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Protection of Vulnerable Children

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the Social Services minister said yesterday it could take three weeks for this government to respond to the recommendations from the inquest into the tragic death of Lee Bonneau. To the minister: why so long?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and indeed I did say it would take between two to three weeks to have a formal response to the recommendations from the coroner's inquest. But I also said that some of those recommendations are already under way because the Children's Advocate had a report some time ago on this very same issue.

Of the 18 recommendations from the Children's Advocate, we've been giving quarterly reports. Three have been made. They're public. As to what the Ministry of Social Services and the Yorkton Tribal Council First Nations agency are doing to comply with the recommendations of the Children's Advocate, of those recommendations, 12 have already been fully implemented. Five are in progress and one is under consideration, Mr. Speaker. So a great deal of work has been done over the last two years.

We've made it public, the work that's been done to improve the system. Where work needs to be done, and we will, the officials will be going through the further recommendations, but it'll be two to three weeks.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, there isn't anything earth-shattering in these recommendations. And the government has heard this all before, time and time again, about caseloads that are too heavy, about lack of communications between different agencies, between different sections of the ministry and between different case workers and about vulnerable children who are falling through the cracks.

So to the minister: why does this government need three weeks to respond to these recommendations? Why can't it embrace these recommendations and start protecting vulnerable children in a much better way?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, as I said in my previous answer, a lot of work has already been done. It's not unusual for the officials to ask for two weeks in order to give an official response to recommendations that come forward. That's not unusual from when he was sitting at the cabinet table. It's not an unusual amount of time to ask for two weeks.

But, Mr. Speaker, a lot of work has been done to address the very issues that he's identified. We now have a dedicated First Nations and Métis service consultant to help us work with our First Nations agencies.

We have changed from every three years to having annual audits of our First Nations agencies. We've added four additional staff to our quality insurance. As I said, Mr. Speaker, those are all in response to the Children's Advocate recommendations. Many of the coroner's inquest recommendations duplicate those, so work has already taken place, Mr. Speaker.

In order to improve the communication, which I think is definitely identified as a breakdown in this particular issue, we now have implemented a structured decision-making tool that our workers use in order to help them with their case file management. And I'll have more initiatives that we have undertaken in the last two years in my next answer.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the Children's Advocate does say some progress has been made since this little boy's tragic death, but he says, and I quote, "There is still a long way to go." And we have recommendations from the coroner's inquest, and we have a Social Services minister that says it could take three weeks to respond to these recommendations. And when we have a Children's Advocate saying this government has a long way to go to protect vulnerable children in this province, that's incredibly concerning.

So to the minister: what will it take for this government to get actually serious about protecting our most vulnerable children?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, this government has been extremely serious about protecting our most vulnerable children. Mr. Speaker, that's why we increased the child and family services budget by 156 per cent from when that member sat at the cabinet table. Mr. Speaker, we're not going to go back to when the NDP had authority over that file, when we had 90 less workers in our province and more children in our care. We

added 90 workers to help with the workload. We will continue to assess and evaluate whether or not that's enough. But we've dropped the average workload for a worker to 16 from 21 where it was when the members opposite were in the authority to make those decisions.

Mr. Speaker, we've added supports to our foster families and we no longer have overcrowded foster homes, because when that member sat at the cabinet table, there was up to 21 children in one foster home alone. Mr. Speaker, that is totally unacceptable. But furthermore and very important, and it was identified in this particular situation how serious this is, we implemented electronic tracking system for our children. Because under the NDP, you could track a library book better than you could track our children in our province.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the member neglects to mention that it costs \$60 million, \$60 million, for the Linkin system. But, Mr. Speaker, between 2010 and 2013 there were 81 deaths of children in this government's care, not counting natural deaths. Ten of those deaths were homicides. To the minister: what is the updated number? How many children died in care in 2014?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, that member needs to represent those numbers in such a way that they are actually letting the public know that includes car accidents, and a number of natural deaths that . . . in those numbers that's he's quoting.

And, Mr. Speaker, I want him to say now — because it was definitely identified with a First Nations agency who now have an electronic system since this incident happened but at the time did not, and didn't have the way to share information from one office to another — is \$60 million, is that too much to have an electronic system to help track our children, to help our front-line workers to be able to manage the case files they have?

Is he saying that that was not money we should spend? Is he saying that we should not have increased the budget as much as we have in order to put supports in for families and for foster families and also for our families in order to keep their children at home? What is that member actually saying? Because he's just implying that we should not have spent that money.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, can the Minister of Social Services tell us why she's ended funding for the Radius youth companion program in Saskatoon?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, we have done a review of CBOs [community-based organization]. There are some CBOs that we will be discontinuing funding for because

either there's a duplication of services or we are now measuring outcomes and maybe the outcomes were not as strong as they should have been.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Samantha Neill is speaking out today. She has a child with severe cognitive disabilities and they rely on the youth companion program at Radius, and this government just cut \$65,000 per year that went into this program. How can the minister possibly justify this cut?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Mr. Speaker, if Samantha is finding difficulty getting services for her son, I'm more than happy to meet with her as well as have officials meet with her to find the services that she needs.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the youth companion program started out as a pilot project in 2006 and then this government annualized funding for the program in 2008. And that was a good move, but now this government has slashed the funding just a couple of months before summer when this kind of support is needed the most.

To the minister: what's changed? Why is this government cutting \$65,000 for a program that it used to think was important for young people with cognitive disabilities?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister for Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Again, Mr. Speaker, there's been no government in the history of this province that has dedicated more dollars to disabilities and disability issues than this government. So we're more than happy to meet with this mother and ensure . . .

Because we did a review of our CBOs, and if the results were not as strong as we were looking for or if there's a duplication of services, Mr. Speaker, to make our dollars effective and efficient, we need to do those reviews. We can't just blindly fund everything even though we're not seeing the results that we're hoping to get. Mr. Speaker, that is being responsible. We will help this mother find some services.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the \$65,000 cut will directly affect young people with cognitive disabilities and their families, and this minister should listen to the mom who's speaking out today. She says, "I can tell you there are virtually no other resources for families in terms of locating potential caregivers for our children." And she says, "This is completely unacceptable."

Will the minister listen to this mom and to the many other parents and reverse this cut that provides needed support for young people with cognitive disabilities?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister for Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: Again, Mr. Speaker, I will tell the member opposite because maybe he didn't hear me. Yes. We will meet with the mom and we will listen to her.