

Concerns and Recommendations from Yellowknife Foster and Adoptive Caregivers

January 10 2020

Hello reader,

This is a document that contains information about the current state of the child protection system in Yellowknife. It was developed after the first scheduled meeting of foster caregivers who live in Yellowknife on 12/12/19.

It must be noted that this document only takes into consideration the voices of foster caregivers in Yellowknife. To fully understand the state of the child protection system in the territory, foster caregivers from every community must be given the opportunity to voice their concerns and experiences, as well as current and former children in care, biological families of children in care, current and former front line child protection workers, and all other stakeholders in the child protection system in the Northwest Territories. When all of our voices are listened to, that is when we will begin to see important change.

Thank you,

Foster Family Coalition of the Northwest Territories

Introduction

On December 12th 2019, foster caregivers in Yellowknife were invited to a discussion with other foster caregivers about the current state of the child protection system in the city of Yellowknife. In attendance, in addition to 16 foster caregivers, were:

Colette Prevost - Territorial Executive Director, Child and Family Services (new to the position in early fall 2019)

Liliana Canadic - Chief Operating Officer, NTHSSA

Nathalie Nadeau - Director of Child, Family, and Community Wellness, NTHSSA

In the summer of 2019, the Foster Family Coalition of the Northwest Territories (FFCNWT) was granted access to the full list of foster caregivers throughout the territory for the first time since its incorporation in 2003, permitting this meeting of foster caregivers to be formally facilitated by the organization.

The reason for a meeting of foster and adoptive caregivers

In 2014, an audit was conducted by the Auditor General of Canada on the Child and Family Services, Department of Health and Social Services, and Health and Social Services Authorities in the Northwest Territories. The results of this audit were grim. Efforts were made internally to improve the system for all involved. An action plan, called Building Stronger Families, was implemented in 2014 to improve the system. This action plan included: increased accountability for front line social workers, revising standards and procedures, and maintaining auditing systems. The system was already overburdened, and appropriate resources were not provided to implement this action plan, therefore changes were improperly enforced. A second audit was released in October 2018, and the results were worse.

Many foster and adoptive parents in Yellowknife have communicated dissatisfaction and disappointment in the territory's Child and Family Services. This has been communicated within the foster caregiver community, to the FFCNWT, to child protection workers, and to supervisors and managers at the DHSSA and the NTHSSA. Dissatisfaction regarding the child protection system in Yellowknife did not just begin in 2014 - similar and consistent complaints have been made for many decades in Yellowknife. Additionally, some foster caregivers refrain from complaining about the major barriers that they face in their caregiving role, in order to protect the children in their care. Complaints are withheld due to fear of losing important supports and

land claims and self-government agreement. The Yellowknife office is a part of the NTHSSA.

The Minister of Health and Social Services is currently Diane Thom. The Director of Health and Social Services, Colette Prevost, reports to the Minister, and is also accountable for all of the decisions made by child protection workers and assistant directors.

Below, please find a brief summary of the 2018 audit by the Auditor General of Canada.

Services for Children in Biological Parental Care

In 2016, child protection workers were provided a new framework to follow, called the Structured Decision Making (SDM) system, to help them decide whether an investigation should be initiated, and if it should begin in 24 hours or in 5 days. There was insufficient training for workers to use these tools, which had the potential to cause greater harm, due to workers trying to implement them improperly. Typically, workers responded within the timeframe for investigations, however in 19% of the files audited, workers did not respond at all. The investigation must be completed within 30 days of an initial report of a child in a potentially unsafe situation. In exceptional cases and with supervisor approval, child protection workers can receive 15 days extra to complete their investigation. In 26% of cases, investigations were not completed in this timeframe.

Services for Children in Temporary or Permanent Care

66% of foster families were not properly screened in 2018. 89% of foster families did not receive a required annual review to ensure quality care. The audit claims that revised standards and supports would be finalized by March 31 2019. Many of these standards were developed and made public, however they were not implemented because the budget has not yet been approved. Here is a link to the updated policies regarding allowance for child and youth in care:

https://28c4218a-357e-474e-896b-28097208b953.filesusr.com/ugd/707478_1f2948cc32c2439eb07142aa58850361.pdf

In September 2017, there were about 167 children in the care of the Director of Child and Family Services. Child protection workers are expected to maintain communication with all children in the care of the Director. In 2014, in 59% of cases workers did not meet minimum requirements, and this increased to 88% of cases in 2018.

