervention caseworker is also delegated to work with each child or youth in his or her care. Similar to the foster care support worker, the intervention caseworker contacts each child or youth at least once per month, and must have face-to-face contact with each child or youth every three months without the caregiver being present. In the case of a child/youth with Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO) status (whose sole guardian is the *Director, Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*), the intervention caseworker must have face-to-face contact every month for the first year. The intervention caseworker monitors the safety and security of the child or youth and ensures that he or she receives quality care in the foster home.

Annual Evaluations

Each foster home in Alberta is reviewed on an annual basis by the foster care support worker to ensure that it continues to meet all program and licensing requirements. This annual evaluation assesses the following:

- whether the home is meeting the needs of children/youth placed in the home;
- the supports provided to the foster family;
- the foster parent's ability to work with the caseworker, child/youth's family and involved professionals;
- the foster parent's strengths, abilities and areas for development;
- the impression of the child/youth's family and caseworkers of the home;
- the child/youth's impressions of the home;
- the foster parent's satisfaction with their role and level of involvement;
- the foster care training completed; and
- any changes to the foster parent's situation or family structure.

Findings from the annual evaluation process inform the development of foster parent learning plans and goals. Learning plans are an important tool used by foster parents to identify specific areas where knowledge, skills and abilities may be enhanced to best

meet the unique needs of the children and youth in their home. Additional supports or specific training may also be identified if the evaluation indicates areas that warrant enhancement.

Depending on the outcomes of the annual evaluation, the foster home licence may be re-issued for a one-year term, issued with conditions which must be met within a specified time period, suspended or terminated.

Social Care Facilities Review

The Social Care Facilities Review Committee is a citizens' panel, appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council, which reviews a sampling of social care facilities, including foster homes, throughout Alberta every year. Committee members meet with foster children/youth and ask about their level of satisfaction with the services being provided by the foster home. Input is also gathered from foster parents regarding the supports provided by the foster care support worker. The information gathered during these visits is compiled into individual facilities reports, a summary of which is submitted to the Minister of Children's Services. Any concerns that are heard are addressed with the appropriate CFSA or DFNA and tracked to ensure satisfactory resolution. The information summarized from individual facility reports is amalgamated into an Annual Report that outlines provincial trends and is tabled in the Alberta Legislature.

Quarterly Monitoring

Children's Services also conducts quarterly monitoring activities to assess compliance to the standards that are in place for children in care. This compliance information is based on representative file samples and reflects a range of placement types including foster care. Monitoring results indicate compliance to a number of standards relating to the safety, well-being and quality of care for children and youth in care.

On April 1, 2006, 16 new Child Intervention Standards came into effect, replacing the former Provincial Safety Standards, and reflecting legislative changes implemented with the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*. These Child Intervention Standards reflect a minimum level of service to children, youth and families; and include targets for compliance. Of the 16 Child Intervention Standards, the following three apply directly to foster care:

- Every foster parent, kinship care provider, as well as private guardianship and adoptive applicant will be provided with information required to care for the child as it becomes available (Standard 10).
- Prior to the placement of a child in foster care or in an adoptive or private guardianship placement, the home must be approved (Standard 12).
- Foster parents must be provided with training in order to understand their duties and responsibilities and to meet the needs of the children and families that they serve. The training must be equivalent to the core training set by the Ministry (Standard 13).

The final monitoring results for 2006/07 indicate that compliance targets were met or exceeded for the above standards.

Foster Care Program Survey

In addition to the monitoring activities outlined above, Children's Services also gathers feedback from foster parents across Alberta through a biennial survey. The Foster Care Program Survey provides an opportunity for foster parents to indicate their level of satisfaction with the services and supports they receive, and assists Children's Services in continuously improving the delivery and quality of services to foster parents.

Results from the 2006 Foster Care Program Survey indicate that the majority of respondents were satisfied with the services provided (85%) and felt the program has positively impacted their foster child (85%). The level of program satisfaction has increased slightly over the past survey years (80% in 2002, 82% in 2004 and 82% in 2006). Similarly, the assessment of positive impact has steadily increased across survey periods (79% in 2002, 84% in 2004 and 84% in 2006). For a more detailed summary of survey results, refer to Appendix C.

When a Child Leaves a Foster Family

Children and youth are usually placed in foster care on a short-term basis until they can return to their families or another permanent placement alternative, such as placement with extended family, private guardian or adoptive family, can be found. The child, foster family, natural family, caseworker or court may initiate the move of a foster child. There are many reasons why a child may be moved. For example, the child may return to parental care, or the CFSA or DFNA may move a child so that siblings can be together.

When a child or youth leaves a foster home placement, policy requires that a Placement Resource Feedback Report is completed. This form records the reasons why a child is leaving the foster home placement as well as the child's opinions regarding the placement, and helps to assess foster parents' strengths and areas for improvement. This form is to be completed by the child's caseworker and forwarded to the foster care support worker to address any quality of care issues that might arise.

Responding to Allegations in a Foster Home

Foster parents are expected to comply with the terms listed in the Agreement to Foster. These agreements are signed by all foster parents and include the agreement to act toward children/youth with kindness and consideration at all times; to provide quality care; to report any significant changes in the family; and to refrain from using physical discipline. Children's Services has a responsibility to follow up on and assess concerns raised with respect to a caregiver.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of a child or youth in care is paramount. Children's Services has policies and procedures in place regarding investigations of complaints regarding quality of care or potential abuse in residential facilities, such as foster homes. If there is a concern about the quality of care being provided to a child or youth in a foster home, this concern is forwarded to the foster care support worker for review and action. If there is an allegation of abuse in a foster home that may also indicate that a person has committed a criminal offence, Children's Services has a responsibility to notify the local police service and follow established protocols to conduct an investigation of the foster home. As part of the investigation process, all involved individuals are interviewed to determine whether the allegations are substantiated. If the police investigation determines that the allegation of abuse is substantiated, criminal charges may be laid by the police against the foster parent(s). Ultimately, the decision to pursue criminal charges rests with the police, and the decision to prosecute rests with the Crown Prosecutor's Office.

If there is an allegation that a child or youth has suffered emotional, physical or sexual abuse while in care, the Child and Youth Advocate must also be notified. The Child and Youth Advocate's involvement focuses solely on ensuring that decision makers appropriately consider the needs, interests and viewpoints of the child or youth.

