

Building Stronger Families

Government of the Northwest Territories Response to Committee Report 6-17(5)  
 Report on the Review of the 2014 Report of the Auditor General of Canada on Northwest Territories Child and Family Services

	Recommendations	Actions
1.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services produce its action plan by June 30, 2014 and table it in the Legislative Assembly at the earliest opportunity.</p>	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations was advised that the June deadline could not be met if the action plan was to be responsive to the recommendations made by the Committee. The Department has completed <i>Building Stronger Families, An Action Plan to Transform Child and Family Services</i>, which was distributed to the Standing Committee on Government Operations and the Standing Committee on Social Programs on August 29, 2014.</p>
2.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services focus on prevention, early intervention and family preservation strategies with the goal of reducing the need for child apprehensions. Measureable targets should be specified for the upcoming five and ten year periods.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Risk Assessment and Differential Response</u> initiative within the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department is introducing the use of a differential response approach to provide support to children and their families. Differential response is collaborative rather than investigative and focuses on providing the family with additional supports instead of an adversarial approach and taking parents to court. Such an approach recognizes the need for varying supportive strategies while promoting prevention, early intervention and family preservation. Implementing a differential response approach is a shift in practice and will be a process undertaken over the next three to five years.</p> <p>The Department of Health and Social Services has begun the process to adopt the Structured Decision Making (SDM) assessment tools. SDM is a decision making process for use by child protection workers, following the screening of an initial report of a child who may be in need of child protection services. SDM is a series of assessments that gather information to guide a child protection worker's decisions in providing the child and family with the most appropriate services. This process is complementary to differential response as it informs decisions made to meet individual needs of a child and family, therefore</p>

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		<p>responding in different ways to differing needs.</p> <p>Differential Response and Structured Decision Making encourage working to create positive change for families through prevention, early intervention and support to the whole family.</p>
3.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services investigate the feasibility of territory-wide expansion of family preservation workers. These workers provide in-home, individualized intervention services in order to promote the well-being of children and families.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Risk Assessment and Differential Response</u> initiative within the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department is introducing the use of a differential response approach to provide support to children and their families. Differential response is collaborative rather than investigative and focuses on providing the family with additional supports instead of an adversarial approach and taking parents to court. Such an approach recognizes the need for varying supportive strategies while promoting prevention, early intervention and family preservation. Implementing a differential response approach is a shift in practice and will be a process undertaken over the next three to five years.</p>
4.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Health and Social Services Authorities, in consultation with the Department of Health and Social Services, assist child protection workers in identifying and accessing the prevention programs available to children and families. They should also ensure that prevention programs such as the Healthy Family Program are offered to families in need.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Inventory and Manual of Prevention Programs</u> initiative within the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. In collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Services, the Regional Authorities will create an inventory and ultimately a manual of all prevention programs within each region to support child protection workers in identifying and accessing programs available to children and families.</p>
5.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services build stronger linkages with Aboriginal governments pertaining to child and family services.</p>	<p>In reply to Committee Motion 48-17(5), the Minister indicated that the Department will be looking to add child and family services to the agendas for government-to-government meetings with Aboriginal governments.</p>

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6.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services provide quarterly updates to the Standing Committee on Social Programs on improvements to child and family services. These updates should replicate indicators associated with Exhibits 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the Auditor General's report. These exhibits pertain to the following areas respectively: conducting investigations; addressing confirmed child protection needs; attending to children in care of the Director; and screening and reviewing foster care homes.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Quarterly Performance Reports</u> initiative within the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department has identified indicators associated with Exhibits 3, 4, 5 and 6 and has created a spreadsheet and reporting template for a quarterly performance measures report. In the fall of 2014, a test report will be designed and used to collect baseline data and adjust the indicator set in preparation for full implementation in 2015-16. Using data reflecting the first quarter of the 2015-16 fiscal year, Assistant Directors in the Regional Authorities will provide the first report to the Director in June 2015.</p>
7.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services begin immediately and in earnest to correct deficiencies in child and family services. Improvements must not be delayed until governance reforms have taken place as reforms may take until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly or longer to complete.</p>	<p>The <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan outlines how the Department intends to transform child and family services over the next five years. Implementation of the action plan began in July, 2014.</p>
8.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services develop a communication plan pertaining specifically to child and family services so that stakeholders and the public are informed about completed actions, upcoming changes, and anticipated timelines.</p>	<p>This recommendation will be addressed in the <u>Leadership and Communication</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan.</p>
9.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services conduct a thorough review of its accountability framework for child and family services to identify existing deficiencies and implement mechanisms to enhance accountability.</p>	<p>This recommendation will be addressed in the <u>Revised Accountability Framework</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The revised accountability framework identifies a number of actions to address deficiencies while enhancing accountability.</p> <p>On July 10, 2014, the regional Chief Executive Officers who have responsibility</p>

