

Second Session - Fortieth Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
Standing Committee
on
Legislative Affairs

Chairperson
Mr. Tom Nevakshonoff
Constituency of Interlake

Vol. LXV No. 4 - 6 p.m., Wednesday, June 12, 2013

ISSN 1708-668X

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Fortieth Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ALLAN, Nancy, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
ALLUM, James	Fort Garry-Riverview	NDP
ALTEMEYER, Rob	Wolseley	NDP
ASHTON, Steve, Hon.	Thompson	NDP
BJORNSON, Peter, Hon.	Gimli	NDP
BLADY, Sharon	Kirkfield Park	NDP
BRAUN, Erna	Rossmere	NDP
BRIESE, Stuart	Agassiz	PC
CALDWELL, Drew	Brandon East	NDP
CHIEF, Kevin, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
CHOMIAK, Dave, Hon.	Kildonan	NDP
CROTHERS, Deanne	St. James	NDP
CULLEN, Cliff	Spruce Woods	PC
DEWAR, Gregory	Selkirk	NDP
DRIEDGER, Myrna	Charleswood	PC
EICHLER, Ralph	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FRIESEN, Cameron	Morden-Winkler	PC
GAUDREAU, Dave	St. Norbert	NDP
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Liberal
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GRAYDON, Cliff	Emerson	PC
HELWER, Reg	Brandon West	PC
HOWARD, Jennifer, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
IRVIN-ROSS, Kerri, Hon.	Fort Richmond	NDP
JHA, Bidhu	Radisson	NDP
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Swan River	NDP
LEMIEUX, Ron, Hon.	Dawson Trail	NDP
MACKINTOSH, Gord, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
MAGUIRE, Larry	Arthur-Virden	PC
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Flor, Hon.	Logan	NDP
MARCELINO, Ted	Tyndall Park	NDP
MELNICK, Christine, Hon.	Riel	NDP
MITCHELSON, Bonnie	River East	PC
NEVAKSHONOFF, Tom	Interlake	NDP
OSWALD, Theresa, Hon.	Seine River	NDP
PALLISTER, Brian	Fort Whyte	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine	Midland	PC
PETTERSEN, Clarence	Flin Flon	NDP
REID, Daryl, Hon.	Transcona	NDP
ROBINSON, Eric, Hon.	Kewatinook	NDP
RONDEAU, Jim, Hon.	Assiniboia	NDP
ROWAT, Leanne	Riding Mountain	PC
SARAN, Mohinder	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	St. Paul	PC
SELBY, Erin, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
SELINGER, Greg, Hon.	St. Boniface	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Verendrye	PC
STEFANSON, Heather	Tuxedo	PC
STRUTHERS, Stan, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
SWAN, Andrew, Hon.	Minto	NDP
WHITEHEAD, Frank	The Pas	NDP
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WIGHT, Melanie	Burrows	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC
<i>Vacant</i>	Morris	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

Wednesday, June 12, 2013

TIME – 6 p.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

**CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Tom Nevakshonoff
(Interlake)**

**VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Ted Marcelino
(Tyndall Park)**

ATTENDANCE – 11 QUORUM – 6

Members of the Committee present:

Hon. Mses. Howard, Selby

*Messrs. Briese, Dewar, Marcelino,
Nevakshonoff, Mrs. Rowat, Messrs. Saran,
Whitehead, Wishart*

Substitutions:

Mrs. Mitchelson for Mr. Ewasko

APPEARING:

*Hon. Jon Gerrard, MLA for River Heights
Ms. Darlene MacDonald, Children's Advocate*

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

*Annual Report of the Children's Advocate for the
fiscal year ending March 31, 2012.*

* * *

Clerk Assistant (Mr. Andrea Signorelli): Good evening. Will the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs please come to order.

Our first item of business is the election of a Chairperson. Are there any nominations for this position?

Mr. Gregory Dewar (Selkirk): It's my pleasure to nominate Mr. Nevakshonoff.

Clerk Assistant: Mr. Nevakshonoff has been nominated.

Are there any other nominations? Hearing no other nominations, Mr. Nevakshonoff, will you please take the Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: Our next item of business is the election of a Vice-Chairperson. Are there any nominations?

Mr. Dewar: I'd be equally honoured to nominate Mr. Marcelino.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Marcelino has been nominated.