Notable statistics from the audit

- On average, children in permanent care move homes 12 times
- In 2016, three children were moved five or more times, and one child was moved more than 20 times
- Five files that were reviewed in which a child was moved to someone else in their biological family, showed that no background checks were completed for the adults in that home

Final notes on the 2018 audit

Trauma, abuse, and violence greatly impact the lives of children all over the world. It is safe to assume that NWT authorities care about, and want to improve, the well-being and safety of all children in the territory. However, it has been shown time and again that authorities will not take the time to listen to the people who see the struggles on the front-line; this includes child protection workers, foster and adoptive caregivers, and children with lived experience in care. Many, if not all, people who are directly affected by the child protection system should have the opportunity to contribute to positive change through discourse, and action should be taken based on their recommendations.

It has been over one year since the release of the 2018 audit. Below, please see a list of changes that have been noted by foster caregivers since the release of the audit in 2018:

- some standards and policies were updated to better reflect the changing needs of foster and adoptive families in the territory (however, it appears that there is no accountability framework to ensure workers follow these standards and policies)
- Nathalie Nadeau - Director of Child, Family, and Community Wellness, NTHSSA - has been available for foster caregivers to discuss their concerns (notably in the last five months). While this is helpful, it does not seem efficient for a Director to be providing front line support
- Colette Prevost - Territorial Executive Director, Child and Family Services - has been communicative and available for foster caregivers (she took this position in August 2019, having relocated from Ontario. She comes to the NWT with 12 years experience as the Executive Director of Ontario Child Welfare)

Meeting of Foster and Adoptive Parents - 12/12/19

- If foster caregivers ask very specific questions to their child protection worker and already have a good understanding of the system, they would receive a response from child protection workers
- The support and flexibility of support for youth aged 19 - 23 with ESSAs has improved in the past six months
- There have been more opportunities to speak and engage with other foster caregivers about their experience, such as this meeting on 12/12/19
- The FFCNWT provides good support (live, email, phone)
- Some of the recent changes in management have provided hope for important changes
- more than one foster caregiver stated that they are grateful for Thichan Than, a child protection worker. Another foster caregiver stated that they were happy with the work of Ronda Vincent, a child protection worker

Adverse experiences of foster caregivers

The 12/12/19 meeting was relatively unstructured and did not have a strict time limit. Many attendees remained in the meeting for 2.5 hours. The meeting consisted of: statements from foster caregivers, discussion between foster caregivers, questions directed to the three NTHSSA staff in attendance as well as to the FFCNWT, and recommendations from foster caregivers to make the system better.

Many topics were addressed, but this is not an exhaustive list of concerns that foster caregivers in Yellowknife have.

1. Services for children in biological parental care
2. Services for children in temporary or permanent care
 - a. General support for kids in care
 - b. Respite care and babysitting
 - c. Family vacations
 - d. Foster caregiver job security
 - e. Emergencies
3. Out of territory
 - a. Treatment
4. Aging out of the system
5. The system
 - a. Child protection workers
 - b. Finances and forms
 - c. Adoption system

at the beginning of a placement to ensure the child is the most comfortable they can be in their new home.

Recommendation - Review the current file system. There should be an ongoing file of every child in care, that can be printed or emailed to their new foster caregivers. This file would include information on the child's allergies, preferences, issues, medical conditions, favourite people in the community, and support items. It should include photos of the child that each home can show them. The file should be accessible to the child as well.

- **There are no programs during the summer or Christmas break or March break for children 13+ in Yellowknife.** Many children in care experience dysmaturity due to trauma or disability, and so they require supervision and scheduled activities every day to ensure healthy growth and their safety. Many programs and community activities that would benefit children in care 13+ are designed in a way that a caregiver needs to be with them. For example, the SPCA is a great organization for children in care to volunteer at, however it is far out of town and a caregiver has to figure out how to get them there.

Recommendation - Create day programs for youth 13+ in Yellowknife. The FFCNWT can run these programs specifically for children and youth in care with additional resources.

- **When a child is removed from their home and placed in care, often their child protection worker does not tell the school about this.** It is imperative that the child protection workers tell the child's school immediately so the school can provide necessary support, and have a better understanding of any behaviour the child may be exhibiting due to their displacement.

- Children in care, by nature, experience attachment disorders, because they are involuntarily being moved to different homes. A child in care can understand what is happening around them. **When there is uncertainty about where a child is going to stay because the child protection worker is not giving specific dates for reunification of the child with their family, this is very traumatizing for the child and it is also very difficult for the foster caregiver.** As a foster caregiver, when a child in your care asks you every night, "Where am I going to sleep tomorrow?" and you cannot provide a response with certainty, it is very hard for both child and caregiver.