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		<p>for child and family services were appointed as Assistant Directors of Child and Family Services. Assistant Directors are now directly accountable to the Director for all services delivered under the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i>. The new reporting relationship places the accountability of day-to-day operations at the regional level and child protection workers are indirectly accountable to the Director through the Assistant Director/CEO. The Assistant Directors received training on the <i>Act</i>, delegated responsibilities and child and family services in July 2014.</p> <p>In collaboration with the Regional Authorities, the Department will undertake annual file audits, while the authorities will conduct audits every six months following the opening of a file. The authorities must create and implement action plans to address issues identified during the audit processes. Action plans will be shared with the Director and monitored by audit teams.</p> <p>The Department has implemented a quarterly reporting requirement for the Assistant Directors to the Director of Child and Family Services. These reports will serve both an accountability purpose and provide information on which the Department will prepare the Director's annual Child and Family Services report.</p> <p>The Director of Child and Family Services, through appointment the Assistant Directors, hold the parental responsibilities for children in their permanent care and custody. The Department is currently reviewing all children in permanent care and custody. The review will be completed by December 2014. This review is to ensure all files are up to date including a case plan and permanency plan. Moving forward, Assistant Directors will review the status and sign all case plans for children in their care on an annual basis.</p> <p>The Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual is another mechanism to enhance accountability. The Manual assists child protection workers to meet their statutory obligations thereby improving accountability system-wide. The Standards and Procedures Manual is a living document requiring frequent change to meet current day best practices, procedures and</p>
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		<p>keep pace with changes in the <i>Act</i>. The Department is currently in the process of revising the Manual for distribution to the authorities in December 2014.</p> <p>Accountability may also be impacted by both financial and human resources. The Department is entering an agreement with the Child Welfare League of Canada to review and assess the human resources required to provide child and family services appropriate for the NWT. The review will be completed by March 2015, at which time the Department will use the information to assess financial resource requirements.</p> <p>Following the Standing Committee on Social Programs' report on Child and Family Services in 2010, the Department began work on a variety of amendments to the <i>Act</i>. A number of the proposed amendments bear directly on improved accountability. It is anticipated that the proposed amendments will be brought forward to the Legislative Assembly prior to the end of its current term for consideration.</p> <p>The Department has recently received approval and funding for the replacement of the current child and family services information system. Recommendations in the Auditor General's report will be included in the redesign of the system improving the Department's data and ultimately improving accountability. It is anticipated that the new system will be in place for the 2017-18 fiscal year.</p>
10.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that contribution agreements with the Health and Social Services authorities include a performance component clearly indicating that funding is contingent on compliance with the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i>. This action should be taken immediately.</p>	<p>Beginning in 2015-16, contribution agreements between the Department of Health and Social Services and the Regional Authorities will clearly indicate required performance measures including the submission of quarterly reports to the Director of Child and Family Services. This action is contained within the <u>Revised Accountability Framework</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan.</p>
11.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Annual Compliance Audits</u> component</p>

