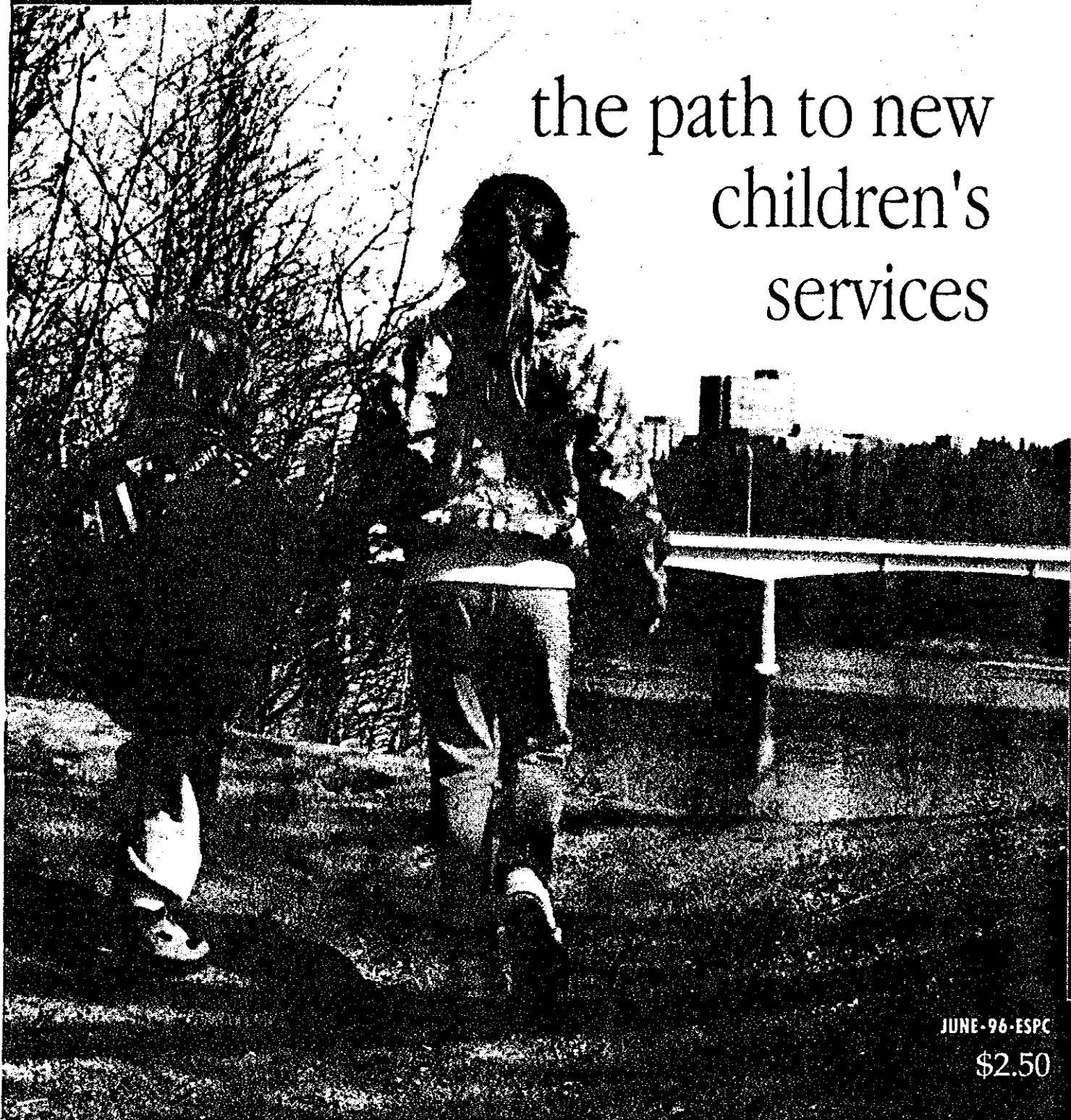


Alberta's Social Issues Magazine

# FIRST READING

the path to new  
children's  
services



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SOCIAL PLANNING

c o u n c i l

First Reading is published four times a year by the Edmonton Social Planning Council. The Council is an independent, not-for-profit organization, whose activities include social research, policy analysis, and advocacy.

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## Vision

A community where all people have a commitment to social justice and shared responsibility as the foundation for community well being.

## Mission

Responding to the changing political and social environment, the Edmonton Social Planning Council will:

- Identify trends and emerging social issues
- Create opportunities to debate and address social issues
- Initiate and support community action through research, coordination and advocacy

When the Edmonton Social Planning Council chose its priority activities for 1996, advocacy related to the reform of Children's Services leapt out as an obvious priority. This reform is one of the most significant social developments of the 1990s in Alberta and, despite deeply held concerns, most Albertans with even a peripheral interest in children have invested at least some energy in trying to make the process work. Depending on your view of the track record of the provincial government in social policy, you may view this as a legitimate exercise in community development or sheer folly. Folly or not, the Edmonton Social Planning Council advocacy efforts will recognize the legitimacy of the exercise, flawed though it may be, and try to advocate in a manner that will produce a better system for children at the end of the day.

To that end, we have published this special "Child Welfare" edition of *First Reading*, which we hope will bring not just "heat" but "light" to the issue. We present for your consideration some articles which are very critical of the reform process such as Bernd Walter's "Perverted Principles," but we also present articles by others who take a more optimistic view, such as Region 10 (Edmonton) Steering Committee member and University of Calgary Professor Margot Herbert, people we know to be committed to the process, but who we also know to be unafraid to speak up when it's the right thing to do. We debated, but ultimately decided not to ask for a contribution from Children's Services Commissioner John Lackey or other government representatives. This is not out of a lack of interest or a lack of respect for what they have to say, but is merely based on the view that they have ample opportunities to make their views known.

Our greatest challenge as we sought out authors was finding people who had an interest and some legitimate involvement, but who were also able and willing to write an article that was in any way critical of the government. I wonder if we can really consider any community development process legitimate when so many of the most knowledgeable people are afraid to say what they really think for fear of retribution, real or imagined?

Is not one of the first principles of community development free and unrestrained participation? This fear does not originate in the office of the children's commissioners office, but rather from the actions of the government as a whole. I have myself been removed from a government advisory committee for speaking out publicly, so I can attest to the fact that consequences of speaking out can be swift and severe.

Despite these challenges, we did find thoughtful and intelligent contributors and I thank them for their efforts. I would also like to thank the advisory committee that we struck to advise on this issue which included John Meston (Association for Youth in Care), Jim Boyd (Child and Youth Care Association), Leslie McCallum (Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families), Rod Adachi (Alberta Association of Social Workers), Dallas Nikolai (Children's Advocate Office), Ken Maskiw (Alberta Foster Parents Association), Anne Fitzpatrick (Edmonton Social Planning Council) and Jason Brown (Edmonton Social Planning Council). John Meston was particularly invaluable to us with his wealth of knowledge and sincere commitment to children.

On behalf of the staff and Board of the Edmonton Social Planning Council, I hope you find this issue of *First Reading* enlightening.

*Brian Bechtel—managing editor*

## Poverty and Child Welfare

“ We never got new clothes or anything like that. We had really ugly clothes, really small. Our pants would go way up here, you know. And it was just the shits. We were poor and I knew it. I was ashamed walking around in some of the clothes I’d wear. And there was never any food in the house. ” (Focus group participant, *Into the Hands of Youth*, 1996)

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According to the National Council of Welfare (1996), there were 1,108,000 (13.7 per cent) families living in poverty in Canada in 1994. The poverty rate for two parent families is slightly below that for all types of families at 11.3 per cent, while the poverty rate for children living in single parent families is much higher at 57.3 per cent. In Alberta, 95,000 families (13.1 per cent) live in poverty (National Council of Welfare, 1996). In 1994, poor couples with children were living on an average family income that was \$8,203 below the poverty line. Single-parent mothers had an average income that was \$8,535 below the poverty line. For example, a single mother with two children, living in a city with a population of 350,000, lives on an average income of \$14,891.

The number of families with children living in poverty has decreased slightly since 1993. However, poverty rates are still much higher than those of the 1989 pre-recession period (8.5 per cent). The National Council of Welfare (1996) showed that over the past 15 years, increases and decreases in poverty rates tend to parallel rises and falls in unemployment rates for working age people. In 1984, for example, the poverty rate for families with children was 15.6 per cent and the unemployment rate for that year was 11.2 per cent. In 1989, the poverty rate dropped to 11.1 per cent, coinciding with the lower unemployment rate of 7.5 per cent. In 1994, the family poverty rate rose to 13.7 per cent, as did the unemployment rate, which rose to 10.4 per cent. Clearly, increases and decreases in

the number of families living in poverty is largely a reflection of the state of the economy. Families who once were financially self-sufficient are now relying on unemployment insurance or social assistance to survive. Those families who were already poor are further affected by a slumping economy. The depth of their poverty deepens and the effects can be devastating.

Children living in poverty are disadvantaged and are at greater risk of experiencing a number of negative effects. Poor children are: at greater risk of developing health problems; less likely to experience good quality child care; more prone to developmental delays; less likely to succeed in school or attend post-secondary institutions; at greater risk of engaging in criminal activity; and at greater risk of being neglected and physically abused. These difficulties may be experienced by families in all socio-economic groups. However, for the most part, children who have come into the care of child welfare authorities come from low income families.

Inadequate income exacerbates the stresses experienced by families in our society. In addition to the typical stresses that all families experience, poor parents are dealing with the constant pressure and anxiety of struggling to provide for their families on an inadequate income. According to Volpe (1989), lack of economic resources can contribute to the anger, frustration, self-recrimination and loathing that is often associated with child abuse. As well, such poverty related factors as

unemployment, dilapidated and overcrowded housing, and insufficient money, food, recreation, or hope can provide the stressful context for abuse. The lack of supports, combined with the inadequate income and social isolation of poor families, create a build-up of extreme stresses and life crises sufficient to undermine individual coping abilities and family relationships.

While evidence indicates that there is an association between socioeconomic status and child abuse and neglect, the relationship is complex. A number of structural, psychological and situational factors combine to place low income children at a higher risk for abuse and neglect. Although external stresses do not contribute directly to family violence, they do contribute to internal stresses within individuals and families, and these are often a direct cause of violence.

While most poor families manage to continue to care for their children themselves, a small minority are unable to do so. Children become involved with the child welfare system for a number of reasons

“I remember opening up the fridge just to see what’s in there. There was a green pepper, an onion in the drawer and a bag of frozen rhubarb in the freezer, and that was all the food we had in the entire house.”  
(Focus group participant, *Into the Hands of Youth*, 1996)

including: physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, behavior problems or conduct disorders, mental health problems within the family, family breakdown, substance abuse by one or more family members, abandonment, neglect, and/or the unwillingness or inability of parents to care for their children.

While only a small percentage of poor children become involved with the child welfare system, the majority of children in the care of child welfare authorities come from low-income families.

