

**The Redesign of
Child and Family Services
—A Frontline Perspective**



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"Government needs to make children a priority above all else." —Survey respondent

Introduction

Redesign of Child and Family Services

In its November 1993 report, *Reshaping Child Welfare*, the Government of Alberta introduced its plan to redesign Child and Family Services. Child and Family Services include child welfare (child protection, residential care, adoption, etc.), handicapped children's services and social care facilities (day care, group homes, foster homes, women's shelters, etc.).

Redesign of services has been ongoing since 1993. During redesign, the provincial government and various concerned and involved organizations and individuals have expressed differing views on the process and its direction, particularly in the areas of standards, funding and monitoring and evaluation. Despite these unresolved differences, the provincial government has already undertaken a number of redesign initiatives.

One major initiative is the creation of regional authorities similar to those established for health care. The new regional authorities will take over many of the Child and Family Services responsibilities originally held by the provincial government. The government, however, states it plans to remain responsible for at least the following three areas: standards, funding and monitoring and evaluation of services.

The Survey

In February and March 1998, the Edmonton Social Planning Council conducted a survey of those in Region 10 who are working with or concerned with the well-being of children (and families) in order to investigate their views on the redesign of Child and Family Services. The survey asked six questions on general issues, followed by 21 questions on standards, funding, monitoring and evaluation of services and confidence in redesign.

The first six questions were multiple choice, while questions 7-27 used a five-point Likert scale indicating level of agreement or disagreement. Some background information was gathered on respondents—approximately 1,000 surveys were mailed and 240 completed surveys were returned.

The responses to questions 7-27 are summarized in this report by combining the percentages for “strongly agree” and “agree” into “agreed” and combining the percentages for “disagree” and “strongly disagree” into “disagreed.” “Agreed” and “disagreed” percentages do not sum to 100 per cent because of non-responses (which did not exceed eight per cent in any question) and/or “neutral” responses. The findings of this survey represent the thoughts and concerns of the 240 respondents.

Standards, Funding and Monitoring and Evaluation

In November 1997, the provincial government completed a draft of its proposed new standards to guide the delivery of Child and Family Services. An updated version was completed in February 1998. Standards are sets of expectations for how and what services will be provided to children and families. “An example of a standard is “children and families are safe.”

The provincial government will continue to decide the overall level of funding for Child and Family Services. Under the new regionalized system, the funds will be divided among 18 regional authorities. Each authority will then allocate its funds to programs in its own region.

The provincial government and the new regional authorities will be responsible to monitor and evaluate delivery of Child and Family Services. Monitoring and evaluation means measuring if standards are being complied with; determining whether performance measures indicate outcomes are being achieved; evaluating peoples’ experiences in receiving and providing services; and evaluating trends. In November 1997, the government completed a draft of its proposed new approach to monitoring and evaluation.

Survey Findings

Survey Respondents

"Thank you for this (survey) as I am also the mother of a handicapped daughter."

—Survey respondent

Seventy-eight per cent of respondents had over five years experience working with children and families, while 57 per cent had over 10 years experience. The respondents included individuals involved with foster care, day care, child protection, nursing, social work, women's shelters, paediatrics, teaching, residential care, home care, literacy, children with disabilities and Aboriginal organizations.

• 78% of respondents
• had over five years
• experience working
• with children and
• families

Thirty-eight per cent of respondents had been directly involved in the provincial government's redesign initiative. Fifty-five per cent had read the November 1997 draft of the new standards, while 43 per cent had read the proposed new approach to monitoring and evaluation. Thirty-three per cent of respondents left a contact name and number so they could be further involved in discussions on Children and Family Services.

General Issues Related to Child and Family Services

"If we neglect social programs now we shall pay heavily in years to come." —Survey respondent

Eighty per cent of respondents felt that non-profit organizations should deliver services, with 52 per cent opting for public non-profit and 28 per cent for private non-profit. Fifty-two per cent of respondents felt that parents or family held primary responsibility for the well-being of children, while 32 per cent felt that society or community held primary responsibility.

• 80% of respondents
• felt that non-profit
• organizations should
• deliver services

Thirty-one per cent of respondents felt that the provincial government alone should set funding levels, while the other 69 per cent opted for a collaboration involving one or more of the following in combination with government: regional authorities, elected local authorities, communities and/or service providers. Fifty per cent of respondents indicated that the provincial government should have the primary responsibility for managing services, and 61 per cent felt that government should have the primary responsibility for monitoring and evaluating services.

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60% of respondents preferred to use provincial revenues to fund social programs

- Sixty per cent of respondents preferred to use provincial revenues to fund social programs to meet society’s needs and then pay down the debt with the rest. Twenty-seven per cent opted for the reverse, i.e., to pay a certain percentage on the debt and then fund social programs with the rest.

