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Protection of Children in Care

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, yesterday in question period I asked about the number of children who died in the care of Social Services last year. The minister wouldn't answer the question, but she did give me the answer last night in committee. She said 16 children in care died last year, not counting the children that died of natural causes. Mr. Speaker, for far too many years, we've lost far too many children in care and it needs to stop.

To the minister: with all the recommendations from the Children's Advocate and the findings of the coroner's inquest, why isn't this government doing a better job protecting our province's most vulnerable children?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In reviewing the number of child deaths over, literally over a decade, the numbers have been fairly consistent, so it isn't getting worse. However no death is acceptable. Some of the deaths are from natural causes. Some are from accidents, and there's other rationale. However, Mr. Speaker, there's always that one, such as the case that we've just heard about recently, where it's not acceptable and more needs to be done.

That's why this government has taken it very seriously and increased the funding for our child and family services by 156 per cent over and above what the members opposite spent when they were in government, Mr. Speaker. That's why this government has implemented an electronic system in order to track the children and also to help the workers to do their work. That's why this government has increased the number of front-line workers. That's why this government has increased the amount of funding to foster families, and we've increased supports that we put into our foster homes.

Mr. Speaker, that's why this government's invested in and supports the families to keep them whole before they go into crisis, and that's why the number of children coming into care is going down, Mr. Speaker. We are working very hard. We'll continue to work with

the Children's Advocate to try to prevent future issues from happening because they're not acceptable. But we don't want to go back to the funding of the NDP [New Democratic Party].

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, 16 children in care died last year. That means since 2010, 97 children in care have died, not counting the ones from natural causes. And that's heartbreaking. And while the Children's Advocate acknowledges that there has been some progress, he says that this government has a long way to go when it comes to protecting our vulnerable children. So, Mr. Speaker, when you have a long way to go, slow progress is not acceptable.

To the minister: what will it take for this government to start properly protecting our most vulnerable children?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, from the Children's Advocate most recent report, he has said that there is progress that's being made, and indeed of the 18 recommendations, we've implemented 12 of those recommendations. We have five that are in progress and one that's under consideration. Mr. Speaker, we've put in a number of systems within our child protection services that has strengthened the system.

It will be a continuous progress that needs to happen in this particular file, and it should happen. We need to learn from each and every time where there seems to be a gap, and we need to do better. And, Mr. Speaker, we'll continue to do so because these are the important citizens of our province. But we don't want to go back to the underfunding of the NDP where we had less workers, more children in our care, and not enough supports for the families before they came into crisis.