A study by the National Youth in Care Network, *Into the Hands of Youth: Youth in and from Care Identify Healing Needs* (1996), interviewed 85 young

people in and from care. Nineteen groups of youth from five provinces participated. Approximately 10 per cent of the youth cited poverty as the primary factor for being taken into care. The percentage of young people coming into care for reasons related to poverty is likely much higher.

A recent newspaper article suggested that the number of young people coming into care may increase in the near future because funding cuts in social programs and social assistance rates in the provinces have drastically affected poor families (*Ottawa Sun*, April 11, 1996). A housing worker in Toronto reported that the Children’s Aid Society is becoming an agency of last resort to deal with problems that are primarily economic. Mel Gill, executive director of the Ottawa–Carleton Children’s Aid Society, agreed that families on social assistance have trouble making ends meet and they may turn to the Children’s Aid Society to care for their children.

Whether families are receiving social assistance, unemployment insurance, or are working full-time for minimum wage, insufficient incomes may prevent them from providing adequately for their children. Many of their problems could be eliminated with the provision of an adequate income. Family tensions and stress would not compound each other in the same way; additional options and choices

would be available to them. Adequate income would enable families to feed, clothe, house and care for their children adequately, reducing the possibility that the family situation will deteriorate to the point of neglect or other forms of violence that cause children to be removed from the home to child welfare facilities.

The United Nations has designated 1996 as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty. According to the National Council of Welfare (1996):

“...the latest available statistics show that Canada still has a long way to go to meet this goal. Nearly 4.8 million children, women and men—one of

*continued on p.32*

I think that it would be relatively easy to build consensus around Bernd Walter's (1993, p.303) suggestion that the existing child protection system is flawed. However, move the discussion to one of causes and solutions then a myriad of perspectives appear. The numbers of individuals involved in this discussion does not appear to be contested. We are told that some 3,300 individuals were consulted in the development of the commissioner's 1994 report and that subsequently some 5,000 volunteers have been involved across the province, inputting ideas and perspectives for a new model of services to children and families. However the political motivation, adequacy and structuring of the discussion is frequently contested.

Individuals and groups involved in the restructuring process. Their role over the next 12 months will be critical to the future of children and family services.

Equally critical will be the ability of groups and individuals within the public, for-profit and not-for-profit sectors to honestly and openly represent their views and interests whilst remaining genuinely open to the possibility of more effective ways to work with children and families that might not meet those views and interests.

From my current perspective there are at least three critical issues that require broad consultation and further debate. First is the development of a comprehensive set of service principles, process

## HALFWAY THROUGH THE PROCESS

*The community consultation process of the reorganization of services to children raises many serious issues. With 17 regions each establishing community working groups and then later appointing regional steering committees—*

I am not sure that this could be otherwise. From my perspective, managing large scale strategic organizational change is a messy business in the best of circumstances. Managing change in the politically-charged public domain, based on broad public consultation, is fraught with all the democratic limitations of trying to incorporate a multitude of perspectives, competing interests and political agendas. Inevitably there is the subsequent frustrations felt by those who have felt not heard or who have felt excluded. The discussion becomes all the more difficult when it moves beyond the pure self-interest of job security, working conditions and influence to become enmeshed in the perceived well-being of vulnerable children and families across Alberta. The challenge of the consultation process is one of managing and acknowledging the legitimacy of the former whilst trying to keep strongly focused on the latter. This unenviable and almost impossible task has fallen on the shoulders of the volunteers involved in the regional steering committees.

From my own experience the past 12 months has witnessed a growing respect for the commitment and integrity that the members of the various steering committees have brought to their task. They have questioned and at times challenged the direction of the restructuring process and have been responsive to input from the various

and outcome standards that address the quality concerns raised by both public sector and private sector agencies, associations and individuals. Second, the development of regional service plans must be responsive to the complex human resource management issues that are an inevitable part of this restructuring process. Third is the issue of the full privatization of the case management function of Child Protective Services.

I think it was Alfred Kahn who suggested to me, following a meeting with regional steering committee co-chairs, that the restructuring process might find itself with a tiger by the tail in the form of regional steering committees who take seriously their responsibilities to the broader community of children and families to 'find a better way'. I for one see no sign of them abdicating this responsibility and whilst it would be stupid for any of us to take consolation in being in such a position—it might be argued that if the government, union, professional associations, for-profit and not-for-profit agencies do find themselves with a tiger by the tail this may not be a bad result at the end of the day for children and families across Alberta. ■

*Stephen Brown is the Executive Director of McMan Youth, Family and Community Services Association. He is currently working on his PhD studying organizational change in the public sector.*

During more than 40 years as a social worker there have been only a few professional issues that have actually kept me awake at night. Involvement in the current redesign of children's services is certainly one of those insomnia-producing endeavors.

The move to community-based service delivery is not a new phenomenon and, at least in principle, is generally supported by those who study and analyze human service systems. Large government bureaucracies with their propensity toward complexity for complexity's sake, their insatiable appetites for meaningless paper, and their tendency to distance themselves from their "consumers" (thus forgetting why they were

community groups prior to the establishment of the steering committees. Many of those who were initially part of local working groups have become disenchanted with the process and its resulting lack of clear purpose, failure to establish time lines, and lack of description of specific tasks. Since regional steering committees depend on a variety of working groups to provide them with locale-specific or issue-specific information, this has been a problem. Remedial steps have been taken, but in the meantime the initiative has undoubtedly lost some talented and enthusiastic people, who now may be judging the entire process by negative experience with a working group.

Another "process" issue has been that in the very beginning, those who initiated the change process failed to work constructively with those who are already in the system, who have

## TWO PEOPLE SHARE THEIR VIEWS

*There are a broad range of perspectives to deal with.*

*We asked two respected advocates to voice their opinions and concerns on this process.*

set up in the first place) are frequently not very humane service providers. In Alberta, the best efforts of some very talented and committed people both within the government bureaucracy and without have not prevented the welfare of children from being compromised by a variety of systemic problems. The resulting series of reports have typically been followed by minor tinkering with the system, resulting in very little real improvement for real children and their families.

The massive organizational changes which are now underway, although prompted by the latest child welfare inquiry (Bernd Walter, 1993) are an inevitable consequence of years of systemic problems. For those of us who have volunteered to be part of the new initiative, the challenge is to design something that works better for children, particularly those children who are at risk, while ensuring that the parts of the system that are working well are protected and maintained. In some ways we are inheriting a system in chaos. Certainly it is a system that has never found an effective way to create policies, programs or services on the basis of information from those who deliver services at the front line. It is an enormous task, and the potential obstacles are all too real.

An initial difficulty has arisen from the questionable decision to encourage the setting up of the

the expertise born of experience with hands-on delivery of services, and who are understandably concerned about their own professional futures. The neglect of this basic community development process has resulted in the change initiative having very few "cheerleaders" within the system. In some ways the current delivery staff and the steering committees have been pitted against one another. Many of those who have been the severest critics of their own employing system over the years have now become the harshest critics of the proposed changes (the "devil-you-know" phenomenon). Efforts are now being made on both sides to find common ground, and a valuable, gentle and friendly information exchange is now an ongoing process in this region, but perhaps some of this could have been avoided.

There are a large number of concerned (and well-informed) people involved in this process both on working groups and steering committees. It is encouraged that these groups, while very aware of the need for effective **child protection** services, are generally looking at this task on the broader base of services to all children and families, and are quite correctly defining **child welfare** as inclusive of much more than services to children at risk of harm.

*continued on p.8*

## What are the questions that keep me awake?

**Commitment.** Are the provincial government and the people of Alberta committed to the welfare of children and families? Do our elected officials understand that creative, economically-viable societies believe in supporting children and families, and that an investment in children is an investment in a sound society? Why does Alberta remain the only province in Canada that continues to refuse to sign the United Nations Charter on the Rights of Children?

**Money.** The best plan in the world is going to fail if it is not properly resourced. The experience from many other jurisdictions outside Alberta who have experienced similar changes tells us that this reorganization is not going to result in a less expensive system, but that it will almost certainly cost more than the current system. Obviously the government has not said that this child welfare initiative is a cost-cutting measure but it is difficult to quell one's cynicism in the face of the dollar driven decisions that are being made on all sides, usually on the backs of the most vulnerable members of our communities. When the work of the various committees has been done, their newly created plans approved by the Children's Commissioner, and the regional authorities in place, will there be sufficient dollars to carry out the plan?

**Integration of Services.** One of the four 'pillars' of the new initiative is integration of all government departments which provide services that impact directly the lives of children. The identified departments are Family and Social Services, Health, Education, Justice, and Community Development (AADAC). It is clear that Family and Social Services is there but the other players do not seem to be full partners at the table. We are now told that the original reference to integration committed the other departments to integrated **planning**, but not integrated **funding** so it is difficult to see how integration is actually going to occur at the service level. Will there be true integration of all these departments at the **political and bureaucratic level**, including changes in funding arrangements?

**Child poverty.** We know that for those who need to access child protection systems poverty is the major variable. It is patently obvious that reduced welfare payments in Alberta have resulted in more referrals to the current child welfare system. Will additional

financial supports be available for families who are living on welfare payments when they have children? Can we convince the politicians that it is not only more humane, but also more fiscally responsible to accept the fact that a decrease in child poverty means fewer dollars spent on children's physical health, mental health, on special education and on social control measures?

**Standards and Monitoring.** Will newly established standards result in children receiving high quality services? Although there seems to be a perception that community agencies want "minimum" standards, many conversations with colleagues in a variety of agencies indicate that in fact the general thrust is toward ever-higher levels of care for children. Aboriginal colleagues are particularly firm on this point. Standards need to include stringent requirements about **appropriate educational preparation** for those involved in service delivery, negating the possibility of any region deciding to utilize poorly qualified (but less expensive) staff. There must also be an effective, comprehensive, province-wide **information system** (to include all the private service providers) to avoid children "falling through the cracks." The government is committed to the responsibility for both standards and monitoring and there is active work being done in this area at the provincial level. But even if high quality standards are set who will do the monitoring of those standards, and will it be vigorous enough?

There are many additional issues having to do with the appeal process, the question of liability, movement of clients between regions, etc.

Why would anyone volunteer to be part of the process? In fact, I am involved because of the questions. There are steering committee members across the province who are there because they want this to work, and they are almost certainly asking the same questions. We need to keep asking them. I suspect that most would agree with social activist Saul Alinsky, that "the most unethical of all means is the non-use of any means." At the end of the day, will a better system be in place? I don't know, but I don't like standing outside throwing rocks and I don't believe in hiding. And on some days I actually feel optimistic. ❏

*Margot Herbert teaches in the Edmonton Division of the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary and is Past President of the Alberta Association of Social Workers. She is a member of the Region 10 Steering Committee.*



# INTERDEPARTMENTAL who's in and what's up? COOPERATION

Over the past few months, both social workers and community volunteers have appeared before the provincial government to raise concerns about child welfare issues.

When the social workers' union appeared before the Cabinet Standing Policy Committee on Community Services, government MLAs left the impression the social workers were grandstanding to protect the status quo rather than working to improve the system.