Children's Services' responses to the findings of an investigation vary depending on the circumstances and may include the following:

- Providing a range of supports to foster parents and families to remedy identified issues, such as marriage counselling, anger management, conflict resolution, mediation services and additional respite support, if required;
- Suspending the foster home licence or issuing a conditional licence;
- Cancelling the foster home licence and closing the foster home; and
- Recommendations made following an investigation are documented in the foster home file. An assessment of compliance to recommendations is conducted as part of the annual foster home review process.

Foster Care Financial Supports

Foster parents are reimbursed for the costs associated with caring for children and youth in their homes. This includes a basic maintenance rate – a per diem that covers all of a child's day-to-day costs, including food; clothing, personal care items, general household costs, spending allowance and gifts. Foster parents also receive a skill fee – compensation for their level of expertise in caring for a child/youth. Skill fees are paid according to the foster home classification to reflect the level of training, skills and expertise.

Special rates may be negotiated for foster children or youth who have specialized needs. Special rates are negotiated with the child/youth's caseworker and the foster parents with the support of the foster care support worker. Final approval of special rates is the responsibility of the caseworker's supervisor and/or Manager.

In addition to regular remuneration, foster parents are also reimbursed for a range of other child-related expenses, including vacation allowance, camp and recreational fees, and school supplies. Each eligible child/youth in care has a Treatment Services Card, which is used to cover any medical, dental and optical expenses.

The Ministry and the Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA) work in partnership and annually negotiate basic foster care maintenance rates, skill fees and allowances. The rates vary according to the age of the child or youth and the level of training the foster parents have received. On average, Alberta provides \$1,374 per month per child or youth to help foster parents provide for their needs. Refer to Appendix D for the 2007 Alberta Foster Care Rate Schedule.

The Alberta Foster Parent Association

The Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA) is a provincial, not-for-profit association that consists of a provincially elected president and regionally elected directors. The role of the AFPA is to support foster families, advocate for the rights of children, educate the community about foster care, provide and arrange for training and social gatherings, and serve as a liaison between foster families and Alberta Children's Services.

The AFPA negotiates on behalf of foster families for fair maintenance fees, skill fees, and quality training. The AFPA offers a range of other services and benefits to its members, including the Legal Assistance Program, Conflict Resolution Program, Citation and Awards Program, quarterly newsletter, Annual Training Conference, and the Caseworker of the Year Awards Banquet.

In 1990, the AFPA formed the Foster Allegation Support Team (FAST) to support foster parents and their families who are involved in an allegation of neglect, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. FAST team members provide direct support to and advocate for foster parents, promote measures that will prevent allegations from arising, and educate foster parents about complaints of abuse and neglect.

4. CROSS-JURISDICTIONAL COMPARISONS

Foster care programs are developed in each province and territory to best fit the unique structure and needs of the jurisdiction. Although each program is unique, many of the processes and requirements for foster care across Canada are similar and include an approval process; pre-service or orientation training and ongoing training for foster parents; respite care for foster parents; maximum numbers of children/youth placed in a home; and minimum requirements for caseworker contact with the foster family and children/youth. A checklist comparing key components of the foster care system in Canada's provinces and territories is presented in Appendix E.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) produces high level standards on a variety of areas related to child welfare, including standards specific to family foster care services². The Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC), Canada's national organization dedicated to the well-being of children and youth, supports these standards as a guide for establishing foster care programs³. While the processes and requirements for foster care programs across Canada are similar, the components vary. Some of these differences or variations are outlined in a comparison document, entitled *Foster Care*, compiled by the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Directors of Child Welfare Committee and summarized below⁴.

Licensing

Alberta is one of a few provinces and territories in Canada, including Ontario and Manitoba, that requires all foster homes to be licensed, and that these licences must be renewed on an annual basis. This policy is supported by Standard 3.20 of the *Child Welfare League of America Standards of Excellence for Family Foster Care Services* (hereafter referred to as CWLA Foster Care Standards).

Reviewing Foster Homes

Most provinces and territories implement a standard annual review of foster homes. In Alberta, the annual review is also part of the ongoing licensing requirements. In Yukon, foster homes are reviewed every six months. In Nova Scotia, new foster homes are also reviewed six months after approval with a competency based annual review thereafter. In addition to its annual review process, Prince Edward Island also requires that a post-placement evaluation be conducted whenever a child is placed in a foster home.

Training

CWLA Foster Care Standard 3.34 supports offering ongoing training for foster parents. While almost all provinces and territories offer pre-service orientation for foster parents,

² Child Welfare League of America. (1995). *Child Welfare League of America Standards of Excellence for Family Foster Care Services*. Washington DC: Child Welfare League of America.

³ Peter Dudding, Executive Director, Child Welfare League of Canada. Email Communication. August 22, 2007.

⁴ Federal-Provincial-Territorial Directors of Child Welfare Committee. (2006). *Foster Care Report*. Draft.

ongoing training opportunities for foster parents vary. Some provinces, such as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, offer Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) training. This training focuses on five essential categories for foster parents: protecting and nurturing children; meeting children's developmental needs and addressing developmental delays; supporting relationships between children and their families; connecting children to safe, nurturing relationship intended to last a lifetime; and working as a member of a professional team⁵.

In Alberta, foster parents are required to complete a minimum of nine hours (Level 1) or 12 hours (Level 2) of training per year, and have four years to complete all mandatory training, which includes 31 different modules. Alberta's foster parent training program is very comprehensive, covering a range of topics intended to develop the knowledge, skills and capacity of foster parents to care for children and youth in care.

Home Assessment

All provinces and territories have in place a home assessment process as supported by CWLA Foster Care Standard 3.15. Alberta has a comprehensive guide and template for completing home assessments. Yukon requires supplements to the home study every three years; new references may be requested for the supplements.

CWLA Foster Care Standard 3.2 recommends that information is gathered regarding the health and mental health status and history of prospective foster parents. In Alberta, this standard is met through the requirement of a medical report. Some provinces⁶, such as Ontario, British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, use the Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) Home Study process for completing a home assessment. SAFE is a home study methodology for the psychosocial evaluation of prospective families; it is often used in conjunction with the PRIDE pre-service training.

Considerations for New Foster Parents

Specific requirements and considerations for new foster parents vary significantly across Canada. In Alberta, a new foster home is approved for placement of children and youth under a Level 1 classification once all licensing requirements have been met, and a licence has been issued. Some provinces implement an interim approval process that includes special provisions for new foster parents. Prince Edward Island, for example, has two assessment stages, potential and probationary, that precede formal contracting. In New Brunswick, new foster homes maintain a "novice" status for the first six months, and require additional training and a positive review before becoming a regular home. In Saskatchewan, new foster homes are classified as "intern" homes and may become regular homes after one year of fostering and with additional training.