Recommendation - Other than in exceptional cases such as court ordered cases, implement a timeframe (and tell the foster family and child in care this timeframe) for when a child will be removed from their foster home and placed back in their family home. Understandably, reunification does not exist in a clear and specific timeline,

- **Currently, there is no formal respite care available for foster caregivers in Yellowknife.** Yellowknife Association for Community Living (YKACL) has a respite care program, however they do not offer their services to foster caregivers. Foster caregivers feel discouraged when they are asked by their workers, “why do you need a break?” after they ask for respite support. For foster caregivers who have older children, they are often questioned as to why they need a caregiver to watch them, because the workers believe the youth are old enough to not require supervision. It is important to acknowledge that many kids who are in care experience dysmaturity due to trauma and/or disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Therefore, for some older youth, it is essential that they have a caring adult supervising them to keep them safe and support their development at all times.

Recommendation - Full-time respite care staff should be available in Yellowknife for foster caregivers. They must be trained and be able to work in the homes of foster caregivers.

Recommendation - Respite should be a crucial component of foster caregiving from day 1; when a child is put into care. This will ensure the highest quality of care from foster caregivers. This can tie into the implementation of block funding.

- **The administrative and financial burden of respite care and babysitting is high.** Foster caregivers must pay out of their own pocket for these services, and they often have to wait two to three months to be reimbursed for their babysitting or respite care costs. The compensation offered by Child and Family Services (\$5 / child for babysitting, and \$20 for respite for the household) is not enough for many respite providers and babysitters in the city. Many kids in care require a skilled adult to supervise them due to their high needs, and skilled adults are unlikely to accept this rate of pay.

Recommendation - Reduce the administration burden of respite care and babysitting by transitioning to block funding.

Recommendation - Increase the compensation for respite care and babysitting to be reflective of the current state of the economy.

- **When a child in care goes into respite care, their per diem is taken away from their primary caregiver.** This should not be the case. Per diem should be consistent and provided to the caregiver even when a child in their care is in respite, because these funds may have already been used for food, clothing, or other essentials that they use throughout the year.

Recommendation - Per diems need to be provided to the foster caregivers at all times for the children in their care.

d. Foster caregiver job security

- **The stress and time requirements of caring for the kids in their care required two foster caregivers in attendance at the 12/12/19 meeting to quit their jobs.** When a foster caregiver does not have enough support to work part-time or full-time and care for the kids in their care, this is evidence that there needs to be improvements in foster family support. The needs of youth in care must be taken seriously, and when a foster caregiver states that the child in their care needs additional support from what they can provide as a working adult, they must be taken serious, and action must be taken immediately.

e. Emergencies

- **There is typically no contingency plan in place for kids in care who require emergency placements.** This leaves kids at risk of experiencing trauma through inconsistent care and inadequate supervision. **Additionally, child protection workers have been known to withhold information about a child in care so that a foster caregiver will be more likely to take them as an emergency placement.**
- **A foster caregiver present at the 12/12/19 meeting experienced a child in their care going missing, and when they called Child and Family Services to report it, they were told to call the RCMP. The RCMP then told them this is the responsibility of Child and Family Services.** No one took accountability, and this child was vulnerable and missing for many days before any action was taken.

Recommendation: Implement rules and policies that clearly outline the responsibility for kids in care who are in unsafe situations.

3. Out of territory

a. Treatment

- **Two foster caregivers at the 12/12/19 meeting have been told this year that a child in their care is going to treatment immediately, and this has not transpired.** The youth believes they are going to treatment, and then nothing happens. This is confusing for the youth, as well as for the foster family. **Additionally, some foster caregivers have been told that a child in their care is expected to go to treatment, but when they look further into it, treatment was never a part of this child's plans.**

Practice Specialist, Guardianship and Interprovincial Desk: unknown
Curriculum Specialist: unknown
Unknown position: Brenda Ansty

Northwest Territories Health and Social Services

Director of Child, Family and Community Wellness: Nathalie Nadeau
Territorial Manager, Child and Family Services: Kristy Jones
Territorial Lead, Child and Family Services: Susan Fitzky
Territorial Manager, Placement Resources: Brian Kolback
Unknown position: Denise Bailey

Yellowknife Region Child and Family Services

Manager, Social Program: Karen Hill
Assistant Director, Child and Family Services: Liliana Canadic
Supervisors: Brenda Ansty
Family and Community social workers: SuEllen Earl, Concilia Kahonde, Thichan Tran,
Melissa Lunn, Denise Basque, Bianca Kotchea, Caihla MacCuish, Ronda Vincent,
Catherine Larose, Evert Dzemua, Lakesha Rondeau, Shelby Clarke
Family preservation worker: Noelene Byrne
Unknown positions: Arlene Lavoie-Stobbs, Crystal Craig, Fiona Wray, Mike Cooper

It is important to know the names and job positions of people in the Child and Family Services staff. This increases accountability within the system.