But when Celeste Holmes, a co-chair of the children's services steering committee in her region, appeared before the same committee to raise concerns about the lack of co-ordination and communication among front line workers in the departments of Health, Justice, Education and Family and Social Services, letters from the ministers involved were sent out the next day asserting the government's commitment to the integration of services across those departments.

The way government MLAs see it, the social workers want to preserve the current system to protect their jobs and their pensions. But volunteers like Holmes represent a community based movement enthusiastic about assuming responsibilities that until now were considered to belong to the province.

The quick action also shows the government's focus has shifted from deficit reduction to restructuring how government services are delivered. While deficit reduction and restructuring are closely intertwined—restructuring is inevitable when the flow of money is reduced—the child welfare area is the latest significant change in how services are delivered. The Conservatives have always talked about the two dimensions of their reform, but the restructuring element has received the least public attention. Ironically, it is the success or failure of the government's restructuring efforts which likely will have the greatest ramifications for Albertans in the long term.

Many of the Conservatives elected in 1993 came to office for the first time in 1993 with saddlebags full of the rhetoric of "re-engineering" and "reinventing" government. The premier even established an ongoing series of meetings on these kinds of change issues beginning in June 1994.

While success on the deficit reduction front is measured by numbers in the public accounts, success on the restructuring front will be much more difficult to measure. And the consequences in areas like the delivery of child welfare services have the potential to be much more catastrophic than a deficit. Volunteers like Holmes see the issue

of integration of services across departments as key to the success of the redesign of the system.

"The original plans, *Finding a Better Way* and *Focus on Children*, stressed integrated planning among the departments of Family and Social Services, Health, Education and Justice. The documentation that is being used by communities for planning, *Laying the Foundation*, assumes integrated planning and the development of integrated services," Holmes said before the standing policy committee last January. "Our experiences demonstrate that there is a lack of commitment to integration at some levels of government."

She says the interdepartmental cooperation is necessary because it eliminates overlap and duplication, allows for interdepartmental cooperation and forces service planning to begin with the child.

Three months later, Holmes said in an interview that she is much more comfortable with the willingness of government departments to work together at the local level. In her region, at least, the letter from the top has had an effect. Where there was reluctance before, there now exists an understanding of the importance of working together at the local level between the regional health authorities, the superintendents of the region and others.

That doesn't mean the problem no longer exists.

Shiraz Shariff, the Conservative MLA for Calgary-McCall and a former social worker, sees the problem as two-fold.

"I recall when I was a child welfare worker, I found it very frustrating that a child in the community was having to interact with Social Services, Education, sometimes Public Health or Mental Health and that quite often the services were not coordinated," Shiraz, who is piloting the bill through the legislature which will create regional children's services authorities, said in an interview.

"The other problem is protection of turf, because whenever you talk about coordination, there is also an element of sharing resources. And so who is responsible for how much and how do you determine what is being shared or how much is being given away? So that in itself, the whole system of resource sharing or resource allocation has to be looked at."

The context in which the change in traditional bureaucratic behavior is expected to take place is also significant. Provincial employees have been under tremendous stress since 1993, forced to do more with fewer resources and less remuneration. On top of that they are now being asked to completely change the way they perceive their position in the government hierarchy and work horizontally

as well as vertically within the power structure. As well, the government has created new organizational structures like regional health authorities which also are trying to find their way in the new Alberta, complicating the changes.

While the ministers involved have said more than once that they are committed to cooperation between their departments, it is often

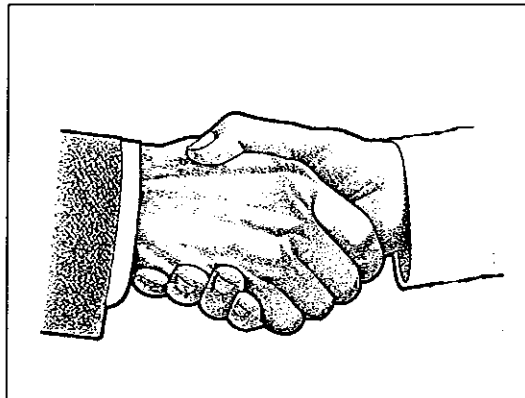
a long way from the cabinet table to the front line where social workers, teachers, health care providers and justice officials are dealing with child welfare.

So how do you make change?

"I believe it has to be modeled from the top down because bureaucrats unfortunately become victims of habits. And what happens is that subordinates pick on those habits and build on them, so that it perpetuates down through the system," Shiraz said.

"But if the modeling occurs from the top down, with the four ministers sitting together and the four deputies sitting together, and then the bureaucrats sitting together to talk about issues and design that kind of collaborate approach, then it really can be done."

*continued on p.11*



The government is following that model at the political and senior bureaucratic levels. The three year business plans of the departments of Family and Social Services and Health have interdepartmental co-operation in the delivery of children's services as an explicit goal.

A coordinating committee of assistant deputy ministers from each of the four departments, which also includes representation from Provincial Aboriginal Affairs, was given the responsibility to support community based planning, develop a joint set of goals and objectives for children's services and ensure that all policies and programs "are aligned" to reduce gaps and duplication of services.

But even Shiraz admits that the government is learning as it goes and there are issues like how resources are to be shared across departmental boundaries in a time of scarce resources that will have to be resolved over time.

"Maybe this initial phase through experience will teach us how to refine it further," he said.

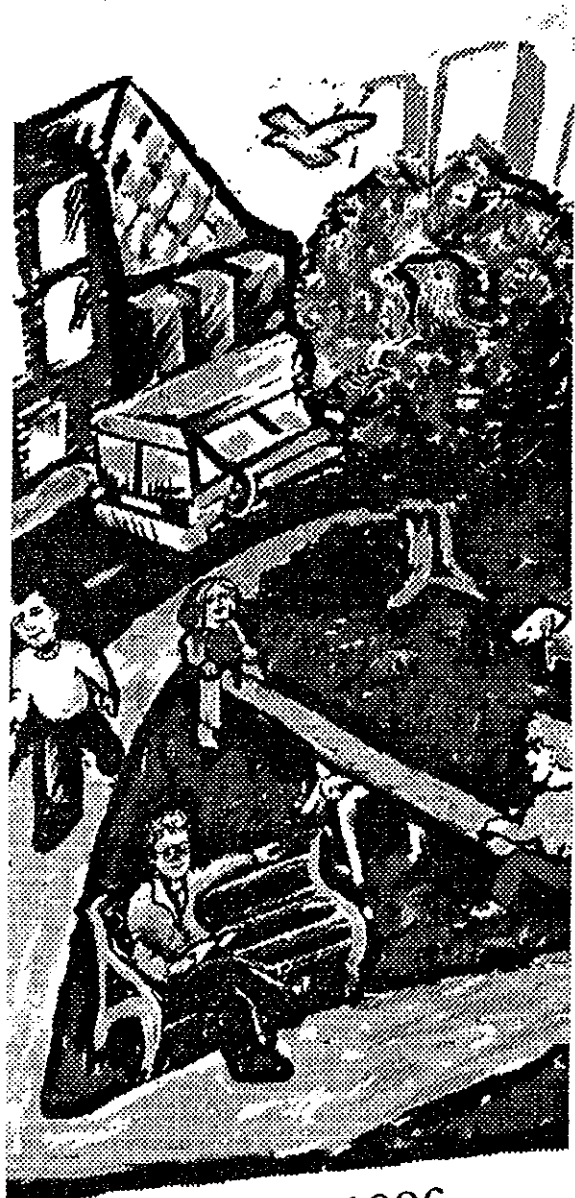
As the significant part of the changes begin—the legislation to create new regional children's services system is just now making its way through the provincial legislature—whether or not the four departments work together is not the only issue facing the architects of the new system. But because it represents a significant change in corporate culture, coordination and communication between government agencies that works is fundamental to the success of a community based system.

The immediate response from the government at the standing policy committee earlier this year showed that volunteers are more credible to Conservative policy makers than social workers. That means there is an additional responsibility on those volunteers to let their politicians know when the system is not working well. The welfare of Alberta children could well depend on it. ■

*Paul McLoughlin is the publisher of Alberta Scan, a weekly newsletter about Alberta politics. You can reach Paul by e-mail at womcom@ccinet.ab.ca*

# Striking a BALANCE

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JUNE 7, 8, 9 1996  
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# Perverting Principles

As I watch Alberta's reorganization of services to children from the sidelines in B.C., I have come to the realization that some of these transformational efforts are destined to founder and are, such as Social Services Minister Mike Cardinal's plan for children's services in Alberta, doomed to failure.

I don't think there is consensus in Alberta on the values and principles which are the foundation for the care, protection and needs of our children.

When I look at the changes which have occurred in children's services—in legislation, policy and programs in this country during the last 15 years, or even the news clippings of the last few months, I can't think of an area of social policy reform which has been more divisive and fraught with hidden and ambiguous political agendas.

All of these reform initiatives have a common element which was at the time considered radical, or at least novel. They all started with an articulated set of principles which were intended to guide their implementations and establish benchmarks for measuring their effectiveness.

Their authors felt that these principles were sound to the extent that they borrowed from what the best research told us was good for kids. They were consistent with children's developmental needs and they were inclusive. We honestly believed in them, and we believed that everyone should be able to agree on them—they were universal. Now, after having worked in this field for the last 15 years, after having experienced the bureaucratic resistance and distortion generated by my review of Alberta's child welfare systems, I have reluctantly concluded that even sound, honestly intentioned principles about children and families can, like scripture, be molded and manipulated to accommodate and advance agendas which sadly have very little to do with what's best for children.

I am convinced the government has turned a well intentioned idea to empower communities and vulnerable individuals into a cynical exercise of downloading responsibility for the most vulnerable members of its society—all obscured in the rhetoric of "vision and principles."

I would like to examine a few of the principles or vision statements which I have been able to discern and to offer my analysis of how they are, according to my observations, being implemented. (*From Children's Commissioner's Planning Handbook*)

The safety and healthy development of children and families is **the first priority.**

This is essentially identical to the principle already contained in Alberta's Child Welfare Act, one which hundreds of Albertans, including Child Welfare professionals, told me called for an unfortunate balancing of priorities between real, live, flesh and blood kids and this government's philosophical concept of the sorts of individuals and relationships it considers worthy of the label "family."

Rather than ending that destructive debate and making it clear that the focus of services is actual kids at risk, this principle avoids, or worse, perpetuates that debate. This and other principles send precisely the sort of mixed message that suffers or condones tragedies like Zachary Giroux, and then punishes the people it forces to work under such ambiguous directives.

A second principle reiterates for the umpteenth time that parents and extended families have primary responsibility for their children.

Again this is simply a restatement of the family autonomy principle in Section 2 of the Child Welfare Act. This was or would have been an altogether salutary goal 30 years ago, when children were frequently removed and placed

in foster or institutional care for fairly arbitrary or subjective reasons. Today this principle can, and is being used to systematically justify non-response to children at risk; abandoning them to their families and extended families, well beyond the point where those families are able to protect them.