⁵ Child Welfare League of America. (2007). Consultation and Training. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from CWLA Website: <http://www.cwla.org/programs/trieschman/pride.htm>.

⁶ Child Welfare League of Canada. (2007). *Foster Care Standards and Assessment Tools – International Scan*. Unpublished document.

Maximum Placement Provisions

In Alberta, a maximum of two foster children/youth can be placed in a Level 1 foster home and a maximum of four foster children/youth can be placed in a Level 2 foster home, with exceptions granted based on specific circumstances and approvals. In Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Yukon, the maximum number of foster children permitted in each home is four, with exceptions granted to accommodate sibling groups. In British Columbia, a foster home is permitted to have no more than six children, including the foster parents' own children. In New Brunswick, regular foster homes are permitted a maximum of seven dependents, including a maximum of five foster children. The average number of foster children per foster home in Alberta in 2006-07 was 1.96, compared to Saskatchewan and Ontario, which have ratios of approximately 2.4 foster children per foster home.

The Council on Accreditation (COA) partners with human services organizations worldwide to improve service delivery outcomes by developing, applying and promoting accreditation standards. The COA's Canadian Organizations Eighth Edition Standards proposes the following standard for placement of children in foster homes:

The home environment is considered when identifying a family for the child, and foster care homes have no more than

- a. *five children with no more than two children under age two; or*
- b. *two foster children with therapeutic needs.*

Exceptions may be made to the number of children in the home to accommodate sibling groups, or when the home is licensed to care for more children and demonstrates that the needs of every child can be met.⁷

Foster Care Compensation Rates

There is significant variation in the amount and types of financial support provided to foster parents across Canada. Inter-provincial comparisons are difficult to conduct because there are significant differences in what provinces include in their rates. Appendix F presents a table outlining basic maintenance rates in Canadian provinces and territories. This information is taken from the report entitled *Foster Care*, compiled by the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Directors of Child Welfare Committee⁸. Information contained in this report is based on information provided by provincial officials, and is updated on an ad hoc basis as rates change. It is important to note that the information presented in Appendix F may not reflect current maintenance rates for each province or territory. In addition, this information does not include additional allowable expenses or special rate provisions based on the extraordinary needs of the child/youth; these additional provisions vary significantly across Canada.

⁷ Council on Accreditation. (2006). Foster Care Services, *COA's Canadian Organizations Eighth Edition Standards*. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from COA Website: <http://www.coacanadastandards.org/standards.php>.

⁸ Federal-Provincial-Territorial Directors of Child Welfare Committee. (2006). *Foster Care Report*. Draft.

While the information presented in the foster care basic maintenance comparison places Alberta fourth overall in Canadian maintenance amounts, it is important to note that Alberta provides additional respite allowance of \$2.60 per day per child/youth, regardless of the unique needs of the child/youth. Taking into consideration this automatic respite allowance moves Alberta to second overall in Canada. However, ranking foster parent maintenance rates is challenging given that these figures do not take into account the complexity of service payments that are included and excluded by different provinces and territories when calculating their overall payment rates.

5. REVIEW FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its review of specific fostering placement, program information and leading practices in Alberta and other jurisdictions, the Review Board is of the opinion that sufficient policies, practices and standards are in place and concludes that the foster care system in Alberta is functional and meets acceptable professional standards.

In its findings, the Review Board did identify some areas for improvement, including policy components that could be strengthened or clarified, as well as some practice inconsistencies that could be addressed to ensure that children and youth in foster care continue to receive the highest quality of care possible. These findings, presented by theme below, formed the basis for the development of recommendations for consideration and implementation by Alberta Children's Services.

The Review Board also had an opportunity to reflect on a future vision for foster care in Alberta, intended to serve as a guideline for ongoing enhancements and refinements to Alberta's foster care system. Broad themes from this discussion are presented in the next section.

Foster Home Assessment Process

A Foster Home Assessment considers attitudes, values and potential to foster and is the deciding factor in determining an applicant's suitability. Alberta Children's Services has a provincial process and guidelines for completing foster home assessments, including a standard home assessment report template. Despite this, a sampling of files noted there is some inconsistency in how the home assessment process is interpreted and applied across the province.

This inconsistency is reflected in variations in both the depth and breadth of information provided in the home assessment report, as well as the degree of analysis and professional discretion applied by the assessor. There is a need to shift emphasis in the home assessment process away from simply collecting and reporting data to a more comprehensive and critical analysis of the applicant's capacity to foster.

In addition to the variations described above, the Review Board also identified a specific lack of clarity in the policy and guidelines relating to the role of individuals, other than the foster parent, who may be providing care to foster children and youth in the home. In assessing the suitability of a family to foster, it is important that clear policy is in place to differentiate between occasional, regular and primary caregivers, and to define and differentiate the degree of assessment and training required to ensure the safety and well-being of foster children and youth, regardless of changing circumstances within the home.

Recommendations:

1. A provincial process should be developed to clarify expectations and improve consistency in the home assessment process.

2. Standards and training for home assessment writers and relevant staff should be enhanced.
3. While Alberta Children's Services' policy currently addresses the need to involve anyone living in a foster home over the age of 18 in the home assessment process, the Ministry should strengthen the policy to clarify the role of alternate caregivers in the home assessment process.

Approval of and Supports for New Foster Parents

In Alberta, foster parents are classified to reflect their level of training, skills and experience. All new foster parents start at Level 1; they must meet basic requirements, complete orientation to caregivers training and complete an additional nine hours of training each year. Level 1 foster homes are licensed for a maximum of two foster children, and typically provide care for children and youth who require both developmental care and professional resources to resolve or meet the needs of a moderate disability. Foster parents may choose to remain at Level 1 for the duration of their fostering term.

Currently, if a foster parent requests a reclassification, it must be determined that they have completed all the core training; understand the performance expectations at Level 2; and demonstrate the competency of the higher classification, as assessed by the foster care support worker.

Unlike some jurisdictions, Alberta does not have in place an "interim" or "probationary" classification specific to first-time foster parents. In opening their homes to children and youth in care, many of whom have a range of challenging emotional, physical and behavioural needs, new foster parents face unique challenges and may require additional supports. This may include an enhanced assessment of the foster parents' ability to cope and manage initial placements; more frequent contact by the foster care support worker; or special conditions placed on the licence.