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	<p>Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services conduct compliance audits of child and family services files annually in all Health and Social Services authorities, as required by the Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual. It should also require Health and Social Services authorities to submit action plans to address deficiencies and monitor their implementation.</p>	<p>of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan.</p> <p>The Department is in the process of creating audit teams that will include representation from both the Department and regional authorities. The teams will collaborate on the development of a common audit tool and report for use in all file audits. The compliance auditing process will support both annual and internal audits.</p> <p>In follow up to audits, authorities will provide the Director with detailed action plans to address deficiencies. Action plans will be monitored and supported by the audit teams.</p> <p>An annual audit schedule will be developed and compliance audits will begin in 2015-16.</p>
12.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that internal compliance audits and action plans designed to address deficiencies prepared by regional authorities be forwarded to the Standing Committee on Social Programs.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Annual Compliance Audits</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department's audit teams and schedule will encompass and support internal compliance audits. The audit teams will monitor and support the actions plans designed by the regional authorities to address identified deficiencies while linking the internal audits with the annual process.</p>
13.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that internal compliance audits and action plans designed to address deficiencies prepared by modified for privacy considerations and tabled in the Legislative Assembly. The Committee further recommends that internal audits include updates on indicators associated with Exhibits 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the Auditor General's report.</p>	<p>As outlined within the <u>Annual Compliance Audits</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan, the common audit tool and reporting template will reflect the indicators identified in the Auditor General's exhibits 3, 4, 5, and 6.</p>
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	The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Director of Child and Family Services report annually to the Minister of Health and Social Services, as required under the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> .	On April 30, 2014, the Director of Child and Family Services submitted a report to the Minister covering the years 2002-2012. The 2013-2014 Director of Child and Family Services annual report will be submitted to the Minister on October 1, 2014 and annually thereafter.
15.	The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Minister of Health and Social Services table the Director's annual report each year in the Legislative Assembly. The Standing Committee further recommends that the Minister of Health and Social Services arrange for the Director's annual report to include updates for each regional authority on indicators associated with Exhibits 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the Auditor General's report.	In future the Director's annual report will be tabled in the Legislative Assembly. To the extent possible, given the limitations of the current information system, the annual report will contain the indicators referred to in the Auditor General's exhibits.
16.	The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that all future departmental business plans adopt as performance measures the indicators associated with Exhibits 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the Auditor General's report.	In response to Committee Motion 59-17(5) the Minister committed to public reporting on the indicators contained within the Auditor General's exhibits. The annual business plans may not be the most appropriate venue for public reporting, but they will be in the Director's Annual Report which will be tabled.
17.	The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services, in conjunction with the Health and Social Services authorities, perform a detailed assessment of the financial and human resource requirements for delivering child and family services. The Department should then review this assessment periodically to identify any necessary changes.	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Workload Management Study</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department of Health and Social Services is in the process of entering an agreement with the Child Welfare League of Canada to complete a review by March 2015 assessing the human resources required to deliver child and family services. The review will provide information for use by the Department to assess the financial resources required.</p> <p>The Department will regularly review the assessment to ensure both the human and financial requirements are being met in relations to the child and family services system of the day.</p>

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18.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services, in consultation with the Health and Social Services authorities, update and clarify the Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual and clarify the additional tools and guidance to better assist child protection workers in meeting key requirements of the Child and Family Services Act.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Manual Revisions and Practice Tools</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department is currently in the process of revising the Manual providing increased clarity in procedures, extensive tools and resources to support child protection workers in their practice. The Manual will be ready for distribution to the authorities in December 2014.</p> <p>The Standards and Procedures Manual is a living document requiring frequent change to meet current day best practices, procedures and keep pace with changes in the <i>Act</i>.</p>
19.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services complete revisions to the Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual by December 2014.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Manual Revisions and Practice Tools</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department is currently in the process of revising the Manual for distribution to the authorities in December 2014.</p>
20.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services, in consultation with the Health and Social Services authorities, develop a process for all parties involved in the delivery of child and family services to share information on best practices and challenges in delivery of these services.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Leadership and Communications</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Director of Child and Family Services has reconvened the Director of Social Program forum providing a regular opportunity for communicating, sharing, problem solving, collaborating and ensuring all voices are part of child and family services.</p> <p>The Directors' forum will meet monthly by teleconference and plan face-to-face meetings as appropriate throughout the year.</p> <p>The first teleconference was held on August 26, 2014. Plans are beginning made for a face-to-face at the end of October 2014.</p>
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	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services, in consultation with the Health and Social Services, provide training to all child protection workers for all key responsibilities required to carry out child and family services. It should also assess whether the training provided is meeting the needs of child protection workers to deliver child and family services and make the necessary improvements as soon as possible.</p>	<p>As indicated in the Department's response to the Auditor General's recommendation (in paragraph 42 of the Auditor general's report) the Department is taking steps to address this recommendation. The statutory training program for Child Protection Workers is being expanded to include best practices in core functions, such as risk assessment, early intervention, dispute resolution family support and permanency planning. Several components of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i>, including <u>Risk Assessment and Differential Response</u>, <u>Permanency Planning</u> and <u>Supervisor Training Program</u> also address this recommendation.</p>
<p>22.</p>	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services implement an ongoing formal process whereby child protection workers have an opportunity to recommend improvements for the child and family services system.</p>	<p>The Department will collaborate with child protection workers on the revisions to the statutory training recognizing the importance of practitioners' knowledge and experience to ensure training is appropriate and applicable.</p> <p>The Standards and Procedures Manual is a living document requiring frequent change to meet current day best practices, procedures and keep pace with changes in the <i>Act</i>.</p>
<p>23.</p>	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services revise the funding methodology for the regional authorities upon completing the assessment of required resources.</p>	<p>The Department will undertake a review of the funding methodology in the spring of 2015 following the completion of the <u>Workload Management Study</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan.</p>
<p>24.</p>	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services establish territory-wide caseload standards for child protection workers, and further the Department of Health and Social Services ensure that caseloads are fairly balanced across the regional authorities. Due consideration should be given to regional variation in duties, demands and available resources.</p>	<p>This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Workload Management Study</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan.</p> <p>The Department will enter an agreement in September 2014 with the Child Welfare League of Canada to review and assess the workloads and caseloads of child protection workers at the authority level. The review will consider the varying duties of child protection workers, the workload demands such as</p>