Even more cynically this principle can be used to curtail services and costs and, in the name of promoting independence and self-reliance, to turn our backs on, and to blame the victims.

When you consider which families are the predominant consumers of social services, including children's services, you have to know that the fragile capacities of those families has been savagely eroded by cuts in mental health, special education, substance abuse, family violence and income support programs over the past two to three years.

The third principle even more cynically purports to embrace or focus on the child's needs as long as those needs can be met within the family and community.

Given the characteristics of the families and children requiring child welfare services, where either the child or family members are damaged due to mental illness, poverty, or substance addiction, this principle fails to recognize that some times the last thing the kid needs is to stay in the family or the community which has been the site of his victimization. Our communities were critically unable to secure appropriate services and beds for kids in need two years ago and I know things are no better today.

Another principle speaks to services which are community based and integrated to remove barriers in meeting children's needs.

This is what I have referred to as the organizational dimension—how the system is structured/ managed and governed (and what has turned out to be the most controversial aspect of my review—probably farthest removed from and least meaningful to child and family). This principle is really the centerpiece to Mr. Cardinal's plan and is the central preoccupation, *raison d'être* and focus of the work of the Commissioner and of the stakeholder communities.

Clearly organization and structure can, as much as any other issue, influence system effectiveness.

However, I am also convinced from what I see that structure has become the end in itself. It has become the substitute for a clear vision of what services should exist and how they should be delivered.

In none of the confusing array of change documents and folksy newsletters have I seen even a glimmer of what the new system should look like, what it should accomplish, what needs to change, what's going to be different about what our children will get or how they and their families will be treated. What on earth does any of this mean to and for kids and families?

The absolute over-emphasis on this aspect of the debate means that everyone is naturally concerned about their place in the new universe and that their own survival and agendas become primary. This means the chances increase geometrically that marginalized children and families are lost sight of. You cannot restructure to this extent and in this manner with all your energy focused on structure and still care for kids.

# integration

I seriously question the extent to which the commitment to integration is real. You absolutely cannot achieve integration at the community level while government bureaucracies and bureaucrats remain intact in their own stove pipe cultures. Yet I note that the Department of Justice has said young offender services will not go to the community.

The structures being created are intended to assume a much broader mandate than the current Department of Family and Social Services. This means that *more* funding, not a reallocation of current budgets is called for; without even considering the increased overhead in administering 17 rather than six regions. Have these costs been identified and committed to? How much new money is going into the system? Have the departments of health, AADAC, and Education all anted up? Where are the funds for early intervention and prevention to come from—the child in care budget? Have budgets even kept pace with the 25 per cent increase in child protection service caseloads which have happened since 1992/93 when resources in the Edmonton region already were in deep crisis? How do you expand the

*continued on p.14*

mandate when the entire system is focused on expenditure targets set by the treasury? Is the commissioner above exempt from Treasury Board?

Indeed the commissioner's handbook acknowledges the lack of vision and values when it invites each community to develop plans as they see fit to create their own vision and array of services. So much for provincial standards as called for in the empowering legislation and so much for enforcing them!

It feels to me like Mr. Cardinal is building a huge and expensive mansion or monument containing many beautiful rooms but no front door!

The final principle speaks to client and community involvement in individual and systemic decision-making.

This begs the question of who is this community? Who is at the table—is it service providers and stakeholders whose conflict of interest has to be apparent? Is it so called community leaders who are articulate and influential and can get elected to boards? What do these individuals know or understand about the realities of a youth from a violent home, a single mother on welfare; a young person in trouble with the law or a kid with a severe behavior problem who's being expelled from school? They do not know the reality of kids at risk or in care!

The problems of these children and families aren't amenable to starting a little league or establishing a recreation center!

Where does a ministry get the arrogance to espouse a principle of individual, consumer, and community involvement, and respect for their views and experiences, when it tries to suppress a public report? When it issues gag orders to its professional staff on penalty of dismissal? When foster parents are routinely punished for advocating for kids?

But in the end it's not the absence of vision or principles which will doom the initiative. It is doomed because it leaves untouched the same old dysfunctional culture which is directed to manage and implement it. Nothing and no one has changed at the top.

This is a culture which lacks integrity and real respect for the voices, ideals and needs of those it

serves, those it purportedly consults with and those it employs—or burns out!

This business of serving children and families is not about programs or services. And it's absolutely not about regional authorities or board structures. It is almost entirely about relationships. In fact, an effective functioning child welfare system is about the same qualities we need to instill in healthy functioning kids. It's about ethics of honesty, fairness, respect and compassion, pride and interdependency. It's about integrity i.e. consistency and congruence between ethics and behavior. It's about demonstrating on a daily basis that you know what you stand for.

And it's about clarity and commitment. It requires a clear, compelling and undecieved vision of what you are trying to achieve, the strength of will to achieve it, the ability to marshall the commitment of others and empower them—not *gag order* them, threaten them, ignore them or dismiss them to do it.

Only when these qualities are present can we hope to have people feel safe, secure and trusting of change. Change can only come through the efforts of skilled individuals in the system. The outcome will inevitably reflect the integrity and ethics of those individuals.

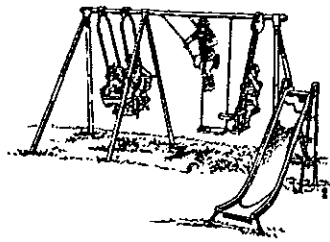
## bottom line:

A bureaucracy or culture that is as unhealthy, corrupt and as lacking in integrity and respect for the voices, needs and ideals of those it serves as this one cannot bring forth a healthy child welfare system.

Finally, child welfare is also about loss. From what I see, the community, the stakeholders and the bureaucracy itself are experiencing the loss and the same anger, denial, rejection, resistance and the clinging to some ideal past, that kids in the system go through.

We need to get to an understanding of what needs to change and its deeper meaning. We have far less important things, than our children to politic about. ■

*Bernd Walter served as Alberta's Children's Advocate from 1989 to 1993. He is currently chair of the B.C. Child and Family Review Board.*



## who's watching the kids?

In November of 1993, the government of Alberta announced its intention to "privatize" children's services. Supporters of privatization argue that this will lead to better services for children. This may or may not be true, but there are risks to privatization that must be addressed. Left to the forces of the marketplace, the essential interests of children may become secondary to financial considerations. What then, is the public responsible for in ensuring adherence to standards in a privatized environment?

That the public has an interest should be clear, as the government's own ombudsman notes in his 1995 report:

"...I am absolutely convinced that a watchdog function is required.... It does not matter whether the service is provided by a line department, agency, commission, tribunal, or a private contractor. If no watchdog or appropriate appeal process exists, then the concept of accountability is at best watered down or, at worse, non-existent".

An effective "watchdog" mechanism will have to be comprehensive, independent, active, and have the power to intervene immediately when the lives of children are found to be at risk. The government has said that it will continue to be responsible for "standards and monitoring," but has yet to make any commitments as to what the new protective measures will look like. There may be a world of difference between what advocates for children consider adequate monitoring and what a government enamoured with the private sector and obsessed with cost would consider adequate monitoring.

Should we take government at its word and be confident that in the new regionalized, privatized system, a comprehensive set of safeguards will be put into place? A look at the draft "enabling" legislation suggests government may not accept final responsibility for ensuring adherence to

standards. Section 8 of the *Child and Families Services Authorities Act* gives responsibility to government for "establishing policies and standards" and for "monitoring and assessing of authorities in the carrying out of their responsibilities". It's not until we get to the section describing the responsibilities of the new authorities that we find responsibility for ensuring adherence to standards. Section 9(1)(e) says that the authorities will be responsible for "ensuring that policies and standards ... are followed".

Now I'm not a lawyer, but "monitoring and assessing" seems to me to fall far short of the commitment to provincial and ministerial accountability of which we've been constantly assured.

This raises a number of critical questions about what we can expect the monitoring and enforcement of standards to look like. Will the current provincial accreditation and certification requirements be expanded and beefed up? Will the new authorities be required to demand that private contractors undergo certification? Will the mandate of the ombudsman be expanded to cover the new children's services authorities? I will present here a brief overview of the main reasons why I fear that the answer to all of these questions will be "no."

"but it'll cost money!"

Effective monitoring costs money. Not lots of money, but some. Need I say more?

Private agencies may argue that the time and energy put into the "bureaucratic" monitoring of standards, could be saved and put into additional service or additional profit. The anti-regulation, anti-bureaucrat advocates in government will leap to their defense and advocates for strong protections for children will be forced to rely on moral, ethical, and "long-term consequence" arguments: not very powerful stuff in the nineties in Alberta.

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## "don't you trust community volunteers?"

By placing the onus for the protection of standards on community boards and by trusting in the "common sense" of well-meaning but relatively inexperienced volunteers, government can effectively distance itself from political liability by downloading responsibility to the local level. While it may be politically popular to promote the value of the volunteer board as the repository of good common sense, and there will be no shortage of people flattered by the opportunity and willing to take it up, providing services to emotionally and behaviorally disturbed children is neither simple nor easy.

Volunteer boards are almost always comprised of well-meaning, conscientious people, but the simple fact of the matter is that volunteers may or may not have the necessary expertise, and they may or may not commit the time necessary to develop that expertise. Boards have no way of identifying problems before they become crises unless someone chooses to tell them, and it's unacceptable to await crisis before acting when the lives of children are at risk.

Volunteer boards need to have the support of third party scrutiny if they are to be truly confident that their clients are being well-served. It is not adequate to trust the welfare of children to one individual, or a small group of individuals, who have a vested interest in presenting a positive spin on the effectiveness and safety of the service they provide, yet doing exactly that is so politically attractive it will likely prevail.

## "I don't hear anybody complaining"

In the past, community agencies have been outspoken advocates for the interests of the child. Agencies could usually be counted upon to speak out against unsafe practices and policies and they may again, but for now, I don't think that's a safe assumption for a couple of reasons.

First of all, community agencies stand to be big winners in the new scheme and this presents a clear conflict of interest. They are powerful and effective advocates for community-based services, as they should be, but they cannot reasonably be expected to spend much time drawing attention to their own shortcomings in this uncertain period

of transition. If community agencies prove troublesome by advocating too vigorously, there will be private, for-profit, operators standing by to pick up the contracts that will present no such complications.

Secondly, there is a general widespread advocacy "chill" in the air. This government does not appreciate advocacy, and there is a sense in the community that those who speak out will be punished and those who behave themselves will be rewarded and this could make or break an agency. Is this a real fear or is it imagined? It doesn't really matter if it's true or not, because it's widely believed and that's all that matters.



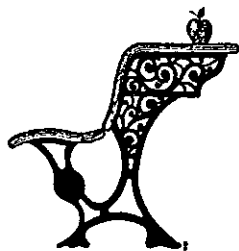
## summary

The pace of social policy change in the last three years has been, at best, hurried. Community advocates have been forced into a narrow, reactive, critical role. Advocacy has usually meant criticism of provincial social policy expressed in the media well after the fact, and to little effect.