- Foster caregiving is a 'round the clock' duty, and emergencies can occur at any time. Foster caregivers are individuals who must maintain their mental health through self-care activities, and also sustain themselves and their family, often by working full-time or part-time jobs in addition to their caregiving duties. **Child protection workers are often not available, and their availability is inconsistent.** For example, at a point in the past, the child protection office was not open on Wednesdays. **Additionally, at times, foster caregivers have not received any response for child protection workers when they are experiencing an emergency.**
- **More than one foster caregiver claims that their workers screen their calls.** This claim is due to a pattern-based behaviour. The worker provided regular support and answered calls at a point in the past, but once the foster caregiver began to

other child protection worker(s). In many cases, the new workers are unaware of what was going on with the kids in care, or they say/do something contradictory to what the previous worker said/did.

Recommendation - Child protection workers need to improve their communication with one another, to ensure consistency across the team. Therefore, they need better training, and the internal accountability system needs to be improved. It is essential that the accountability structure is shared with foster caregivers. A review of the file system would also support improved communication, as social workers are unsure of what other social workers have filed already because the files are either filed incorrectly or not completed at all.

- **At this point in time, there is an obvious shortage of social workers, and the people that this harms the most is the children who are in care.** While there is no explicit reason why there is a shortage of workers, it seems apparent that the Yellowknife office is dysfunctional, and new workers also experience burnout quickly.

Recommendation - Implement a functional accountability framework that will ensure the workers who 'flame the fires of dysfunction' are removed from positions of authority, or fired from the office. Additionally, ensure that workers are provided with clear and understandable job descriptions and are properly trained.

- **Personnel are constantly moving positions within the HSSA. In the case of the adoption specialist and the foster care specialist, this led to these positions remaining unfilled for long periods of time.** With this constant relocations of staff, paperwork is regularly missing, and foster caregivers have to fill out the same forms multiple times. **The Foster Care specialist position remained vacant for a number of years with other people from the team only covering for that position.** The duties of this position include any tasks related to foster care and would be the contact person for the FFCNWT. It was recently filled and an initial meeting has already happened between this staff member and the FFCNWT.

- **When something goes drastically wrong, it seems as though there is never any accountability on the team at Child and Family Services.** The excuse is often that they are short staffed. For example, a child who was attending treatment in Alberta went missing for more than one week, and no one took responsibility to find them and ensure they were safe, and the excuse provided was that they were short-staffed.

- **Child protection workers have been known to tell a foster caregiver that a child in care will only be with them for a short amount of time, and then the foster**

paperwork, they lose important time to interact with the foster families and the children in care.

Recommendation - Implement block funding. Newfoundland has implemented block funding and experiences have been positive.

- **Foster caregivers have experienced having to wait two months for their worker to sign the financial documents so they can get their reimbursements.**

Recommendation - Review the current financial system, with consideration for new administration staff positions to support the financial compensation process.

Recommendation - Implement block funding.

- Workers have told foster caregivers that they cannot be repaid for certain expenses, when these expenses are clearly noted as available expenses in the current standards. **Workers are unaware of the current standards, and refuse to believe foster caregivers when they provide evidence regarding financial standards.**

Recommendation - Review the current financial system, with consideration for new administration staff positions to support the financial compensation process.

Recommendation - Implement block funding.

- **When a foster caregiver puts in more than one receipt for various expenses, often they will be returned to them in small reimbursements, instead of one lump sum.** This is an unnecessarily inefficient process.

Recommendation - Review the current financial system, with consideration for new administration staff positions to support the financial compensation process.

Recommendation - Implement block funding.

- **Receiving important documents and cards, such as a child's health care card, has proven to be impossible in some situations.** One youth, who has been in the care of the Director since they were three years old, still does not have a health care card. It is the expectation of the child protection worker to fill out these forms and ensure that the children in care have all their required documents. **This is the case with other forms as well, such as financial reimbursement forms.** However, because they also have many other tasks, this is something that is often on the bottom of the list of priorities for workers.

Recommendation - Hire administrative staff to do this work. This is not work for a certified social worker, therefore it would be optimal to hire other staff who can do this extra and essential paperwork. This is also a cost-saving measure.

- **The adoption system in the Northwest Territories is broken.** Workers are constantly being moved in and out of positions, and it seems that no one ever knows the adoption process. A family may be going through the adoption process, and then a new staff comes in and all of the past paperwork has disappeared.
- **There is a lack of process for fostering to adopt.** There are no clear decision trees and pathways for adoptions, even though this is not a new process. There needs to be accountability for timelines.
- DHSS is responsible for the final adoption paperwork. However, foster caregivers have experienced the DHSS blaming the child protection workers for the delays, and the workers blame DHSS for the delays. **There are no clear processes in place for how the two systems - DHSS and front line child protection workers - communicate and coordinate.**

Recommendation: Design clear and outlined processes for GNWT employees who work with adoptions and for the prospective adoptive parents to follow. This could include: checklists, timelines, decision tree matrixes, user-friendly forms that are PDF fillable, and updates to the website.