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		<p>preparation for court appearances and what resources, both human and program, are available.</p> <p>A note of caution is required in reference to establishing caseload standards. Child protection cases vary widely in complexity, and case complexity is what drives workload demands. It may be more realistic to establish workload standards which take into account case complexity.</p>
25.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services work with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and Aurora College to enhance support for students in the social work program with the goal of increasing the number of home-grown, Aboriginal students. A bursary program should be established. Online coursework and distance education options should also be considered.</p>	<p>The Department will collaborate with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and Aurora College to explore alternative program delivery approaches such as online options with a view to improving accessibility and reducing cost of program delivery to meet the goal of increasing the number of Northern Aboriginal students in the Social Work Diploma program.</p> <p>Distance education is also being considered as an option to increase the number of diploma and degree graduates in the field of social services</p>
26.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Health and Social Services authorities, in consultation with the Department of Health and Social Services, develop a tool to ensure that longer-term risks to children are formally assessed when determining a child's safety, as required under the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i>. This tool should be ready for use by front-line workers within the current fiscal year. To expedite the process, the Department should look to other jurisdictions for guidance.</p>	<p>As outlined in the <u>Risk Assessment and Differential Response</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan, over the next three to five years, the Department will introduce Structured Decision Making (SDM) and adapt assessment tools to the unique cultural and social environment of the NWT. SDM uses a series of structured assessment tools at various points in the process of managing child protection cases to assist workers to make decisions.</p> <p>In 2014, the Department will develop tools to support decisions at the time of screening and prioritizing a report of the need for child protection services and the safety and long term risks of and for the child. Tools will be completed by March 2015. Following training and in-service for child protection workers, testing and validation of the three assessment tools will begin in the summer of 2015. As part of both accountability and evaluation of the tools, the Department will undertake a validation study in the fall of 2016 in order ensure the</p>

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		assessment tools are meeting needs in the NWT.
27.	The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that the Health and Social Services authorities comply with the Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual in their delivery of services to children and families. They should ensure that key requirements are met when: investigating concerns about child safety and well-being; providing protective services to children to address confirmed child protection needs; providing services to children under the care of the Director of Child and Family Services; and performing screening and monitoring of foster care homes.	As outlined in the <u>Annual Compliance Audits</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan, audits of child and family services at the regional authority level will outline compliance with the Manual and the <i>Act</i> . In places where deficiencies are found, the Regional Authorities will be required to develop and implement an action plan for improvements and compliance.
28.	The Standing Committee on Government Operations concurs with the Auditor General of Canada and recommends that Health and Social Services authorities, in consultation with the Department of Health and Social Services, should regularly assess whether the services they provide to children and families are in compliance with the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> and the Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual. The results of these assessments should be used to improve compliance and should be shared with the Director of Child and Family Services.	This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Annual Compliance Audits</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. Annual audits, based on a common audit tool, will be performed on each Regional Authority, and the Regional Authorities will report the audit results using a common reporting template. Annual audits will verify compliance with both the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> , and the Standards and Procedures Manual.
29.	The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services address gaps in services for youth and make appropriate amendments to the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> . Performance measures should be included in all departmental business plans to track the number of youth receiving discretionary services and the types of services received.	This recommendation is addressed in the <u>Legislative Amendments</u> component of the <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan. The Department has been collaborating with the Department of Justice on the drafting of proposed amendments to the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> . It is expected the proposed amendments will be presented to the Legislative Assembly when it convenes in the spring of 2015.

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		<p>The amendments include changes to the <i>Act</i> that support youth including defining 'youth' as a person from the age of 16 to the age of majority (19) and extending services support transition planning for youth leaving the permanent custody of the Director.</p> <p>The performance measures in future departmental business plans, beginning in 2015-16, will include gathering of information on the number of youth and the type of discretionary services they receive.</p>
30.	<p>The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Government provide a comprehensive response to this report within 120 days.</p>	<p>The <i>Building Stronger Families</i> action plan, submitted as a confidential draft to the Standing Committee on Government Operations on August 29, reflects the Department's comprehensive response to the Committee's report. Once the action plan is finalized and approved for public release, it will be formally transmitted to the Standing Committee.</p>