Standards for Child and Family Services

“Standards are too general to be more than ‘motherhood’ statements paying lip service —need to be more specific.” —Survey respondent

- 22 per cent agreed that the new standards will ensure the needs of children are addressed, while 44 per cent disagreed
- 12 per cent agreed that overall funding for services was high enough to meet the new standards, while 54 per cent disagreed
- 22% agreed that the new standards will ensure the needs of children are addressed
- 37 per cent of respondents agreed that there had been meaningful involvement in the development of the new provincial standards, while 39 per cent disagreed
- 27 per cent agreed that they would be meaningfully involved in determining whether the new standards were appropriate, while 47 per cent disagreed
- 28 per cent agreed that standards set in the last decade had been appropriate, while 52 per cent disagreed
- 19 per cent agreed that in the last decade government had ensured that standards had been adhered to, while 66 per cent disagreed

Funding of Child and Family Services

“Too many children are losing out due to lack of funds.” —Survey respondent

- 87 per cent of respondents agreed that the overall level of funding should be based on social needs rather than on predetermined budgets, while five per cent disagreed

- Nine per cent agreed that the overall level of provincial funding is sufficient to ensure that children and families in need can access the services they require, while 59 per cent disagreed
- 18 per cent agreed that there has been meaningful involvement in setting the overall level of provincial funding, while 54 per cent disagreed
- 22 per cent agreed that in the new regionalized system, Aboriginal people will be given enough funding and other resources to provide quality services in their own community, while 28 per cent disagreed (note: 43 per cent were neutral)
- 89 per cent agreed that the need for Child Protection Services increases when funding is cut for other social programs, while 6 per cent disagreed
- 76 per cent agreed that child welfare workers should be given extra funds to provide short-term income support for clients in a crisis, while 11 per cent disagreed
- 51 per cent agreed that when children are in government care, the parents should pay part of the cost, while 23 per cent disagreed

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Monitoring and Evaluation of Child and Family Services

“Monitoring is essential but it needs to be done with reason, common sense, caring and good follow through.” —Survey respondent

- 79 per cent agreed that proper monitoring and evaluation will require additional provincial funds specifically allocated for that purpose, while eight per cent disagreed
- 23 per cent agreed that there has been meaningful involvement in developing the new processes and measures for monitoring and evaluation, while 48 per cent disagreed
- 21 per cent of respondents agreed that in the last decade monitoring and evaluation has been properly carried out by the provincial government, while 54 per cent disagreed

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- proper monitoring and
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- funds

- 75% agreed that the office of the Children's Advocate should be retained
- 75 per cent agreed that the office of the Children's Advocate should be retained with at least the same powers it has now, while 12 per cent disagreed
- 63 per cent agreed that the Children's Advocate should report directly to the Legislature, while 10 per cent disagreed
- 77 per cent agreed that the performance measures used to evaluate services should be measures which cannot be influenced by arbitrarily denying access to services, while one per cent disagreed

Confidence in Redesign

"Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to respond to the changes in children's services. I wrote a letter to the Region 10 report on the redesign of children's services and I was left feeling very discouraged.

I just don't think anyone is listening to the real concerns from the community."

—Survey respondent

- 14% agreed that since redesign began their confidence has INCREASED that redesign will result in services which better meet the needs of children
- 16 per cent agreed that the provincial government's redesign will result in services which better meet the needs of children, while 45 per cent disagreed
- 14 per cent agreed that since redesign began their confidence has INCREASED that redesign will result in services which better meet the needs of children, while 58 per cent disagreed

Conclusion

Summary

The Edmonton Social Planning Council's survey shows that those working with or concerned with the well-being of children have a number of serious concerns with the redesign process. These concerns include:

- shifting of responsibility for delivery and management of services away from the provincial government
- inadequate funding
- lack of meaningful involvement in the redesign process with respect to funding and monitoring and evaluation
- inadequate standards and enforcement of standards
- funding cuts in other related programs (e.g. Supports For Independence)
- lack of adequate monitoring and evaluation
- lack of confidence in the redesign process

Current Policy Implications

The survey suggests a number of policy implications. These include:

- maintaining responsibility for services with the provincial government
- establishment of mechanisms to ensure meaningful involvement in the redesign
- improved standards and enforcement of standards
- increased funding in the areas of service delivery and monitoring and evaluation
- improved monitoring and evaluation
- better integration of policy and programs (e.g. between child welfare and income support programs)

Final Thoughts

The most disturbing findings of the survey are twofold. First, the survey calls into question a number of the positive statements which the provincial government has made about the nature and direction of the redesign process, for example, that the overall level of provincial funding is sufficient to ensure that children and families in need can access the services they require. Second, the survey shows that over half of those who returned their surveys felt that their confidence in redesign had not increased since the redesign process began.

It is clear that it is time to take stock of the redesign of Child and Family Services and to determine whether it will or will not result in better services for children and their families, as the provincial government continues to claim. One starting point would be to initiate a broad discussion on the findings of this survey. Another constructive step would be a regional replication of the ESPC survey. These initiatives would provide an informed basis for conducting an objective re-evaluation of the redesign process.