Recommendations:

4. The Ministry should consider the implementation of an interim approval status for newly approved foster homes.
5. The Ministry should enhance policy to ensure that no additional children or youth, beyond the maximum number permitted, are placed in a foster home with interim approval status without an assessment of the foster parents' capacity.

Maximum Placement Provisions

Alberta Children's Services' policies identify guidelines for exemptions to maximum placement numbers in exceptional circumstances, such as placing a sibling group together, taking into account ethnic or cultural factors, and considering the best interests of a child/youth who is returning to foster care. This policy, however, does not include guidelines to assess the ability, specifically, of first time foster parents or alternate caregivers to care for additional children or youth, nor does it include specific guidelines

for assessing the impact of family composition, length of experience, or needs of the child/youth as it relates to maximum placement provisions. An assessment of a range of factors impacting the collective abilities of the foster home to care for additional children or youth will increase the likelihood that caregivers will have the capacity and necessary supports to provide quality care.

Recommendations:

6. The Ministry should amend its policy and procedures to enhance the assessment of the foster parents' ability to accommodate any additional children/youth over the maximum numbers, prior to any exceptions to the placement numbers being made.

Communication and Integration of Information

Foster parents in Alberta receive primary support from their assigned foster care support worker. Foster children and youth receive primary support from their delegated intervention caseworkers. Through this model, regular contact is maintained with children and youth in care as well as with foster parents, ensuring the continued safety and well-being of children/youth while also ensuring that foster parents receive the supports they require.

Based on its assessment, the Review Board noted some concerns regarding the sharing and integration of information between intervention caseworkers and foster care support workers. One such example pertains to the Placement Resource Feedback Form, which the caseworker uses to record the reasons why a child or youth is leaving a foster home placement, including quality of care issues. A sampling of files determined that there are inconsistencies across the province in filling out the form and sharing the information with the foster care support worker. There is currently no mechanism to validate that this report is being used or completed accurately, which is potentially concerning given that issues relating to quality of care provided by the foster home may be documented.

Interviewing children and youth when they leave a placement will provide an opportunity for the child/youth to voice his or her opinion. It is important that this information be provided to the foster care support worker who has a greater understanding of the foster parents' strengths and challenges. Additional supports can then be provided to the foster family as needed.

Recommendations:

7. The Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) and Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs) should take steps to increase compliance to policy regarding completion of the Placement Resource Feedback Report. This report should be completed and provided to the foster care support worker whenever a child or youth leaves a foster care placement, whether the move was planned or unplanned.
8. The CFSAs and DFNAs should enhance their processes for sharing, coordinating and integrating information between foster care support workers and child intervention caseworkers.

6. FOSTER CARE VISION

As indicated, the Review Board found that adequate policies, practices and standards are in place and concluded that the foster care system in Alberta is functional and meets acceptable professional standards. In the course of its review of Alberta's current foster care system and leading practices in foster care, the Review Board also had the opportunity to reflect and comment on a future vision for foster care. Invited to participate in this discussion were representatives from the Alberta Foster Parent Association as well as regional experts in the foster care delivery system. This discussion was informed by the experiences and expertise of the Review Board members and invited guests, as well as by the various documents cited throughout this report. A document summarizing leading practices in the recruitment and retention of resource parents also informed this discussion⁹.

From this discussion emerged seven broad themes, which the Review Board felt defined the foster care system of the future. These themes are not directly connected to the review of Alberta's current foster care system but, rather, are provided in the spirit of continuous improvement to serve as a guideline for ongoing enhancements and refinements to Alberta's foster care system. It is important to note that, while the Review Board felt there is value in applying these themes to the entire continuum of placement options for children and youth in care, they are presented here in specific relation to foster care.

The vision of Alberta's foster care system is based on the following key themes:

1. There is a clear understanding amongst the primary players in the foster care system regarding the vision, philosophy and objectives of foster care in Alberta.
2. Relevant stakeholders are consistently involved in decision making and case planning activities regarding the care of children and youth in foster care placements.
3. Information required to make informed decisions regarding the care of children and youth in foster care placements is consistently shared with relevant stakeholders in a timely manner.
4. There is a clear understanding of and respect for the roles and responsibilities of primary players in the foster care system, contributing to positive relationship development and optimal care for children and youth.
5. Alberta's foster homes consistently receive individualized support and assistance to best meet the needs of children and youth in the home.
6. Foster care policy and procedures are consistently understood, interpreted and applied across the province, contributing to a common standard of quality care for children and youth in foster care placements.

⁹ Phil Goodman. (2007) *Strategies for Improved Recruitment and Retention of Resource Families: A Discussion Paper*. Unpublished document.

7. Alberta's foster care system invests in and supports the development of cultural competence and culturally diverse representation to ensure appropriate supports and optimal care for children and youth in foster care placements.

Theme #1: There is a clear understanding amongst the primary players in the foster care system regarding the vision, philosophy and objectives of foster care in Alberta.

An important first step towards ensuring the long-term success of Alberta's foster care system is to create and communicate a clear vision, philosophy and objectives. This is particularly important given that Alberta's foster care system involves and impacts such a wide range of partners and stakeholders. By clearly defining and communicating the guiding principles, values, intentions and goals of foster care – through a child-focused lens – those partners and stakeholders are more likely to share a common understanding and common expectations about the fostering experience. This will also help support greater consistency in foster care practice across the province. To ensure that the vision and objectives for foster care remain relevant, meaningful and effective, it is important that they be re-assessed and refined on a regular basis.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- Children and youth receive clear, consistent and well informed messages and know what to expect from their foster care placement, including why they are placed in a foster home, who decides, how they can participate, what happens next, how long they will stay, and when they can go home.
- Children and youth understand what foster care is and isn't and the potential to feel conflicted in terms of loyalty to biological parents and foster parents is recognized.
- Children and youth understand, feel comfortable in, and are supported to adapt to their foster home placement.
- Biological parents receive comprehensive, consistent messages about what to expect while their child is placed in a foster home, including if and how they can contact their child, whether their child can be returned home, who decides, and how they can participate.
- Foster parents receive comprehensive, consistent messages about what to expect from the fostering experience, including how long the child will stay, who decides, roles of foster parents versus biological parents, how to support the child's transition to permanency, and expectations for maintaining connections to the child's culture.
- Individuals who work with foster children, youth and families are grounded in a common vision, philosophy and objectives for foster care, apply consistent practices and provide consistent information about the fostering experience.