d. Audit / internal reviews

- There was an apparent internal review that took place in the summer / fall of 2019. Foster caregivers were not formally told this information, however it became clear that this was the case, when social workers were gone for long periods of time, and supervisors became front line workers. Many foster caregivers were completely unaware of who the worker was who worked with the child in their care because there was so much internal movement and very little communication. Internal changes have affected the positions of four known child protection workers / supervisors, and foster caregivers have not been told any information. **Throughout this process that appeared to be an interval review of the child and family services staff, no foster caregiver who was present at the 12/12/19 meeting was asked any questions about their experience with the social workers involved. Additionally, when foster caregivers provided evidence that a child protection worker was not fulfilling their job role properly, they were often ignored, or told that there would be a follow up, and there never was.**

Recommendation: Share information that directly affects foster families with foster families. Include them in the improvement plans.

- Increase the clothing allowance for kids in care. Older children and youths' clothes cost more than babies, and babies need clothes more frequently because they grow faster. Base the clothing allowance on the needs of the child and the family at the time, not just a blanket statement covering all children regardless of their current situation

System Recommendations

- Improve training and policies for child protection workers to follow, and improve internal accountability frameworks to ensure that child protection workers:
 - are fully aware of what actions are and are not permitted to be conducted by themselves (child protection workers) as well as by foster caregivers
 - always share all essential information such as medical information at the beginning of every placement
 - tell the schools when a child has been removed from their home and placed into a foster home, and inform the foster caregivers of who at the school has been told about the child's new placement so they have a school contact who knows the current situation of the child
 - inform the child in care and their caregiver of the time in which they are expected to return back to their family home so they have time to prepare for the transition
 - Provide travel letters for children in care at least two weeks in advance
 - Know who is responsible (Child and Family Services or RCMP) for taking action in cases of emergency, such as a child going missing
 - Improve communication with one another and remain consistent
- Create day programs for youth 13+ during breaks (Christmas, March break, summer break, PA days)
- Respite should be a crucial component of foster caregiving from day 1; when a child is put into care
- The internal accountability framework / system structure should be shared publicly so any interested party can access this information if desired
- Update the foster caregiver review so that the foster caregiver's child protection worker does not have access to their comments and concerns regarding them
- Create an online interface that is simple to navigate, provides opportunity to fill out forms securely online, provides a venue to connect with staff at Child and Family Services, and houses all relevant policies, standards, and information about the child protection system in the NWT
- Include foster caregivers in the Child and Family Services quality improvement plans

This document does not acknowledge the voices of current and past child protection workers in Yellowknife. This being said, foster caregivers in Yellowknife understand that child protection workers and other staff working in the Child and Family Services in Yellowknife works very hard and does good work. Foster caregivers understand that in order to make essential changes in the system, the voices of these workers must also be heard. This is true also for biological parents and families whose children are currently or have been in care. This document, however, is a place for the voices of foster caregivers to be heard, as their history has been one of voicelessness.

Foster caregivers wants to be more involved in the process. They want to know what the planned steps are next, and want to be invited to contribute to this improvement. Therefore, the final ask to not just inform Yellowknife foster caregivers of the changes that are to be made to improve the child protection system, but to involve them as an equal member of the team along the way.

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services from their child protection workers or having a child removed from their home suddenly.

What is the role of the FFCNWT?

The FFCNWT is a non-profit organization located in Yellowknife that serves the entire territory. It is 'a unified voice, dedicated to improving the quality of life for children and youth in care by supporting foster and adoptive families' well being'. To ensure that the FFCNWT is doing good work, the organization is overseen by a board of directors. The board consists of foster caregivers from each region in the territory.

The FFCNWT holds many roles and responsibilities in the NWT. It is meant to be an organization in a trusted position with foster and adoptive families, providing support and resources to those who need it, and having the capacity to advocate for and influence the systems that affect the lives of kids in care. This means that the organization must have a good working relationship with the government, as it maintains a liaison position between foster families and government bodies. Having the opportunity to facilitate conversations between foster caregivers and staff at the NTHSSA is an important role that the FFCNWT is now able to take. In the past, the FFCNWT received information from foster caregivers either directly, or through the board members who reside in the various regions in the NWT.

A summary of the 2018 audit of Child and Family Services in NWT

The Child and Family Services Act states that all children are entitled to protection from abuse, harm, and neglect. Based on the conversation between foster caregivers during the meeting on 12/12/19, it is evident that the Act is not being fulfilled due to the barriers and inefficiencies of the child protection system. In fact, evidence provided by foster caregivers shows that in many cases, Child and Family Services not only fails at protecting children from harm, but actually causing more harm to them.