The Government of Alberta has given advance notice of the reform of children's services and this provides a rare opportunity to influence the outcome. Despite this advance notice, the reform process has proved a slippery one for advocates. The rhetoric surrounding the reform process is just so darned friendly. Who can argue with those lofty statements? They're saying all the right things. Despite the efforts to suggest otherwise, the future of children's services is not motherhood or "value-neutral." Even the cursory review of recent trends presented in this article should be cause to prepare in earnest for a privatized system without the kinds of protections we would consider adequate. We should not await the outcome before asking some tough questions. ■■

*Brian Bechtel is the Executive Director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council.*





## A Century of Child Welfare Services in Alberta

Children were viewed as miniature adults until the concept of childhood was defined by late-19th-century social reformers as a period of growth and education. This view influenced the delivery of child welfare services undertaken by the state and private agencies to save children from neglect, abuse and poverty. In Alberta, child welfare services emerged as frontier society gave way to mass settlement and 20th century urbanization. Throughout this period, the characteristic of Alberta's child welfare services became centralized state control.

### Frontier Beginnings

Canada gained control of the northwest in 1870 and decreed law and order under the North-West Territories Council. The North-West Mounted Police Council ordinances in 1874 and 1883 addressed child welfare matters such as the placement of orphans and destitute children. Customary care was commonly practiced, and Catholic and Protestant missionary schools introduced in the mid-19th century were also concerned with the care of children.

Between 1867 and 1924, approximately 80,000 impoverished English children were transported to Canada by private "child savers" in the U.K. Many were placed as domestics and farm laborers in the west. Child immigration to Alberta ceased largely due to attitudinal and policy changes in the United Kingdom, and partly because nativist Albertans disapproved of unbridled immigration.

### The First Children's Protection Act

Western agricultural settlement boomed after 1896. Alberta became a province in 1905 and Alexander Rutherford's Liberal government passed the first Children's Protection Act in 1909, instituting a superintendent of neglected and dependent children. The act legally defined provincial, municipal, parental and voluntary activity in child welfare matters and set out procedures that remained practically unchanged for two decades. (Coulter,

1977, p.59) Many child-saving features of Alberta's act originated from Eastern Canada and abroad.

After 1909, Children's Aid Societies (CAS) were organized Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat where they were the designated agents responsible for child protection services. The Children's Aid Society of Edmonton and Strathcona published its first annual report in 1910, and addressed local issues such as running a children's shelter. In Edmonton, the historic 1912 Ross Flats Children's Shelter—built at a cost of \$30,000 to accommodate 40 destitute, dependent and delinquent children and babies—is a physical reminder of the energetic local involvement of the Children's Aid Society. Where no CAS operated, the provincial superintendent assumed CAS's role. Churches, religious orders, women's organizations, police and municipalities also played an active part in child welfare at this time.

In 1925, the United Farmers of Alberta passed an Act Respecting the Welfare of Children. Broadening the superintendent's role and powers was a key feature of the new act, which may have contributed to the decline of the CAS. The UFA's 1928 Sterilization Act was backed by overwhelming public support for eugenics and affected the lives of many children.

### Children in Dire Need

Child-saving work in Alberta was driven by practical necessities to meet dire human needs. The 1930s Depression had a devastating effect on Albertans. The province, CAS, municipalities and voluntary services carried out child welfare work under the weight of increased expectations and costs. This era underscored the need for future social programs under the welfare state.

During the Great Depression, the Social Credit government brought relief functions together under the Bureau of Relief and Public Welfare, which included the child welfare branch. Repeated public concerns were voiced about child welfare

services, focusing on conflicting powers and the ill-defined relationships of provincial, municipal, public and voluntary welfare services. Alberta had also fallen behind other provinces in terms of the professionalization of child welfare services.

In 1943, an internal government child welfare committee reviewed these concerns. Its recommendations led to the further centralization of administrative functions. The Department of Public Welfare replaced the Bureau of Relief and Public Welfare in 1944. Once again, the Child Welfare Act was rewritten creating the Child Welfare Commission, which had parallel powers to the Child Welfare Branch. The superintendent of child welfare's 1935 to 1944 report lauded the overall provincial control of child welfare services, contrary to growing public discontent. Notably, few Aboriginal children were reported to be in care under child welfare legislation at this time.

### Postwar Reconstruction

Following World War II, the Alberta Chapter of the Imperial Order, Daughters of the Empire (IODE) hired Charlotte Whitton and a team of experienced investigators to review the state of social programs. Explosive findings and recommendations followed in 1947. As a result, an Alberta royal commission was appointed to investigate child welfare issues. The Howson Commission supported ongoing "centralized control" of child welfare. Consequently, CAS functions were eventually usurped by municipalities and the province, and CAS ceased to exist in Alberta.

Government reforms became noticeable during the late 1950s in the form of a strong senior management team in the Department of Public Welfare that led a general upgrading of services. On their own initiative, larger municipalities developed well-functioning child welfare units staffed by trained child welfare workers. In smaller municipalities and outlying areas, designated citizens, local police, RCMP and government workers carried out statutory functions. Programs administered by the province grew in scope and regional offices opened across the province.

A fundamental aspect of the postwar social safety net was cost-sharing. Under the Canada Assistance Plan, Ottawa paid 50 per cent of Alberta's child welfare expenses. In the late 1950s, the province started to reimburse municipalities for 100 per cent

of child welfare costs. Expanding provincial child welfare in the 1960s also had a direct impact on Aboriginal communities as many of their children were taken into care and placed primarily with non-Aboriginal caregivers.

### Reinventing Bureaucracy

In 1966, a new Child Welfare Act and the Preventive Social Service Act were passed. The former allowed the province to take over statutory child welfare functions from the municipalities; the latter enabled municipalities to develop a range of preventive services. By the late 1960s, the province thus attained full centralized control over the administration and delivery of statutory child welfare services. Accountability flowed upward into an increasingly complex bureaucratic structure.

The 1970s economic boom and rapid population growth necessitated expansion of services. However, serious cracks appeared in the child welfare delivery system. The Child Welfare Branch had started to contract out many support and residential services, but accountability remained within a centralized system, leaving citizens, communities and local elected officials uninformed. A key exception to this trend occurred in 1973 when the Siksika people from Southern Alberta signed a tripartite child welfare agreement, quietly shifting the balance from centralized control to community involvement.

As the economy declined in the early 1980s, a serious and extensive attempt was made to regionalize provincial Social Services and decision making. Simultaneously, a plethora of reviews and recommendations resulted in new child welfare legislation in 1984; yet, by 1993, Alberta's first children's advocate reported that the provincial child welfare system was flawed and incapable by itself to properly serve children's interests.

### Navigating the Future

In contrast to public education and health services administered under local authorities, Alberta's child welfare services started and expanded under centralized state control that has grown incrementally ever since 1909. The ongoing revision of child welfare legislation in Alberta has attempted to resolve underlying systemic problems, yet strong legislative mandates along with centralized control appear to have had a disempowering effect on local communities. At the same time, Alberta has scorned international conventions pertinent to children's rights.

*continued on p.32*



## Are We Ready?

**I** live and am the owner/operator of a business in rural High Level which is part of Region 17. As a volunteer and active community member I have serious concerns about what our communities are being asked to take on.

Region 17 has more than 50,000 square kilometers (which is larger in land mass than some of Canada's Eastern provinces and is, in fact, larger than many small countries). Within this vast area there are approximately 22 small communities with a total population between 15,000 and 17,000 people. Economically, the disparity between our communities is enormous. The cultural diversity also presents unique challenges. Half of our population reports a home language other than English. Another characteristic that sets us apart from mainstream trends in Canada is the age breakdown. Placing the age split at 20, 48 per cent of our population is aged 19 or under. This compares to a provincial rate of 30 per cent and a national rate of 28 per cent. Increasing the education and skill levels of our population remains a major challenge for the people of this region. The statistics show that less than one-third of people aged 15 to 24 are attending school, which is only adding to our already severe adult literacy problems. Of the population 15 years of age and older in 1991, 35 per cent have less than grade 9 education, 29 per cent have not completed high school, eight per cent have a high school certificate, four per cent have a university degree, three per cent have either a trades certificate or diploma, and 21 per cent have post secondary qualifications.

So is my community, and others like it, ready to take on yet another government department? I believe this depends on the community. For example some of the larger regions, I understand are doing very well. However, it is the smaller communities I worry about. How do you take a region of 16,000 people and expect them to take on this responsibility? What percentage of residents

are interested in volunteering? (How many have the time?) What percentage have knowledge of how boards function? Do we have enough qualified people who have the time to commit to ensure success?

We have volunteers burning out at a rapid pace in these small communities. Many of these same communities are transient and the continuity on any board is a concern. We find that those who commit to most of the boards are the people who have made the community their home, and these people are tired! Even if we are fortunate enough to find new volunteers, are we then going to train them while children's lives hang in the balance?

Section 3(4) of Bill 26 (Child and Family Services Authorities Act) states that "The Minister shall, when appointing members to an Authority have regard to (a) the desirability of achieving a diversity of qualifications, backgrounds and experience among members..." We have few professionals who make their homes in these small communities. Often they are 'imported.' Lawyers and accountants are two examples of professionals that even if the community is lucky enough to have one or two set up residence, will they commit to volunteer and which organization will be fortunate enough to recruit them?

When you have only 16,000 people to choose from, where will you find them? Will you take from other important organizations in the community? Consider the total population. What percentage will volunteer, then what percentage have the required skills and how long before they move on or burn out? Now consider all the organizations in a community: minor hockey, health board, bands and council, community health committees, school board, school parent councils, local municipal government and all their related committees, housing authorities, day care boards, play school boards, tourism, recreation, economic development, Chamber of Commerce...the list is long.

The people, more specifically the interested volunteers, are already spread too thin. Everyone will lose in these small isolated communities if we continue to push more to the local level. Are we willing to risk the lives of children and families?

## WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT WHETHER A KID CAN PLAY HOCKEY THIS SEASON. WE ARE TALKING ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT CHILDREN WILL LIVE.

Then there is the question of responsibility. Who is accountable in the end? Section 19 of Bill 26 states "No action for damages may be commenced against a member of an Authority for anything done or not done by that person in good faith while carrying out duties or exercising powers under this or any other enactment." So who is responsible? We are not talking about whether a kid can play hockey this season. We are talking about whether or not children will live.

Who sets priorities? Do those groups that manage to become strong advocates get the money while others who have a great program lose out because they are not able to advocate as effectively? We still have communities that do not recognize issues such as family violence. Will this take us back to the years when communities hide issues in closets? It has taken years of work to bring family violence into the public eye. If the board consists of people who do not have a good understanding of the cycle of violence, or do not recognize it as a problem, will this jeopardize the work that has been done to date? How do we ensure that these important and sometimes contentious issues are not lost? We cannot say 'Well the community does not recognize this, therefore it is not an issue.' Violence does occur whether we want to recognize it or not.

I understand there are regions doing very well. I am thrilled at their achievements. However, what will this mean for the communities that are not doing so well? Will we be lost in the shuffle? Will we end up with a province of 'have' and 'have not' regions? Did we see this already with the \$50 million of early intervention money? How will this be allocated and will the communities who are struggling lose out?