Theme #2: Relevant stakeholders are consistently involved in decision making and case planning activities regarding the care of children and youth in foster care placements.

Consistently engaging key stakeholders in the case planning process for children and youth in foster care placements is acknowledged as an important component of solid child welfare practice. In order for Alberta's foster care system to succeed in the long term, policies and procedures must be grounded in a recognition that children and youth are more likely to thrive, and foster parents are more likely to continue fostering, when they are provided regular opportunities for input into case planning decisions.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- Children, where age appropriate, and youth understand their role as partners in the case planning process and are able and encouraged to participate in decisions regarding their care and their future. As a result, they feel more connected and in control of their lives.
- Whenever possible and appropriate, children and youth are supported in their desire to remain connected to parents, siblings, extended family and significant others; have a say in identifying possible caregivers; and attend court hearings and case planning meetings.
- Biological parents, extended family and significant others understand and support placement decisions, are able to express their desire for involvement, and are included in care planning and decision making, where possible and appropriate.
- Foster parents experience being recognized and appreciated as integral members of the case planning team, are provided consistent opportunities for input into placement decisions and care planning, and have timely access to information.
- Individuals who work with foster children, youth and families recognize the important role that children and youth, foster parents and biological parents play in the case planning process and ensure that they are provided consistent opportunities for involvement and input.

Theme #3: Information required to make informed decisions regarding the care of children and youth in foster care placements is consistently shared with relevant stakeholders in a timely manner.

In order for key stakeholders to contribute to the case planning process and to provide quality care, it is important that they have timely access to information pertaining to children and youth in foster care placements.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- Whenever possible, children and youth receive information prior to placement about where they are going to live.

- Whenever possible, foster parents receive information prior to placement about the children or youth who they will be caring for, including their history; interests, needs and strengths; cultural considerations; and relationships with biological family, extended family and significant others.
- Biological parents receive information about the foster family so they know generally who is caring for their children.
- Foster parents receive timely responses to inquiries or requests for information and are provided with relevant information regarding placement decisions for the children and youth in their care, including copies of concurrent plans.
- Foster parents are aware of the services and supports available to them to ensure they are able to provide the best care possible to meet the needs of the children or youth in their care.
- Relevant information is consistently shared in a timely and transparent manner between the child or youth's caseworker and the foster care support worker to ensure an optimal placement that meets the needs of the child or youth and the foster parents.
- Alberta Children's Services has the competency and capacity to access and analyze information regarding quality of care for children and youth in foster care placements and supports provided to foster parents to inform foster care policy and practice.

Theme #4: There is a clear understanding of and respect for the roles and responsibilities of primary players in the foster care system, contributing to positive relationship development and optimal care for children and youth.

Like all partnerships, the long-term success of Alberta's foster care system requires integral members of a team to work together towards a common goal. In this case, that goal is ensuring the necessary supports and services are provided to the child or youth in the foster care placement to keep them safe and help them develop to the best of their abilities. For this team to operate as effectively as possible, it is important that its members – children and youth, foster parents, biological parents, extended family, individuals who work with the child/youth and family, band designate (for First Nation children) and Métis Resource Person (for Métis children) – share a clear understanding of and respect for each other's roles and responsibilities.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- All team members understand and support a principle of 'child-centred care' that ensures foster care services and supports are based, first and foremost, on best meeting the needs of children and youth in foster care placements.
- Children, where age appropriate, and youth understand their role as integral members of a team and feel that their opinions and desires are heard and respected.

- Barriers as a result of stigmatization and administrative rules are minimized, allowing children and youth to feel included in and connected to the communities and homes in which they live.
- Foster parents understand their role as integral members of a team and have positive relationships with their foster care support worker and the child or youth's caseworker.
- Foster parents who are involved in an Investigation, Administrative Review or Appeal feel that the process is fair, transparent and respectful, and that they have sufficient opportunity for input and participation.
- Foster care support workers and agency foster care workers understand their role vis-à-vis the child or youth's caseworker, feel they are valued and respected members of the team, and have sufficient responsibility and authority to make decisions regarding supports and services to enable foster parents to provide the best quality of care possible.
- Caseworkers have a positive relationship with and understand their role vis-à-vis the foster parents and foster care support worker or agency worker, share information with these individuals in a timely manner, and facilitate and model a collaborative approach to case planning and decision making.
- The roles and responsibilities of primary players in Alberta's foster care system are clearly defined, communicated, understood and respected.

Theme #5: Alberta's foster homes consistently receive individualized support and assistance to best meet the needs of children and youth in the home.

Each child or youth residing in a foster home in Alberta has unique needs depending on a range of factors including age, cultural background, and mental, emotional and physical stage of development. Some children and youth require specialized supports to address specific medical, psychological or developmental conditions. Recognizing that the needs of each child and youth are unique, the foster care service delivery system must be based on a 'child-centred' approach that is designed to support foster parents to meet the specific needs of children and youth in their care. This includes providing supports and training to foster families to effectively meet these specific needs.

In addition, specific training, support and respite must be available to assist in the skill development and retention of foster parents. Foster parents experience ongoing changes and challenges as do all other families and must be supported to effectively meet the needs of children and youth in their care.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- Children and youth receive individualized care to meet their specific needs.
- Children and youth with complex behavioural and psychological needs can receive specialized care in a family setting.

- Biological parents have an opportunity to provide input regarding the specific needs of their children and youth, and feel satisfied that they are receiving the care needed while in foster care.
- Foster parents receive the support and training they require to effectively meet the specific needs of the children or youth in their care.
- Foster parents feel supported in circumstances where they require mediation services, and are provided with respite options when they need a break in order to continue in their fostering role.
- Caseworkers are confident in the placement options available to meet the specific safety, well-being, health, development, cultural and community connection needs of the children and youth on their caseloads
- Foster care support workers and agency foster care workers are confident that the resources available can address the priority needs of children and youth in foster homes as well as the needs of foster parents.
- Foster care support workers and agency foster care workers have the resources and authority to provide supports and respite for foster parents based on the needs of the child, youth or foster family.
- A full range of foster care services is available across Alberta to meet the emotional, psychological and behavioural needs of children and youth.
- There is a sufficient supply of trained and supported foster homes to meet the varied placement needs of children and youth in care.

Theme #6: Foster care policies and procedures are consistently understood, interpreted and applied across the province, contributing to a common standard of quality care for children and youth in foster care placements.

