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Support for Children in Care

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Children's Advocate released his annual report today, and it shows that child and family services is facing an appalling shortage of staff and resources. And as in previous years, the advocate says that caseworkers are overworked with far too many cases and unable to properly look out for vulnerable children. To the minister: will she give caseworkers the resources they need to properly protect our province's most vulnerable children?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. And I really thank the child advocate for his report. It's important that we understand that our most valuable and vulnerable asset is our children. Mr. Speaker, today we talked about prevention and intervention when it came to the work that we're doing.

And I think the member opposite is aware that we have hired 90 new caseworkers, and the children in care, the numbers are down for the first time in over a decade. Mr. Speaker, the February numbers when it comes to caseworkers was just shown to me today, and we show that 80 per cent of social workers have between 10 and 20 cases. That's down considerably from a few years ago when it was around 40.

We know that there's always more work to do because the cases dealing with our children are complex, and in a province the size of Saskatchewan, there's a need to travel and to ensure that the supports are available. Mr. Speaker, through our child and family committee, we've put an additional \$62 million into services for children in the last number of years. Mr. Speaker, this is an important item to us and it always will be.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well, Mr. Speaker, the minister should listen, actually listen to what the Children's Advocate has to say. He says the structured decision-making system for

children protection services has, and I quote, “. . . great potential to improve outcomes for children and families, but it won’t be implemented effectively until the caseloads of protection workers allow them to meet SDM standards . . .” Here’s what he says, and I quote, “We remain deeply concerned that Child and Family Services will not be able to meet compliance with these standards and improve families’ outcomes without investing significant additional resources in child protection.”

So to the minister: when will this government starting taking the recommendations of the advocate seriously?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, I assure you that we take all the recommendations from the Children’s Advocate very serious. We take every case involving children very seriously. Mr. Speaker, the structured decision-making tool is actually an opportunity for workers to look at a new type of assessment to determine the needs of the children and that we have to spend more time and money, which we are doing, to ensure that workers can look at, use this tool.

Mr. Speaker, the tool was implemented across the entire province. We have two First Nations — Lac La Ronge First Nations and Peter Ballantyne First Nations — are using the structured decision-making tool. And we have eight other agencies, the First Nations agencies, that are interested in using this tool as well. This will give them an opportunity to determine the risk that the children have and to make sure that we are implementing and providing supports.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to our children, the extra money that we’ve been investing — not spending, investing — through the child and family agenda gives us a chance to put this \$62 million into the hands of the people that are working with our children.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, we know that in just the last four years 81 vulnerable children have died. These were children who were in the care of Social Services or who had just left the system. And those deaths don’t include the deaths of natural causes. The Children’s Advocate talks about two tragic deaths of very young children, and he notes that the workers for these children had caseloads in excess of 40 vulnerable children.

He says, and I quote, “. . . this caseload pressure critically impacted the quality of their work and their ability to comply with the standards in policy.” That’s why the Children’s Advocate is calling for manageable caseloads for child protection workers.

To the minister: will she commit to reverse her cuts to child and family services and implement the recommendation today?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, I’m sure that the member opposite doesn’t want to leave

the impression that there's been cuts to the number of front-line workers in this family, in this government. There's 90 new front-line workers. There is cuts to, there is cutbacks in some of the work that we're doing within the ministry themselves, but when it comes to having money for children and the front-line workers and the support they need, it's been there. We have 90 new front-line workers. Mr. Speaker, we have the structured decision-making tool, and we are looking at the caseloads as well.

I told the member opposite a few minutes ago that we have cut the number of caseloads down from . . . between 10 and 20 now is the average across the province. At one time there was 40, 40 caseloads for each one of the workers. We've cut that, Mr. Speaker. We're going to continue to work with the child welfare experts to determine what the right caseload number is across the province. There's always more work to do when it comes to this area, but I assure you our children are the most important asset we have in this province.