A government document I received entitled *Alberta's Redesign of Services for Children and Families Background* has a couple of interesting notes. The first is that 3,300 Albertans were consulted on ways to improve services for children and families. First of all, where did these people live? Have they experienced life in remote, isolated communities and not just for a day or two, but for extended periods of time? You have to live the life to understand it! I also found another area that states the "Communities expressed a strong desire to plan and design their own local services in ways which would be more responsive and more appropriate to the needs of local children and families." It does not state that communities had a strong desire to implement these services, it says we wanted input. Make the involvement at a level which the community can handle. Don't burn our residents out! We do not have the volunteer base to continue to withstand government downloading on us! You can involve communities without dumping everything on them and setting them up for failure or putting lives on the line.

Is this a way of further decreasing government funding? Will we soon not have enough money to fully fund the operation of Child and Family Services—like we have seen with so many government departments? Will this mean that they too will have to begin fundraising? Health Authorities are now facing this reality. Is Child and Family Services next?

In conclusion you'll notice this article is full of questions—so where are the answers? I do not know. All I know is that volunteers are burning out, fundraising dollars are becoming scarce and more responsibility is being passed down onto communities that do not have the resources to deal with the issues. ❧

*Pat Kulscar is a certified trainer of Nobody's Perfect. Pat has served on various boards and committees. This combined with her five years involvement with Family and Community Support Services, in several capacities including director for the district, has given her a wide base of experience and knowledge. Pat now owns and operates a business offering personal and professional development workshops and facilitation of board development and strategic planning.*

# reshape or repeat

By Jessica Lee

AS A YOUNG PERSON WHO HAS EXPERIENCE IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM, I HAVE QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS REGARDING THE REORGANIZATION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES.

I ALSO WORK WITH ADOLESCENTS IN CARE AND THEY ARE CONCERNED TOO.

MANY OF OUR QUESTIONS ARE REFLECTED IN THIS ARTICLE.

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The Alberta government has decided that services to children need a make-over. Do they plan on using cover-up or will they resort to plastic surgery? As a youth I have many concerns about whether the system will change for me and other young people in care, or just for the adults involved in the system.

From a youth perspective this process is just going to make it easier for no one to take responsibility for the generations to come. The regional steering committees are in their second year of creating a whole new system for children's services. That isn't spending very much time on services that our kids will be using. It's taken many years to get the system to where it is now—animals had more protection than kids did up until a few decades ago.

There are presently 17 regions throughout Alberta. What will happen to the children moving through the system and to different regions? Will children requiring special needs, like secure treatment, have to move to the region where their needs will be able to be addressed? Or will each region have basic services for all the needs of these children and youth?

Child Welfare is a big part of our lives! Everyone should be concerned about the reorganization of children's services. There are many things that are not right in the system. To start at the very beginning of a young person's experience in care, you would understand the apprehension. At this point in our system, no one is sure whether to take the child out of the home or work with the family in the home! What will happen when 17 different regions make different decisions on that specific topic?

There was a youth who just finished a volleyball game. When she came out, some people locked her into a room. She was told that she was going to a foster home and then Social Services sent her in a taxi (by herself) to the other side of the city. The worker called the youth when she arrived. The worker stated that if the youth told her mother she was in a foster home, she would be breaking the law. What kind of checks and balances will evaluate the services that will be in place to insure that the services are running properly? Who will check to see if the workers are doing their job?

A friend of mine went into secure treatment, a completely structured environment, for his own safety. After a month, when he was considered to have been helped, he was thrown into Y.E.S.S. (Youth Emergency Shelter Society). This is a place where there are limited support systems set up to assist him in his needs.

This is what happens when there is a lack of placements available for young people. Will communities make more placements available to youth or will it be the same as it is now? Will youth have to continue to find their own placements when their social workers can't find one for them?

What kind of standards will be in place for a privatized agency? Right now there are agencies that offer 'fee for service,' beds that don't require any standards at all! Will the "minimum standards" be in place, as the government is trying to do now? Will the agencies make their own standards or will there be one general set of standards that everyone has to abide by? How high will the standards be? Who will monitor how these places are run and if they are abiding by those standards?

*continued on p.22*

If the youth has a problem, anything from being abused in care, to wanting a placement that suits their needs, will there be someone that they can go to? What kind of opportunities will youth get to have a say in their lives, their worker's skills and the system as a whole? Where will they turn when their worker is not listening to their needs? If the youth are unable to get the supports they believe they need, will the children's advocate office be easily accessible or will it even be there? Will they be able to make a change if they need something that is not available? Will the appeal system make it easier for youth to get help or will it be changed to suit the funding limitations of the system (as it may be now)?

The word privatization comes up in every sentence you see. Does that mean we, as youth, are going to have to keep quiet, or is it the communities that will keep our abuse a secret? What does privatization mean? I see it as a policy of a government that doesn't want to take responsibility for it's youth. It would rather *delegate* responsibility to the regional and local authorities. Then if something goes wrong the government can blame it on those authorities. If that doesn't work then it has got to be the child's fault.

These steering committees are changing children's services for children so why don't steering committees have more young people on them? If they wanted youth, why don't they meet at a time that is possible for youth to come?

I wish that I could become the Minister of Family and Social Services. I guess that once you get that high in the system you seem to lose the ideas of youth and are buried in the politics. If you don't become that powerful, you still have the ideas, but are unable to change things.

I wonder how we, as youth, can express our concerns about a reorganization we can hardly understand. I don't want to get a dictionary every time that I have a problem to try to figure out where I can go for help. It reminds me to much of the Child Welfare Act.

There are so many uncertainties in this process of restructuring children's services! It's changing, but does anyone really know how? ¶

*Jessica Lee is the executive director of the Association for Youth In Care in Edmonton.*

## source Readings

Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation

By Jonathan Kozol

New York: Crown Publishers, 1995

256 pages, \$32.00

# PUTTING CHILDREN

Early in 1994, eight-year-old Bernardo Rodriguez, Jr. was playing in the halls of his grandmother's South Bronx apartment building when he leaned on a set of elevator doors. The doors collapsed, and the boy fell four floors to his death. The city blamed the family for letting the boy play in the hallway. Residents blamed the city for years of cutbacks to safety inspections, pointing out that the gang- and drug-related violence on the streets made it unsafe for the boy to play outside. As Jonathan Kozol writes in his new book, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, "what some financiers and politicians see as nothing more than fiscal prudence, other people see as social homicide."

Kozol, a Boston writer whose previous books include *Savage Inequities*, *Illiterate America* and the National Book Prize-winning *Death at an Early Age*, went to the South Bronx to find out what it was like for children to live in one of the most violent, poor and racially segregated neighborhoods in the United States.

The children and young parents of South Bronx guide Kozol through a neighborhood which has been degraded by political decisions designed to appease people who fear the poor as much as they fear poverty, and by criminal elements which have reduced the community into armed fiefdoms. By tracing the circumstances leading to the high incidence of asthma, the community's ambivalence toward the murder of a protective drug dealer and the death of Bernardo Rodriguez in a neglected elevator shaft, Kozol shows that neither individual nor societal responsibility is abstract.

From interviews and supplementary research, Kozol discovers that amputated limbs, fetal tissue,

# ON THE LINE

between fiscal prudence

social homicide

bedding, bandages and syringes from 14 New York City hospitals are transported to this densely populated neighborhood because residents of the more well-to-do East Side of Manhattan felt a proposed incinerator there would pose a risk to their children. He learns that up until 1987, the city assigned thousands of poor families to live in apartment buildings and to study in schools that contained lead contamination levels in excess of acceptable levels set by the city in 1960.

Kozol notes that election promises and programs announced by the then-newly elected Mayor Rudolph Giuliani would represent a disproportionate hardship for New Yorkers living in poverty. Medical, support and security staff at the city's public hospitals were to be laid off, programs promoting lead poisoning prevention, AIDS awareness and rat control are to be cut, as well as programs to help the poor obtain food stamps and drug abusers to rehabilitate. Kozol writes:

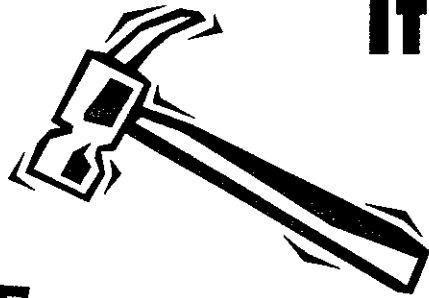
*In all, the city intends to lay off 15,000 workers, nearly 5,000 of them in the agencies that offer social services, which, says a columnist in Newsday, "lends an unavoidable racial tincture" to the mayor's decisions, since the majority of those to be laid off in social service agencies are black and Hispanic women. Caseloads of social workers, already as large as 200 children to one worker in some instances, are certain to grow larger, the newspapers say. Meanwhile, nearly half the cuts in taxes will, according to Manhattan borough president Ruth Messinger, benefit only the five per cent of the population who have incomes higher than \$100,000.*

At best, these promises show a denial of the desperate circumstances in the ghetto. At worst, they betray a systematic program to punish the poor. Prefiguring Ontario Premier Mike Harris, Giuliani announces in a speech to a group of school children that he wants all welfare recipients fingerprinted. Later, one of the mayor's deputies muses aloud about putting all 1.2 million welfare recipients (by the deputy's own count, presumably based on the collective number of recipients in South Bronx and the adjacent communities of Washington Heights and Harlem) in green uniforms and sent to the streets to "pick up papers" and "clean up graffiti."

Kozol struggles to reconcile the living conditions of the children of the South Bronx with the rationalizations of a self-described liberal writer, Anne Rophie. In a *New York Observer* column, Rophie defends her decision to buy a fur coat in the full knowledge that "someone is sleeping on a grate ... white powders are served in contaminated needles ... and the emergency rooms are full." She believes "cruelty is as natural to the city as fresh air is to the country". But the young people of the South Bronx are not as convinced about the inevitability of their situation.

As the bright, teenage son of a woman afflicted with AIDS told Kozol: "I believe that what the rich have done to the poor people in this city is something that a preacher could call evil. Somebody has power. Pretending that they don't so they don't need to use it to help people—that is my idea of evil." ■

*Suzette C. Chan is an Edmonton writer. She is also the Administrative Assistant at the Edmonton Social Planning Council.*



# If you build it, they will come

**T**he redesign of services is a prodigious task, Herculean in size and of Gordian complexity. The methods, the practices, the selection of resources and the marshaling of those resources are crucial elements in this undertaking. What is indicated for the Alberta attempt at the redesign of children's services and how that compares and contrasts with what is actually being done is of fundamental importance. A very small part of this equation is the subject of this article.

How will people access services within the redesigned system? Scenarios have been floated with buzzwords and titles like "single point of access." What do these mean and what are the implications for both people in need and for the practice of children's services?