To ensure that foster care services best meet the needs of children and youth, it is important to strike the right balance between designing services to meet local priorities and needs and ensuring some level of consistency in services, regardless of where the child or youth resides. The first step in achieving this balance, as noted in theme #1, is to clearly define and communicate a vision, philosophy and objectives for foster care. The next step is to ensure that the delivery of foster care services, guided by clearly defined policies and procedures, is aligned towards this common vision and objectives. This in turn will contribute to a common standard for foster care practice across the province and more seamless interaction between the foster home and the foster care system.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- Children and youth experience less ambiguity and know what to expect because they receive consistent messages about the foster care system through the duration of their time in care.
- Regardless of where they reside, children and youth in foster care consistently receive quality care at par with community standards.

- Biological and extended family members have a clear understanding of the foster care system as well as their role and rights within the system.
- Foster parents experience a consistent interpretation and application of foster care policy, resulting in the same opportunities, supports, training and benefits regardless of where they reside in the province.
- Caseworkers, foster care support workers and agency foster care workers have a clear expectation and common understanding of the objectives of the foster care placement and are able to determine the optimal placement option for the child or youth.
- Individuals who work with children, youth and foster parents have manageable caseloads, feel supported in decisions to meet the foster care goals, and work together to achieve these goals.
- Alberta Children's Services has clearly defined foster care standards in both direct and agency systems that can be measured and monitored, promoting quality continuous improvement and accountability.

Theme #7: Alberta's foster care system invests in and supports the development of cultural competence and culturally diverse representation to ensure appropriate supports and optimal care for children and youth in foster care placements.

In order for Alberta's foster care system to ensure the best quality of care possible for children and youth, it must reflect the cultural diversity of the children and youth in its care. Approximately half of the children and youth in care in Alberta are Aboriginal while others come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Given this diversity, it is necessary to have a pool of resource families reflective of the culture of children and youth in care, including their linguistic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Where a linguistic, ethnic or cultural match cannot be made between the foster child or youth and their foster family, it is important that the foster home be provided with the supports required to ensure that the quality of care provided is culturally competent.

What will this mean for stakeholders in Alberta's foster care system?

- Children and youth feel connected to their culture, supported to participate in cultural activities, and able to successfully transition to adulthood.
- Foster parents receive the training and supports required to develop cultural competence and meet the cultural needs of the children and youth in their care.
- Biological and extended family members are assured that their children and youth will be cared for in homes that accept their culture and ethnicity and support them in maintaining these important connections.
- Individuals who work with children, youth and foster parents are sensitive to and respect the importance of one's culture or ethnicity, and deliver services in a culturally competent manner that meets the multicultural needs of children, youth and families.

APPENDIX A: TERMS OF REFERENCE

Special Case Review – Death of Foster Child

Region: Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA)
Date of Incident: January 26, 2007
Date of Death: January 27, 2007

The decision to conduct a special case review was made by Honourable Janis Tarchuk, Minister of Children’s Services, on January 28, 2007.

Review Board

Chair

- Mark Hattori, Assistant Deputy Minister (Acting), Program Quality and Standards

Members

- Dr. Lionel Dibden, Medical Director, Child and Adolescent Protection Centre, Stollery Children’s Hospital
- Peter Dudding, Executive Director, Child Welfare League of Canada
- Linda Hughes, Executive Director, McMan Youth, Family & Community Services Association, Calgary Region
- Debbie LaRiviere-Willier, Associate Director, Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council Child Welfare Department
- John Mould, Child and Youth Advocate, Alberta Children’s Services
- Lillian Parenteau, Chief Executive Officer, Métis Settlements Child and Family Services Authority

Incident

An Edmonton foster child died in hospital on January 27, 2007. The child’s foster mother has been charged with second-degree murder, assault causing bodily harm, abandonment and failure to provide the necessities of life.

Purpose of the Special Case Review

Paying particular attention to the foster care system, the review will:

- Examine the practice undertaken by the CFSA to ensure the best interests of the child;
- Comment on the above examination of practice to identify other practices that would improve services and, if appropriate, develop recommendations that could help prevent similar incidents; and
- Examine Alberta’s foster care practice and standards in relation to acceptable professional standards and evidence-based best practice; recommendations will be provided if areas for improvement are noted.

Scope of the Special Case Review

The special case review will review and assess compliance with program standards/ expectations and decision-making in relation to:

- the foster home assessment process;
- the placement matching process;
- the ongoing monitoring, services and supports provided to the child, family and the foster family;
- the appropriateness and effectiveness of services; and
- the provincial standards and any other procedural obligations.

Method

The special case review will be conducted through:

- a review of the electronic and paper files (child intervention and foster care);
- interviews with CFSA staff and other relevant service providers, as required; and
- a review of best practices and current trends related to foster care.

The reviewers will co-ordinate with any ongoing police or Medical Examiner investigations.

Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy

The *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* apply to all information and records transferred to or collected, created, maintained or stored for this review.

All records submitted to the Minister, and in the custody or under the control of Children's Services, are subject to the provisions of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

Reporting

The final report will be shared with the Edmonton and Area CFSA Board, CEO and senior management and provided to the Honourable Janis Tarchuk, Minister of Children's Services.

APPENDIX B: FOSTER PARENT TRAINING MODULES

The table below outlines the 31 modules comprising Core Training for foster parents in Alberta. These modules are grouped according to eight core competencies.

Core Competency	Training Module
A. Working with Legislation, Policies and Procedures	A1 Fostering by the Act
	A2 Your Role on the Fostering Team
	A3 How to Observe, Record and Report
	A4 Safeguarding Against Allegations of Abuse
	A5 Addressing Allegations
B. Facilitating Transitions	B1 Transition Process
	B2 Tools for Transitions
	B3 Resources to Support Transition
C. Identifying Influences on Child Development	C1 Childhood Development: Baselines and Influences
	C2 Assessing and Reporting Developmental Issues
	C3 Creating a Developmental Environment
D. Guiding Behaviour of Children and Youth	D1 Parenting Our Special Children
	D2 Building a Relationship with Your New Child
	D3 The Parenting Toolkit
	D4 The Goals of Misbehaviour
	D5 Monitor, Evaluate and Report (after 1 year)
E. Managing the Environment of Children with Complex Issues	E1 Effect of Abuse and Neglect on Brain Development
	E2 Managing Attachment Issues
	E3 Working with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder and Conduct Disorder
	E4 Understanding Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
	E5 Managing FASD

