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Protection for Children in Care

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There are many concerning issues in the report from the Advocate for Children and Youth, including the number of critical injuries. A shocking number of kids in this government's care attempted suicide over the past year, and that's heartbreaking. And the report identifies major shortcomings into mental health services for our kids. To the minister: what's the government going to do to address this?

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Children's Advocate for all the work that he does and the report that he brings forward every year, as well as the special investigations that he does. The work that the Children's Advocate does is critical.

We are happy that there is progress in this report that is being pointed out, but there's also more work that needs to be done. And he touches on a number of ministries where that work needs to be done, Social Services being only one of them. Mr. Speaker, we will work with the Children's Advocate on how we can make improvements for all the children within our province.

What we won't do is go back to a system where, seriously, we didn't even know how to track our children, and where we had up to 21 children in a foster home. And that's the way it was when the NDP were government.

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the member from Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, this is a pretty serious matter and the minister tends to want to play political games with this, talking about, you know, going in the past. This is what's happening now in this province. She needs to take it seriously, and the government over there needs to take it seriously.

When you have 16 children in the government's care attempting suicide, and when you have 3 children in the government's care who has died as a result of suicide, this government should be taking significant steps, significant steps to address shortcomings in mental health services for kids. Ten children in this government's care were not kept safe and were victims of physical or sexual assault. What is the minister going to do to address this now?

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, a lot of work has been done, including in the Ministry of Health, where there was now a mental health and addictions action plan. And we'll be acting on the recommendations of that report in due course. Mr. Speaker, what we've done is we have introduced an electronic system so that we can track our children around the province. That was never there before.

We have brought down the caseload, the number of children in our care, quite significantly by adding more supports to homes and families before the family becomes at risk, Mr. Speaker. We've added more front-line workers, even though we have fewer children in our care, Mr. Speaker.

It's interesting that the member opposite wants to do a dramatic act on how, you know, why don't we show that this is important. Well, Mr. Speaker, this government has committed more dollars each and every budget since we've been government to child and family protection issues. And we've increased that budget by over 150 per cent, Mr. Speaker. But when the NDP put out a press release where the opposition wants budget to reroute spending to priority areas, there was not one mention of child protection in that document.