To begin this discussion, we require some consideration of what is practically and conceptually manageable for most people. A key element of this is the concept of neighborhood and community. For most people, access is a question of recognition, distance, location, comfort and treatment. Going to a place to obtain some good or service is decided on the those five elements. In commercial enterprise we would, of course, add cost and marketing, among other things. With the continued privatization of services, these may become a serious reality within our discussion.

Seeking and receiving help for personal and family issues or problems is much different from the act of buying a burger or a magazine. It is a much more private issue and is often influenced by a real or perceived question of stigma. People want to be understood. People want to trust those who provide the service. They want help when they need it. They want the best care they can get. They want it to be personal. They don't want the next burger on the shelf.

People seeking and receiving help want that help to be close at hand. They want to deal with people.

They want to deal with the organization that provides the service on a scale that is 'human' and reflects the personal nature of the issue. They want to feel that they can trust the person who is providing the service.

People seeking and receiving help are most comfortable when they can easily identify where that help is available. They don't want to go into the door of an organization that has a sign hanging above the door that reads "Services for Incompetent Parents and Bad Kids." There is stigma and labeling enough already. They don't want to be referred and passed around. They don't want to tell their story to four, five, six or more people before being told that they are at the right place.

In most cases people would be more comfortable going to a place in their neighborhood—a place that is identifiable without stigma, near by and part of what they see and identify as being part of their community.

Ideally the place would be staffed by people who know and understand that neighborhood—people who know the school and the grocer and the beat cop—people who know what is going on in the neighborhood and what affects the lives of the people who live there.

The concepts of neighborhood and community may appear on first glance to be simple and readily definable. For many people, these may be initially conceptualized as the area close to where we live. However, neighborhood and community appear to be terms which are both changing over time and variable not only from person to person but also variable from place to place.

A neighborhood or community may look much different if the frame of reference is a small town, a rural area or a city. Neighborhood and community are concepts defined by the sum of the interplay of geography, pathways, services, infrastructure and people resulting in a distinctly identifiable area. A population of people have a real and a perceived



# (or will they?)

belonging to and identity with that area. This is due to their participation in the life of the area, the interplay between them and their use of services and facilities.

The same factors determine the real nature of defining a "region." It is neither accurate nor is it acceptable to arbitrarily draw a line on the map according to convenient geographic reference points or historical precedent to demarcate a "region." It is artificial. It may look nice on a map but it feels wrong and can impose impractical and severe consequences.

When services are designed for a particular area, it may seem obvious to give considerations to how people will identify with and access those services. This means that we cannot redefine children's services using the cookie cutter approach. What works in one location may not be appropriate for another. The system must be flexible. Nor can we build or use the great monoliths and bureaucratic institutions that have characterized previous organizational efforts.

A single point of entry doesn't mean a huge superstore of services under one roof. Nor does it mean that we should offer ready packaged responses to issues and problems—"Oh, you have family issue number C-2Y. You will find the counseling package you need in aisle 10 on the third shelf."

What it does mean is that people should be able to make a request for service or help locally. That a trained generalist can conduct the activity required to document the need, respond and manage the request wherever possible, advocate and refer 'their' client to more advanced or specialized service when needed, respond across current departmental mandates, i.e. one worker dealing with the income security as well as the day care issue or the child behavior issue. It means dealing with the person and the family, not carving up that person or that family into separate "jobs."

At the same time, we must foster and promote generalists and explore and develop multi-service

teams. Narrow bands of worker competencies and departmental barriers must be reduced, if not eliminated, at least at the front line level. For community based service provision to work, access to information must be readily available but protected with a systems matrix which ensures confidentiality and denies unauthorized access. This means common data bases and records for all service providers delivering mandated service, at least within the same region and ideally throughout the province. It also requires agreement between and among regions to share and manage information in a like manner through reciprocal agreements.

Secondly, it means that service providers, whether in different regions or under different contracts must be compelled by overarching common practices and regulation. An extension of this would be that standards of care would be common, requiring all service providers to adhere to professional, ethical and commonly accepted guidelines and practices in the delivery of service. Gone would be the days of marketing foster care as a means of getting subsidized labor for the farm and of warehousing people.

Blending together these concepts of professional care bound together by regulated standards and delivered through responsive, local and adapted service units is no small task nor quick fix. It cannot and will not be achieved by simply saying it's a local responsibility. It will not happen if the process is under-resourced and subject to the control of the local party chapter or the old boys network of contract awarding. Failure in human services is more than a misuse of resources. It often means real human casualties. That is a price too great to pay. ■



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# the future of social services

The welfare state is dead, the nation state is dying. Long live the ??? A century ago Bismarck transformed Germany from a group of weak principalities into a strong unified military nation state. Concurrent with the development of the German nation state, a welfare state that was to serve as a model for much of the rest of the Western world emerged. Bismarck saw universal health and social services as the logical extension of the nation state building process. He regarded social legislation as an important subservient component of the overall development of the nation state. Mass armies were required to defend the interests of the nation state and these armies required universal citizen participation. Health and welfare services were seen as handmaidens that ensured all segments of society would defend the nation state.

Gunnar Myrdal, a co-founder of the modern welfare state in Sweden, warned allies of the welfare state nearly 50 years ago that the welfare state was doomed as long as the social welfare aims remained interwoven with the war aims of the nation state. The altruistic claims put forward by Keynesian supporters were in retrospect often merely ideological gloss for the economic status quo. Universal social services were seen as merely a vision of universal military commitment. The notion of a mixed economy gradually gained orthodoxy because no nation believed that it could survive unless all the traditionally competing interest groups of business, labor and government worked together in some form of collective action. The collectivism was usually reluctant, but the Keynesian methodology that was deployed in the three decades immediately following the First World War was seen as an effective way of resisting extreme ideological proposals of both the left

and the right and protecting citizenry from international economic malfeasance as well as military attack. A preoccupation with demand-side economics, unemployment and the build-up of a permanent military force enabled Western governments to pursue policies of full employment. As long as the economy was in expansion, energy was readily accessible, and nuclear capacity was in its infancy, Western countries could pursue a policy of guns and butter. However, as nuclear weaponry increased in complexity and expense, the military needs of the nation shifted from mass armies to elite technological weapon systems. The primary military rationale of the global nuclear build-up was to enable superpowers to have an overwhelming first strike capacity in order that no other nation would dare launch an attack. The success of this philosophy, ironically, has led to the demise of both the nation state and the welfare state. With the impending collapse of the nation state, apologists of the welfare state seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time defending obsolete social institutions. The triumph of international corporatism has profoundly upset the idea of universal social services. Universal social services were the logical extension of nationalistic fervor, a sort of fiscal protectionism that would allow nations to maintain tariffs and taxes. International corporatism demands the reduction and eventual elimination of tariffs and holds out the Utopian hope of tax relief.

Much like the Roman Empire of the third century AD, the present day nation state seems to be a shell of its former self as the world begins to enter a new age. It may not be apparent to some people that our health and social institutions are in decay, just as it may not have been apparent to the Romans of 400 AD that the empire was an empire in name only.

However, a facade of previous social institutions is all that remains. Reality forces one to conclude that like the Roman world of the third century and beyond, we cannot restore the institutions of the nation/welfare state. We no longer believe we can afford the fiscal or nuclear price and we no longer believe in the political promise of the nation state. Therefore, it seems foolhardy to expend much time wringing our hands about a world that, effectively, no longer exists in the hope that we might somehow push the clock back to an age of nation state certainty. Rather, it seems to be a time for those who are concerned with social services to rid themselves of a state delivery system mentality—just as we have apparently rid ourselves of a nuclear missile delivery system mentality.

Just as the people of the 19th century began to reject religious institutions, the people of this century are rejecting political solutions to social problems. Corporatism, as much by accident as by design, has evolved to replace the crumbling nation state. Just as the Church of the middle ages had to confront the empty institutions of the empire, corporations are confronted with an uneasy public.

There are, of course, all sorts of risks in a society that no longer offers protection from cradle to grave. In a world at risk of nuclear warfare, the promise of universal protection was spurious at best. In the uncertainty and limited liability of international corporatism, the need for social

compassion is clearly needed. To believe that somehow governments can or have the will to effectively provide social services is to reject the reality of the present. Like the late Roman Emperors, the politicians of today who do the bidding of the multinationalists seem to use the word 'welfare' excessively in their official declarations that proclaim to protect the many, but in reality protect the privileged few.



Just as the Roman empire ceased to exist, so did feudalism and so it seems is the idea of the nation state. It is time to think of different social arrangements. The 19th century economist Walter Bagehot said there is nothing more painful than "the pain of a new idea." Just as the collapse of the monasteries in Henry VIII's England called for new methods of assisting the unfortunate, and the collapse of Europe at the conclusion of the Second World War called for the institution of the modern welfare state, the present state of the world calls for new directions and new

ideas. Calls for the amelioration of the nation state may put those who champion the cause of universal social services on the side of the angels, but their yearnings for past remedies does little to help vast numbers in this world, this country and indeed this province who have little to say about their social arrangements. It is time for new directions, new arrangements and new ideas. Painful? Probably. Necessary? Certainly! ■■

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# in a stateless world

# one stop shopping

## —pilot project gets an “A”

**I**t is very different going to work at a school rather than the traditional child welfare office. The first time I ventured into Wellington Junior High School was September 1994. I did not know what to expect and judging by the faces of many of the students they were in the dark just as much as I was.

The Partners For Youth (PFY) program had been operating at Wellington for one full school year already. Some students came into the PFY room, looked around and walked out. Others asked for the previous child welfare worker and my enthusiasm was quickly snuffed out by their look of disappointment as they turned and left. I wondered whether the students would ever accept me, especially given the authority of my role and the stereotypical image of a child welfare worker—interfering with families and snatching children away from their parents over-zealously, or conversely, not doing, or caring, enough to keep children safe. These thoughts quickly evaporated as I got to know so many students and families and learned to work in a different way.

Poverty, crime and drugs are a problem in the Wellington area (which includes the communities of Wellington, Athlone, Calder, and Kensington). Wellington has comparatively fewer resources despite the need. For instance, these communities share many of the problems faced by people in north east Edmonton yet in that higher-profile area there are numerous agencies providing services to children and families. There are precious few agencies based in the Wellington area outside of PFY. The Calder-Kensington Police Station is a valuable service but the area is resource-starved as far as agencies that serve children and families.

The biggest difference, for myself as a child welfare worker was that, for the most part, I came to be

seen as a resource rather than a threat. This was also true for the entire PFY team. The Wellington team uses a multidisciplinary approach and includes not only Alberta Family and Social Services (child welfare) but also Edmonton Community and Family Services (ECFS), Edmonton City Police, the Capital Health Authority (public health nurse), the YMCA, Edmonton Public Schools, Child and Adolescent Services (CASA), Glenrose Hospital (psychiatric nurse) and the provincial Department of Justice (probation officer). The project started running in 1993 (there is also a sister project that started in St. Nicholas School at the same time) and came out of the City of Edmonton Safer Cities Initiative. I am at the school three and a half days per week and ECFS worker Eugene Ip spends three days a week at the school. Other workers come and go during the week.