Appendix B: Foster Parent Training Modules

Core Competency	Training Module
E. Managing the Environment of Children with Complex Issues (continued)	E6 Managing Substance Abuse
	E7 Suicide Awareness
	E8 Sexual Abuse
F. Maintaining a Child's Culture	F1 Making the Cultural Connection
	F2 The Aboriginal Experience: Severed Connections
	F3 Creating Connections (Stand Alone)
G. Working with the Child's Birth Family and Significant Others	G1 Keeping Family Connections
	G2 Our Role in Reducing Risks
H. Managing the Fostering Experience	H1 Communication
	H2 Managing the Realities of the Fostering Experience

APPENDIX C: FOSTER CARE SURVEY RESULTS

Summary of Results

Key findings from the 2006 Foster Care Program Survey are as follows:

- The majority of respondents that had become a foster parent within the last two years agreed that the orientation training enabled them to make an informed decision about becoming a foster parent (94%), and the assessment of their home was based on relevant information (93%).
- New foster parents were slightly less likely to agree that they had all the information they needed about the program before becoming a foster parent (82%), and the time required to approve their application was reasonable (72%).
- The majority of respondents felt that foster parent training helped them to understand a number of facets of the Foster Care program, including the temporary nature of Foster Care (91%), the role foster parents play in the transition to permanency for children (84%), and the availability of cross-cultural training (87%).
- Respondents were less likely to agree that maintenance fees (56%), skill fees (54%) and respite support (45%) provided through the program is adequate.
- The majority of respondents agreed that they were an active participant in the service planning for the child in their care (82%), and they received information on the child's school arrangements (73%).
- Respondents were slightly less likely to agree that they were provided with a number of key pieces of information at the time of Foster Care placement, including clothing, medical and dental information (64%) and special needs of the child and their family (59%).
- Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Foster Care Support Workers are courteous (94%), interested in helping (88%), listen to foster parents (88%) and knowledgeable (86%).
- Of all the attributes, foster parents seemed least satisfied with the ease of contacting Foster Care Support Workers (71%) and particularly, Intervention Caseworkers (61%).
- Most of the respondents agreed that their CFSA treated them fairly (87%), assessed their child's needs fairly (76%), and helped them care for the foster child (82%).
- The majority of respondents affirmed that an Annual Evaluation is completed every year (95%), and that during the evaluation a safety check is completed (97%), their learning plan is developed or updated (90%), they had an opportunity to provide input and feedback about the care provided in their home (90%), and they were given valuable feedback (90%).

- Foster parents of Aboriginal children largely agreed that Aboriginal culture is respected in the Foster Care program (96%), that Aboriginal cross-cultural training is available (88%) and that service support using traditional Aboriginal approaches is also available (79%).

APPENDIX D: ALBERTA FOSTER CARE RATE SCHEDULE

Please note the effective date for each rate.

Basic Maintenance per diem rates – Effective April 1, 2007

(Basic Maintenance per diem rates apply to Foster Care, Kinship Care and Supports for Permanency)

Age Breakdown	April 1, 2007
0 - 1	\$18.21
2 - 5	\$20.36
6 - 8	\$22.33
9 - 11	\$23.60
12 - 15	\$26.72
16 - 17	\$30.55

Respite Funding – Effective April 1, 2006

In addition to Basic Maintenance, all Authority Foster Homes and Authority kinship Care will receive an additional \$2.60 per day per child for respite.

Skill Fees

Classification – per diem	April 1, 2006
Level 1	\$12.50
Level 2	\$25.00

Foster parents classified as specialized will continue to be reimbursed through special rates.

Clothing – Effective April 1, 2006

Age Breakdown	April 1, 2007
0 - 1	\$25.83
2 - 5	\$36.12
6 - 11	\$47.10
12 - 15	\$65.72
16 - 17	\$67.26

Sports, Arts & Recreation – Effective April 1, 2007

Age of Child	Not to exceed per fiscal year
0 - 11	\$625.00
12 - 17	\$725.00

Exceeding this limit cannot be authorized without prior written approval from the Supervisor.

Spending Allowance – Effective April 1, 2006

Age of Child	\$ Per Week
6 - 8	\$2.44
9 - 11	\$6.10
12 - 15	\$9.76
16 - 17	\$13.42

Christmas Gifts – Effective April 1, 2006

Age of Child	\$
0 – 2	\$20.50
3 - 5	\$24.50
6 - 9	\$28.50
10 - 12	\$32.50
13 - 15	\$36.50
16 - 17	\$40.50

Camp Fees & Vacation Allowance – Effective April 1, 2007

\$425 per 12-month period.

Foster parents may claim either camp fees or vacation allowance per fiscal year (April 1 to March 31). They are not entitled to claim both within any fiscal year.

Travel and Subsistence – Effective May 1, 2007

\$0.44 per kilometre (as per government standards)

Meal	\$
Breakfast	\$8.80
Lunch	\$11.10
Dinner	\$19.85

Reimbursements for Babysitting – Effective April 1, 2007

Babysitting for the foster parents' children and the foster children

Amount
Up to \$4.00 / hour / child
Up to \$50 / day / child
Up to \$150.00 / day / home

APPENDIX E: CROSS-JURISDICTIONAL COMPARISON CHECKLIST

The table below compares key components of the foster care system in Canada’s provinces and territories and is based on information provided and/or validated by the provincial and territorial child welfare directors. Only those provinces and territories that provided information for the purposes of this comparison are reflected in the table.

	AB	SK	MB	ON	NB	NFD	NU	NWT	YK
APPROVAL PROCESS									
Foster Care Application	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Licensing Application	✓		✓	✓	Approval				
Agreement to Foster	✓	✓	Optional		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child Desired Profile	✓			✓	✓				✓
CRIM Check	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CYIM Check	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Financial Information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Medical Reference	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
References	3 (1 relative)	✓	4 or a recommendation from a local child care committee	3 for single parent 5 for couple	3 (non-relative)	3 (non- relative) And 1 (collateral)	2 (non- family)	3 references (non- relatives)	✓
First Aid Certificate	✓		Required by some agencies and specialized programs						
Safety Checklist/Safety Environment Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Home Assessment Report/Home study	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix E: Cross-Jurisdictional Comparison Checklist

	AB	SK	MB	NB	NFD	NU	NWT	YK
TEMPORARY APPROVAL STATUS								
Probationary Status – minimum of 3 months								
Begin as a “Novice” home, and become regular home after additional training, 6 months fostering, and a positive 6 months review				✓				
Begin as “Interim” home, and become a regular foster home after additional training and 1 year of fostering		✓						