Prior to 2016, Yellowknife had its own regional office, known as Yellowknife Health and Social Services Authority (YHSSA). In 2016, six of the eight territorial authorities were combined under one larger authority, known as the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA). There also exists the Hay River Health and Social Services Authority (HRHSSA) and the Tlicho Community Services Agency (TCSA). Unlike the NTHSSA and the HRHSSA, the TCSA is self-governed through the Tlicho

land claims and self-government agreement. The Yellowknife office is a part of the NTHSSA.

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Services for Children in Temporary or Permanent Care

66% of foster families were not properly screened in 2018. 89% of foster families did not receive a required annual review to ensure quality care. The audit claims that revised standards and supports would be finalized by March 31 2019. Many of these standards were developed and made public, however they were not implemented because the budget has not yet been approved. Here is a link to the updated policies regarding allowance for child and youth in care:

https://28c4218a-357e-474e-896b-28097208b953.filesusr.com/ugd/707478_1f2948cc32c2439eb07142aa58850361.pdf

In September 2017, there were about 167 children in the care of the Director of Child and Family Services. Child protection workers are expected to maintain communication with all children in the care of the Director. In 2014, in 59% of cases workers did not meet minimum requirements, and this increased to 88% of cases in 2018.

A case review is a more extensive review that needs to be done for children in temporary or permanent care. In 2018, only 19% of cases showed successful and timely case reviews were completed. A case review is expected to be done every three months.

Out of Territory

40-50 children are placed out of territory each year due to their special needs. A worker is expected to visit them every one to three months. In one case, a child went missing for one week, and because there was no supervising worker in charge, all parties involved were unsure who was in charge of this child's well-being. The excuse provided by the HSSA was that there were vacant positions, therefore no one was available to supervise this child.

The 2018 audit states that an enhanced out of territory program will be implemented in April 1, 2019.

Aging out of the System

Extended support services agreements (ESSAs) are for youth aged 19-23 who need continued support due to various needs. 65 youth in the NWT were using ESSAs at this time of the audit. ESSAs provide financial support to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing, funding for post-secondary education, and help in accessing life-skills training and counselling services. The 2018 audit states that HSSA has done well in working with people as they use ESSAs.

The System

The key changes implemented due to the damning 2014 audit, which include changes to the accountability framework and the organizational structures delivering child and family services and the new assessment tools, actually created new challenges. Overall, the NTHSSA have not clearly identified their roles and responsibilities and have not decided upon who has the authority to direct and oversee child and family services. This makes any new initiative very hard to conduct.

For example, one change included the appointment of senior officials in each of the HSSAs as assistant directors. However, they did not have the qualifications or experience necessary, and training was insufficient.

According to the 2018 audit, clarified accountability, roles, and responsibilities were supposed to be in effect by January 1, 2019.

Notable statistics from the audit

- On average, children in permanent care move homes 12 times
- In 2016, three children were moved five or more times, and one child was moved more than 20 times
- Five files that were reviewed in which a child was moved to someone else in their biological family, showed that no background checks were completed for the adults in that home

Final notes on the 2018 audit

Trauma, abuse, and violence greatly impact the lives of children all over the world. It is safe to assume that NWT authorities care about, and want to improve, the well-being and safety of all children in the territory. However, it has been shown time and again that authorities will not take the time to listen to the people who see the struggles on the front-line; this includes child protection workers, foster and adoptive caregivers, and children with lived experience in care. Many, if not all, people who are directly affected by the child protection system should have the opportunity to contribute to positive change through discourse, and action should be taken based on their recommendations.

It has been over one year since the release of the 2018 audit. Below, please see a list of changes that have been noted by foster caregivers since the release of the audit in 2018:

- some standards and policies were updated to better reflect the changing needs of foster and adoptive families in the territory (however, it appears that there is no accountability framework to ensure workers follow these standards and policies)
- Nathalie Nadeau - Director of Child, Family, and Community Wellness, NTHSSA - has been available for foster caregivers to discuss their concerns (notably in the last five months). While this is helpful, it does not seem efficient for a Director to be providing front line support
- Colette Prevost - Territorial Executive Director, Child and Family Services - has been communicative and available for foster caregivers (she took this position in August 2019, having relocated from Ontario. She comes to the NWT with 12 years experience as the Executive Director of Ontario Child Welfare)

Meeting of Foster and Adoptive Parents - 12/12/19

This was the first meeting of what we expect to be many. The point of this meeting was to clearly communicate individual and group concerns of foster caregivers. As mentioned, three members of supervisory positions in Child and Family Services - Colette Prevost, Liliana Canadic, and Nathalie Nadeau - were in attendance, so they could hear first hand the concerns of foster and adoptive parents. As Colette stated during the meeting, now that they have heard the experiences of Yellowknife foster caregivers, they cannot unhear them.