The PFY room has become a hang out for many of the students. It is a safe place where nobody is judged or put down. The teens ask questions, laugh, talk about their dreams, play music, write poetry, do homework, plan their evenings and weekends, eat lunch, give opinions, offer advice, and share food, tapes, CDs, clothes, make-up, and school work. When a few teens become rambunctious the students police the PFY room themselves. They take pride in the place and they've developed their own rules and continue to help decorate, make posters, and plan workshops, life skills and social skills groups.

Students also come to PFY individually to discuss personal issues. Regardless of whether they are receiving services through child welfare, more students are coming in for help. A general perception among team members is that many teens appear to need and appreciate contact with adults whom they can trust. This trust is not easy to establish as so many of them have been profoundly

hurt in their short lives. There are many who have severe attachment problems—they are unable to form relationships, unable to trust or be trusted, and tragically, unable to love or be loved. Some enjoy adult attention but cannot allow anybody into their lonely, frightening world for fear of being hurt once again. Many did open up to us and they shared many sad stories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. They talked of emotional and physical neglect. Many carried deep emotional scars that caused them to push anybody away who tried to get close to them. Some of the girls were being beaten by their boyfriends or had been raped. Some teens had already turned to drugs, alcohol, and the streets to find comfort and escape from their problems.

Myself, and team members, journeyed with many of these students throughout the school year and beyond, seeing a few of them cry in pain as some days they struggled to find a reason not to kill themselves, while other days they were able to smile and find some hope. There is satisfaction seeing some of these students graduate and move on to grade 10. Many carry fond memories of a school year that included Partners For Youth.

During the 1994-95 school year, approximately 140 of the 240 students at Wellington School had involvement with PFY at some level. As the child welfare worker I was involved with 77 students with 43 of these being on a formal child welfare basis. Though Wellington is a high-needs school situated in a high-needs area, there is little doubt that fewer children fell through the cracks as a direct result of PFY. It is very different working right with the youth as you not only pick up on situations more quickly, but students and parents do self-referrals. Though bizarre, for some teens it was almost trendy to have a child welfare social worker. I found myself telling a few of them that there was simply no way I could open up a file and be their worker.

The workload has become extremely hectic at times as being involved in a community project creates additional demands. As well as a caseload of often close to 20 families (over a full caseload by department standards), investigations also needed to be

completed. The community work of attending PFY meetings, running groups, organizing workshops and most importantly, seeing teens who do not have child welfare status (whether in Wellington School or the larger community) is in addition to this. This situation has been relieved somewhat only recently.

This presents a big dilemma for child welfare, as being involved in the community will increase caseloads (this has been found to be consistent in other community projects around the province). If we make ourselves more available and are seen as a resource, fewer children and families will fall through the cracks. This is positive in that more children get the help they need, but, it also means

more resources are required in the form of workers and services. The PFY team does mean services can be accessed more quickly and there is room to be creative, but often the typical in-home resources are required or, in some cases, the teens need to be removed from their homes.

There is little doubt that child welfare needs to be involved with and be part of the community, as it means better service

to children and families (though there is debate over whether child welfare needs to be privatized to do this). Hopefully this will help to change the image of the department and child welfare workers. Perhaps such an approach will change the preception of child welfare workers from being an overpaid bureaucracy of failure-prone "professional social workers" to one where people see there are so many children and families who are struggling day to day, and that social workers are trying to make a difference in people's lives and prevent further problems in the future. ¶

*Peter Smyth has worked as a social worker with the Department of Family and Social Services for seven years and has spent the last two years working more than half time at the Partners For Youth office in Wellington Junior High.*

*The PFY team will be moving from Wellington School across the road to Kensington Mall to be more accessible to teens and the community in general. An alternative school program for junior-high-age students will also be a part of the Partners For Youth Outreach Society. For more information call 451-7700.*



# Prevention

*in Alberta's New Children's Services Scheme*

It is now over a year since Albertans were asked by their government to become involved in creating a new system of children's services. Privatizing child welfare, decentralizing, regionalizing, improving service delivery, one-stop-shopping, union busting, cost reduction and many other expressions have been used to describe these actions and/or intents of the government. The realities will evolve over the next couple of years. Prevention is stated as one of the four major themes of the initiative.

I have been involved in major reorganizations of the child welfare system twice since moving to Alberta in 1964. This is the only time that real input and decision making has been sought from a broad sector of the public. I dearly hope that this effort will be successful. Otherwise, my cynicism would keep me from trying again. Many others to whom I have talked feel much the same. However, if one cares but doesn't give the effort, his/her hopes will not be realized. My major concern this time, as with the other two, is whether preventive thrusts and orientations will be adequate.

What is prevention? What is prevention in a children's services context? In a community context? In a child welfare context? In a family context? Let's look at some of the beliefs, myths and characteristics of prevention.

In our predominantly western science-oriented society we see prevention in cause/effect or input/output terms. For every action there is a reaction. If we want to prevent something we must intervene so that our new 'cause' will bring about a different 'effect.' We see or expect a direct cause/effect link. If there is a germ that does us harm we must hunt the germ down, kill or maim it, so that we can stay healthy. Our cause (killing the germ) brings about our effect (we don't get sick). We are very linear in our approach.

## The characteristics of prevention in the social development field are:

- Prevention is about addressing an issue before it becomes a problem or malady.
- Prevention is a mind set. It is by believing that one might have an impact on lives and risking action in that direction that people are able to address their issues.
- Prevention is a process. It is by becoming informed, finding out how decisions are made, by cooperative action, and by teaming that we become preventive.
- Prevention is usually interdisciplinary. It is not the jurisdiction of a particular profession. It usually has a strong community development component.
- Prevention considers strengths, as well as weaknesses, in addressing issues.
- Prevention is development rather than remediation or intervention.
- Prevention requires taking a very broad perspective. It must take an overview, a view of the whole issue/system.
- Prevention requires that people become informed and take action.
- Prevention is most usually community based. It needs this context to work effectively.

If we look at the Office of the Commissioner of Children's Services and its initiatives to date, I believe we must laud the government's stated directions of moving to a community base and regionalized service determination and the early intervention initiative which has taken \$50 million

from savings made in Alberta Family and Social Services and created an Early Initiatives Fund (remember this is \$50 million over three years and over 17 regions). As well, the creation of interdepartmental activities and coordination between five departments (Family and Social Services, Justice, Community Development, Education, and Health). Of all of these, I believe the effort to have citizens in all communities involved in determining the future of children's services is by far the most important and hopefully the best chance for prevention.

Poverty is still the major correlative with child welfare involvement. Unless the present initiative starts to address this issue as part of the overall strategy we will only be addressing symptoms as opposed to getting to the roots of the issue. Where is Alberta Economic Development in this initiative? We know that if we address our social development concerns in isolation from our economic development concerns or vice versa we are likely to fail in our efforts. The preventive strategy says that we must involve both.

Our society normally talks a good line about prevention but does not "walk the talk very well." We continuously react to crises. Let's look at some examples. First, the headlines screamed about famine in Ethiopia and massive amounts of money, food, medicine, and other resources were pumped into the country. After all, are we not a kind and caring people? Where was our concern for these people several years before, when the issue was identified? Second, a short while ago we heard about a woman who alleged she was dying of cancer and that her purse had been snatched. The police and the citizens of Toronto reacted by raising over \$100,000 within a week to assist this poor soul. Again a reaction to a crisis (a crisis which later proved to be fabricated). Third, the Capital Health Authority attempted to address some of the preventive issues in the community (they have been involved in prevention for many years) by considering coordination and fund pooling with other agencies and groups who were also concerned and involved in preventive activity. They were criticized and asked "why are you going to spend money on these 'frills' when there are waiting lists for hip replacements?"

We maintain that we espouse prevention, that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, but our behavior belies this. We understand the preventive message in the Fram oil filter commercial

where a mechanic, standing in front of a car with an obviously wrecked motor, holds up a new oil filter and says, "you can pay me now, or you can pay me later." Our talk and the values we profess are preventive, but in a crisis, in a crunch, we walk the non-preventive route. It's a variation of the practice that we will gladly spend millions to save an individual, a heart transplant for example, but begrudge the same amount to help all people, to increase their cardiac health.

Can we alter this unusual behavior and focus on prevention ahead of time? If we can collectively resist the urge to move resources and effort away from prevention when there is a problem, the answer is yes. We will all have to take an active roll in this focus to prevent our usual giving of oil to the squeaky wheel.

## What else can we do to help the preventive focus?

Recognize that children's services is a community issue, and that it is not only children with problems that are of concern. If we are able to recognize this initiative as having to do with all children, all families and all communities, and if we are able to recognize that the local school teacher local convenience store operator, the local shopping mall manager, the local politician and the local FCSS board are key components along with social, medical and mental health workers, we will be more developmental/preventive.

If we insist on involving business, Chambers of Commerce, Alberta Economic Development and all those other 'non-typical' children's resources, we run the risk of succeeding. If we do not, I believe we will fail.

We should let the government know that the Early Intervention Fund is a good idea, but that it might need to increase the money available, and that it should be prepared to do so if necessary. Certainly more funds are already needed to assist the overloaded steering committees and working groups in their work.

If we insist that the community be informed and heard, then prevention has a chance of working. ■

*Ron Gaunce worked in residential treatment centres for 11 years as a Family and Community Support Services Consultant. He is now retired and has been an active member of one of the Edmonton working groups.*

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## Poverty & Child Welfare *continued from p.3*

every six Canadians—were living in poverty in 1994, and the overall national poverty rate was 16.6 per cent. In a country as rich as Canada, these figures bear witness to the failure of successive federal, provincial and territorial governments to provide for the well-being of a significant portion of the people they were elected to represent." ❏

*Catherine Ryerce is a freelance writer/editor and author of Thursday's Child—Child Poverty in Canada, A Review of the Poverty of Children (1990). She completed her master's degree in psychology at the University of Alberta, and studied sociology at the graduate level at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She has been writing on child welfare and youth in care issues for seven years. Her most recent report is the National Youth in Care Network's Into the Hands of Youth: Youth in and from Care Identifying needs (1996).*

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## A Century of Child Welfare Services in Alberta *continued from p.18*

Children's Aid Societies and Municipal Child Welfare Services had a significant community-driven presence, but were never given adequate authority, funding and control to deliver a comprehensive range of services. While no panacea, the CAS illustrate a delivery model operated with accountability to the community, legislation and professional standards. Referring to the CAS in Ontario, Prof. Brian Wharf (1995, p.833-837) noted: "They are the only public child welfare agencies in Canada to have sustained a record of effort." As Prof. Brad McKenzie indicated (1992, p.26), the current urge to decentralize child welfare services cannot be meaningful without the democratic empowerment of local authorities. Despite ongoing change, as Alberta looks to the needs of children in the 21st century, a 1911 newspaper report that the Edmonton Children's Shelter was "crowded practically all the time" still rings true. ❏

*Baldwin Reichwein is the Director of the Huntington's Disease Resource Centre in Edmonton. He is a professional social worker with a career background in child welfare work. Dr. PearlAnn Reichwein is a historian and Canadian heritage specialist.*

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