	AB	SK	MB	NB	NFD	NU	NWT	YK
REVIEWS								
Annual	✓	✓ – at least	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ also every 6 months
Reviewed 6 months After Approval				✓				

	AB	SK	MB	NB	NFD	NU	NWT	YK
TRAINING								
Pre-Service/Orientation Training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	no	✓	✓
Ongoing Training	9–12 hours/year		Funding provided to licensing agency that assesses	Mandatory training of PRIDE Core Modules 1 and 9 plus ASIST	27 hours pre-service Ongoing training if			

Appendix E: Cross-Jurisdictional Comparison Checklist

	AB	SK	MB	NB	NFD	NU	NWT	YK
			and provides training on an as-needed basis	in first year of approval and any additional Core Training based on Family Development Plan	resources are available			

	AB	SK	MB	NB	NFD	NU	NWT	YK
SUPPORTS								
Amount of respite per year	\$2.60/day/child	5 days (21 days for children with disabilities)	\$2.10-\$2.22 per day per child (depending on location) Additional respite assessed by placing agency	Possibility of 38 days and more dependent on child's case plan	Assessed on an individual basis – no cap on the amount of respite	as requested – if funds are available		
Frequency of contact with home	Monthly with face-to-face/3 months	6 months	Monthly face-to-face with caregiver Monthly with child in the child's placement	At least every 3 months or more frequently as needed	1 "in person" per month			monthly
Maximum # of children per home*	2 – 4 foster children	4 foster children (if 4 pre-school kids, no more than 2 under 2 years, and no more than 3 under 2 ½ years)	4 foster children - no more than 7 total dependents – no more than 2 under 2 years - no more than 3 under 5 years) - exceptions made for sibling groups where there are more than 4 children	Regular home - maximum of 5 foster children or up to 7 children including dependents Therapeutic home - maximum of 2 children	2 (can be increased in the case of sibling groups or exceptional circumstances)			4 foster children (no more than 2 under 18 months)

Other Support Services Provided:

- Saskatchewan provides for counselling of foster parents after traumatic/severe/intense events.
 - Yukon provides funding for day care if it is part of the plan for the child. It may be part of the plan if the child's behaviour places excessive demands on the family.
 - Manitoba has additional support services provided through the licensing agencies, which can include support groups, youth care support and therapeutic services.
- * Exceptions may include the placement of sibling groups, placement in a home where the children have previously lived, placement on a short-term/emergency basis, and placement for respite. In Saskatchewan, if maximums are exceeded, the home must be reviewed and the exceptions renewed every 2 weeks

APPENDIX F: COMPARISON OF BASIC MAINTENANCE RATES

Basic Maintenance Rates		
Province/Territory	Per Diem	Monthly
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$15.81 per child (0-11 years)	\$474.70 per child (0-11 years)
	\$18.28 per child (12 and over)	\$548.40 per child (12 and over)
Prince Edward Island	N/A	\$200 per family(Level 1); additional \$100 if placement exceeds one child
	N/A	\$600 per family (Level 2); additional \$200 if placement exceeds one child
	N/A	\$1,000 per family (Level 3); additional \$300 if placement exceeds one child
Nova Scotia ¹	\$13.77 per child (0-9 years)	N/A
	\$20.02 per child (10 and over)	N/A
New Brunswick ²	N/A	\$544.67 per child (0-4 years)
	N/A	\$584.67 per child (5-10 years)
	N/A	\$656.67 per child (11 and over)
Quebec	\$17.23 per child (0-4 years)	N/A
	\$19.84 per child (5-11 years)	N/A
	\$24.89 per child (12-15 years)	N/A
	\$26.85 per child (16-17 years)	N/A
Ontario	\$25.71 per child (minimum)	N/A
Manitoba ³	\$17.57 per child (0-10 years)	N/A
	\$22.13 per child (11-17 years)	N/A
Saskatchewan ⁴	N/A	\$553.62 per child (0 years)
	N/A	\$423.29 per child (1-5 years)
	N/A	\$514.43 per child (6-11 years)
	N/A	\$579.30 per child (12-15 years)
	N/A	\$653.98 per child (16 years)
Alberta ⁵	\$18.21 per child (0-1 years)	N/A
	\$20.36 per child (2-5 years)	N/A
	\$22.33 per child (6-8 years)	N/A
	\$23.60 per child (9-11 years)	N/A
	\$26.72 per child (12-15 years)	N/A
	\$30.55 per child (16-17 years)	N/A
British Columbia ⁶	\$23.39 per child (0-11 years)	\$701.55 per child (0-11 years)
	\$26.85 per child (12-19 years)	\$805.68 per child (12-19 years)
Yukon ⁷	\$26.97 per child	N/A
Northwest Territories ⁸	\$24.00 per child	N/A

Notes

- 1: An increase in foster care rates in Nova Scotia has been scheduled for 2006/07. In addition to the basic maintenance amount reflected above, foster parents also receiving regular allowances for clothing and spending allowance.
- 2: Includes Federal Special Allowance. Foster parents in New Brunswick also receive a monthly Fee for Services (\$200.00 for regular foster homes, \$516.00 for therapeutic foster homes) based on their training, on-going training and competencies to meet the children in their care.
- 3: Manitoba provides higher basic maintenance rates than those shown above for foster families living in northern communities in recognition of the increased costs of living in these communities.
- 4: Saskatchewan provides higher basic maintenance rates than those shown above for foster families living in northern communities in recognition of the increased costs of living in these communities. In addition, Saskatchewan provides a Skill Development Fee of \$100/month per child to all approved practitioner foster families who have completed training.
- 5: In addition to the basic maintenance amount reflected above, foster parents in Alberta also receive skill fees (\$12.50 per day for Level 1, \$25.00 per day for Level 2) in recognition of their skills, abilities, training and experience.
- 6: The basic maintenance amounts reflected here apply to Restricted and Regular Family Care Homes; Specialized Family Care Homes receive an additional service payment that varies according to the designated level of care and the number of children or beds in the home.
- 7: Yukon provides higher basic maintenance rates than those shown above for foster families living in remote communities in recognition of the increased costs of living in these communities. In addition to the basic maintenance amount reflected above, foster parents also receiving regular allowances for clothing and spending allowance.
- 8: Northwest Territories provides higher basic maintenance rates than those shown above for foster families living in isolated communities in recognition of the increased costs of living in these communities. In addition to the basic maintenance amount reflected above, foster parents also receiving a monthly clothing allowance.