A number of the subsections below offer recommendation(s) put forth by the foster caregivers during the 12/12/19 meeting as well as by the FFCNWT. These recommendations are provided given the assumption that:

- a) All children are entitled to protection from abuse, harm, and neglect
- b) It is the responsibility of Child and Family Services to protect children in the NWT from abuse, harm, and neglect. Please see the NWT Child and Family Services Act:
<https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/files/legislation/child-family-services/child-family-services.a.pdf>
- c) Foster and adoptive caregivers are members of the child protection team, and have equal authority to child protection workers on this team, as they are also working to protect children from abuse, harm, and neglect

There is hope that with proper guidance and accountability, changes can be implemented to ensure that all future improvements that are made to the Child and Family Services system are made with the above three statements prioritized.

Positive experiences of foster and adoptive parents

The meeting on 12/12/19 began with all foster caregivers having the opportunity to state one or more positive experience(s) that they have had in their role as a foster caregiver. Approximately half of the attendees provide the answer 'pass'. The responses that were heard from the others were:

- Regardless of the bad experiences, they still choose to continue fostering
- Camp Connections (a summer camp run by the FFCNWT) is a good program for children in care
- YWCA offers a good after school program that provides support in caring for children in care
- The availability of bus passes and pool passes is supportive

- If foster caregivers ask very specific questions to their child protection worker and already have a good understanding of the system, they would receive a response from child protection workers
- The support and flexibility of support for youth aged 19 - 23 with ESSAs has improved in the past six months
- There have been more opportunities to speak and engage with other foster caregivers about their experience, such as this meeting on 12/12/19
- The FFCNWT provides good support (live, email, phone)
- Some of the recent changes in management have provided hope for important changes
- more than one foster caregiver stated that they are grateful for Thichan Than, a child protection worker. Another foster caregiver stated that they were happy with the work of Ronda Vincent, a child protection worker

Adverse experiences of foster caregivers

The 12/12/19 meeting was relatively unstructured and did not have a strict time limit. Many attendees remained in the meeting for 2.5 hours. The meeting consisted of: statements from foster caregivers, discussion between foster caregivers, questions directed to the three NTHSSA staff in attendance as well as to the FFCNWT, and recommendations from foster caregivers to make the system better.

Many topics were addressed, but this is not an exhaustive list of concerns that foster caregivers in Yellowknife have.

1. Services for children in biological parental care
2. Services for children in temporary or permanent care
 - a. General support for kids in care
 - b. Respite care and babysitting
 - c. Family vacations
 - d. Foster caregiver job security
 - e. Emergencies
3. Out of territory
 - a. Treatment
4. Aging out of the system
5. The system
 - a. Child protection workers
 - b. Finances and forms
 - c. Adoption system

d. Audit / internal reviews

1. Services for children in biological parental care

- **There are very few services available for biological parents to receive essential supports that ensure they can care for their children when they are brought back into their home.** Unfortunately, this leads to family home breakdowns, which negatively impacts the children.

Recommendation - Child and Family Services needs to allocate specific human and financial resources to provide support in biological family homes. Children typically want to live with their biological parents, and if this is possible with extra support, this support should be available for the sake of the children. For example, providing an in-home worker a few times a week, or offering mandatory parenting classes in which childcare and transportation is provided.

- **When a family is reunified, child protection workers do not often check up on the children to ensure they are safe and healthy.** While it is hopeful to believe that the biological family has developed skills to provide a safe home for their children, this is not always the case, and the children may be at risk for additional harm.

Recommendation - Child and Family Services needs to allocate specific human and financial resources to provide support in biological family homes.

2. Services for children in temporary or permanent care

a. General support for kids in care

- **Medical files of children in care are not always shared with foster caregivers at the time when the children are placed with the foster caregivers.** Almost all kids in care need specialized early intervention support to help them thrive, and without knowing their medical history, an added barrier exists to access this early intervention support.

Recommendation - Important information such as medical information should be made mandatory documents to provide at the beginning of every placement.

- When a child is placed in a new home, often the foster caregivers are given very little information about the child, and they have to start from scratch - learning about the child's likes and dislikes, their allergies, their community mentors and favourite teachers. **Foster caregivers need access to this important information about a child**

at the beginning of a placement to ensure the child is the most comfortable they can be in their new home.

Recommendation - Review the current file system. There should be an ongoing file of every child in care, that can be printed or emailed to their new foster caregivers. This file would include information on the child's allergies, preferences, issues, medical conditions, favourite people in the community, and support items. It should include photos of the child that each home can show them. The file should be accessible to the child as well.

- **There are no programs during the summer or Christmas break or March break for children 13+ in Yellowknife.** Many children in care experience dysmaturity due to trauma or disability, and so they require supervision and scheduled activities every day to ensure healthy growth and their safety. Many programs and community activities that would benefit children in care 13+ are designed in a way that a caregiver needs to be with them. For example, the SPCA is a great organization for children in care to volunteer at, however it is far out of town and a caregiver has to figure out how to get them there.

