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Support for Children in Care

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, just in the last four years 81 vulnerable children, those in the care of Social Services and those who have just left the system, have died. Eighty-one deaths of vulnerable children just since 2010, and that doesn't include the deaths from natural causes. It's heartbreaking, Mr. Speaker, and it ought to be a cause for major concern for this government. That's why many were incredibly concerned to see this government's budget when it cut \$5.6 million in salaries from the child and family services division of Social Services.

To the minister: how can this government justify cutting jobs in the child and family services division?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and to the members opposite. We know that the death of any child is a tragedy, and we know that all the workers that we have in this province work together with the caregivers and with government to see what we can be doing better. When we look at the budget that has been spent and the one that was released last week, we know that there was additional money spent to the child and family agenda to ensure that there is more money for the workers. We're making sure that money is spent to go across ministries so we can evaluate the work that's being done. Any time there is a death, we review it not only within the ministry but we work with the Children's Advocate as well.

Mr. Speaker, there is not a . . . We continue to invest in our children. There is fewer children in care, and we know that every one of these children are special. So, Mr. Speaker, we know that the work that we do continues. Our job does not mean that we are trying to take children into care. We must keep them safe and keep them with their families if at all possible. But, Mr. Speaker, there is not a cut when it comes to our children.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, when we know that 81 children have died, either in care or shortly after leaving the system just since 2010, we should be seeing significant improvements to child protection and family services. And here's what the budget document says, the child and family services division, and I quote:

Provides programs, services and financial assistance to protect children from neglect and abuse and support the safe care of children through a continuum of family arrangements. It also operates residential facilities for youth who require structured living arrangements.

This is an incredibly important unit because its job is to protect some of our most vulnerable citizens — children and youth in care. Again to the minister: why is this government choosing to cut front-line jobs in the child and family services division?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, I know that the member opposite is aware that there is no cuts to the front-line services. In fact what we have is 90 more front-line workers for fewer children in care. Our goal is to make sure that we have . . . that children are supported within their own home if possible. If not, we make sure that they are going into foster homes where there is support as well.

Mr. Speaker, we have the Linkin system. We no longer have children being kept track of on paper. We have a structured decision-making process. We have an assessment to see what we can be doing for our children.

Every time there is a child death, we look at it through the eyes of families and people that are loving the children to see what else we can do. In fact I had the opportunity lately to speak to the ministers in Alberta as well to see if together we can decide what else we can be doing in learning best practices from each other.

Mr. Speaker, there is no cut for our children. There is more workers for our children. And our goal as a government is to keep our children safe.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Children's Advocate has said repeatedly that this government's cut to staff at Social Services are having a negative impact on children in care. And here's a quote from the Children's Advocate in September, and I quote:

The quality of case management and case planning has to improve. If that's a resourcing issue, which I believe it is, I know the ministry has added 90 staff, but the ministry as a whole also has cut over 100 staff members.

To the minister: why is this government refusing to listen to these warnings and failing to

properly protect children in care?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, we make sure that the work that we're doing within the ministry, within the administration, within the policies, whatever we're doing within ministries, yes, we make sure we do that work in an efficient manner as possible.

What we do not look for is cutting care for children. What we do not . . . We make sure that there are front-line workers. We've cut back the number of . . . There are fewer children in care. There are more contact people to be able to go out and meet with our families. There is more help for our foster families. There is more help for assessment.

And there is working across ministries, the first time in Canada where we've had the chance to look across ministry and make sure we see the children through the eyes Education and Social Services and Health at the same time. We're looking at more money for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, more money for autism, and more money to protect our children. There is never a doubt in this province that children are our first priority, and I cannot say the same for the members opposite.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: But this is the fact that the minister does not dispute, they've cut \$5.6 million in salaries. That is the fact.

Mr. Speaker, there is perhaps no greater responsibility of government than to protect our most vulnerable citizens. Yet we keep hearing major concerns about our child protection system: 81, 81 vulnerable children have died just since 2010 and that does not include deaths from natural causes. And in December, the Provincial Auditor reported that this government is still not doing enough to protect vulnerable children. Yet this government is cutting front-line workers in the child and family services division.

To the minister: when will this government listen to the auditor and the Children's Advocate, stop cutting front-line workers, and start properly protecting vulnerable children?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I cannot say often enough how much everybody's heart aches when we hear about the death of a child. We know that many of the children that come into care in this province are medically fragile. We also know that the number of children that come into care, we automatically think that they are younger children, ages six and down. Children are also what we would call young adults up to the age of 18 years old. And we look at the statistics, we find that some of them have died from homicides. Some of them have died in car accidents. Some of them have died from suicides. Every one of those breaks our hearts.

But we have not cut front-line workers. We do not cut money to the care of our children. What we do is work together to make sure that we can protect the lives of the most vulnerable and the most valuable asset we have in the province, and that's our children.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the minister should go back and read through the government's own child welfare review report from 2010. Here's what that report said, and I quote:

High caseloads and worker turnover result in lost continuity in planning, increased time children spend in care, attachment and relationship challenges for children, and increased recruitment and training costs for the Ministry and agencies.

To the minister: this government knew about this issue for the last four years from its own review. Why is it cutting staff when its own review and Children's Advocate and Provincial Auditor all have called for better support for vulnerable children?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, to the hon. member, I have said — and I know, and I believe he knows it as well — we have not cut support for vulnerable children. There may be . . . There are cuts within the ministry. We decide how we can do things in a better way. We decide that processes may be done differently. We look at the way the money is spent so we can take money and put it to the front line. Every time we go to treasury board, every time we go in front of the caucus we say, what else should we be doing? They tell us, look after the children in this province.

Mr. Speaker, we have 90 more front-line workers. We have fewer children in care. We have more supports for those children that are in care and we have supports for a family who need help for their children as well. Mr. Speaker, that is a priority for our government. It always has been. It always will be. And I do not care how many times the member opposite asks that question, children matter on this side of the House.