Recommendation - Create day programs for youth 13+ in Yellowknife. The FFCNWT can run these programs specifically for children and youth in care with additional resources.

- **When a child is removed from their home and placed in care, often their child protection worker does not tell the school about this.** It is imperative that the child protection workers tell the child's school immediately so the school can provide necessary support, and have a better understanding of any behaviour the child may be exhibiting due to their displacement.

- Children in care, by nature, experience attachment disorders, because they are involuntarily being moved to different homes. A child in care can understand what is happening around them. **When there is uncertainty about where a child is going to stay because the child protection worker is not giving specific dates for reunification of the child with their family, this is very traumatizing for the child and it is also very difficult for the foster caregiver.** As a foster caregiver, when a child in your care asks you every night, "Where am I going to sleep tomorrow?" and you cannot provide a response with certainty, it is very hard for both child and caregiver.

Recommendation - Other than in exceptional cases such as court ordered cases, implement a timeframe (and tell the foster family and child in care this timeframe) for when a child will be removed from their foster home and placed back in their family home. Understandably, reunification does not exist in a clear and specific timeline,

however setting reasonable minimums is realistic. This is a process that can be dramatically less chaotic than workers make it out to be. There is room for upholding accountability and enforcing boundaries and timelines in this process.

- **The number of children placed in one foster home is unmanageable.** Many foster homes have 3+ children living permanently or temporarily in care. Even in these cases, foster caregivers may be guilty by their worker about why they are not taking any more placements. Many foster caregivers state that their boundaries in regards to the number of children they can take into their home are not respected by child protection workers.
- **There is no support in place for sibling groups who are in different households to get together.** It is very meaningful for sibling groups to maintain relationships with one another, and effort needs to be made to do so, especially for those who are in various homes.
- **There is no essential training for foster caregivers to take when they begin fostering.** It is important that foster caregivers are properly educated on what fostering can and will entail in the Northwest Territories. It is also very important for the safety, comfort, and well-being of the child in care to be living with trained caregivers who understand them.

Recommendation - Implement essential training for all new foster caregivers, and provide regular 'update training' for foster caregivers each year. This training should include information on cultural competence, understanding disability, and caregiving for children who have experienced trauma.

- **The Northwest Territories does not have a Child's Commissioner and Advocate.** This position is essential in ensuring the voices of every child in the territory is heard.

Recommendation - Introduce a Child's Commissioner and Advocate in the Northwest Territories, that works independent from the GNWT. The roles of this position must include: 1) champion the rights of children, 2) ensure the voices of children and youth are represented in policy and programs, 3) support families in navigating programs and services, 4) streamline and improve government programs and services, and 5) enhance further collaborations between community and government.

b. Respite care and babysitting

- **Currently, there is no formal respite care available for foster caregivers in Yellowknife.** Yellowknife Association for Community Living (YKACL) has a respite care program, however they do not offer their services to foster caregivers. Foster caregivers feel discouraged when they are asked by their workers, “why do you need a break?” after they ask for respite support. For foster caregivers who have older children, they are often questioned as to why they need a caregiver to watch them, because the workers believe the youth are old enough to not require supervision. It is important to acknowledge that many kids who are in care experience dysmaturity due to trauma and/or disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Therefore, for some older youth, it is essential that they have a caring adult supervising them to keep them safe and support their development at all times.

Recommendation - Full-time respite care staff should be available in Yellowknife for foster caregivers. They must be trained and be able to work in the homes of foster caregivers.

Recommendation - Respite should be a crucial component of foster caregiving from day 1; when a child is put into care. This will ensure the highest quality of care from foster caregivers. This can tie into the implementation of block funding.

- **The administrative and financial burden of respite care and babysitting is high.** Foster caregivers must pay out of their own pocket for these services, and they often have to wait two to three months to be reimbursed for their babysitting or respite care costs. The compensation offered by Child and Family Services (\$5 / child for babysitting, and \$20 for respite for the household) is not enough for many respite providers and babysitters in the city. Many kids in care require a skilled adult to supervise them due to their high needs, and skilled adults are unlikely to accept this rate of pay.

Recommendation - Reduce the administration burden of respite care and babysitting by transitioning to block funding.

Recommendation - Increase the compensation for respite care and babysitting to be reflective of the current state of the economy.

- **When a child in care goes into respite care, their per diem is taken away from their primary caregiver.** This should not be the case. Per diem should be consistent and provided to the caregiver even when a child in their care is in respite, because these funds may have already been used for food, clothing, or other essentials that they use throughout the year.

Recommendation - Per diems need to be provided to the foster caregivers at all times for the children in their care.