Are there any other nominations? Hearing no other nominations, Mr. Marcelino is elected Vice-Chairperson.

Committee Substitution

Mr. Chairperson: This meeting—oh, one moment, I do have a substitution to announce. I would like to inform the committee that, under our rule 85(2), the following membership substitution has been made for this committee effective immediately, Mrs. Mitchelson for Mr. Ewasko. Thank you.

* * *

Mr. Chairperson: This meeting has been called to consider the following report, the Annual Report of the Children's Advocate for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2012.

Before we get started, are there any suggestions from the committee as to how long we should sit this evening?

Mr. Dewar: I suggest we sit until 8 o'clock and then revisit the proceedings at that time.

Mr. Chairperson: It's been suggested 8 o'clock. Any further suggestions? Seeing none, so ordered.

Does the honourable minister wish to make an opening statement? And would she please introduce the officials in attendance.

Hon. Jennifer Howard (Minister of Family Services and Labour): I just want to briefly welcome the folks that are here from the office of the Children's Advocate. Of course, we know Darlene MacDonald, the Children's Advocate. When she makes her remarks, she can more ably introduce her staff.

I don't want to take up a lot of time. I just want to say it continues to be a very constructive working relationship, I believe, between the office and myself and the department, and I want to thank her again for the work that she's done in the annual report and in

all of the reports that her office does to, I think, continue to provide the child welfare system with constructive ways to improve. And I think that I hear—certainly, the feedback that I hear from agencies is that they find the work that her office does to be helpful, to be constructive and to help move forward our goal of making sure that kids are safe and well cared for.

So I look forward to her presentation tonight, and I look forward to continuing to receive her good counsel and her wise advice.

Mr. Chairperson: All right. We thank the honourable minister.

Does the critic for the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mrs. Leanne Rowat (Riding Mountain): Actually, there's a number of questions that we'd like to ask. I just want to, you know, thank the Children's Advocate for being here today, and I look forward to a discussion in learning more about the role that the advocate has taken over the last year with regard to children in care.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you, Mrs. Rowat.

Ms. MacDonald, would you like to introduce your staff, please.

Ms. Darlene MacDonald (Children's Advocate): Yes, by my side is the new Deputy Children's Advocate, Cory Laberge. Also, my entire management team is here: Patty Sansregret; Angie Balan, involved in best practice and outcome measurements; Shelagh Marchenski, SIR program manager; and, in the back, Kristin Magnusson and Cynthia Steranka.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you. Does the Children's Advocate wish to make an opening statement?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, please.

First of all, good evening. I'd like to thank the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs for this audience today. I'm here to address any questions or comments that committee may have related to the annual report we recently tabled for the fiscal year 2011-2012.

As you know, our office exists to represent the rights, interests and viewpoints of children and youth who are receiving or entitled to receive services as prescribed under The Child and Family Services Act and The Adoption Act. Our office is empowered to review, investigate and provide recommendations on

matters relating to the welfare and interests of these children. During this year we responded to 2,382 requests for advocacy services.

Our mandate also includes a review of services after the death of a child who has—who was or had been receiving services through the child welfare system, within one year of the date of death. This review is known as a special investigation review. The purpose of this review is to identify ways in which programs and services under review may be improved to enhance the safety and well-being of children. Of the 163 child deaths in Manitoba during the year of this report, 61 of those cases were eligible for special investigation review.

The theme of our annual report this year is Change through Engagement. It encompasses the belief of this office that to effectively foster improvements to Manitoba's child welfare system, we need the participations of those involved at every level, including children and youth, child welfare workers, government, community leaders, advocates, as well as foster parents and caregivers. You'll see through the pages of this report that we've made a number of efforts to include and engage those involved in child welfare at various levels.

We're particularly pleased with the protocols we now have in place to develop child death reviews—recommendations in collaboration with those charged with implementing them. This has strengthened the ability of the agencies to make changes that are realistic and truly address the issues at hand. Important, but not central to the annual report, I want to say we actually completed our backlog, so yay for that.

* (18:10)

Overall, we're seeing a child welfare system that is beginning to stabilize after a very large-scale structural change that have taken place related to devolution. We have seen improvements in training and the development of stronger practice standards. The increase in extensions of care to youth turning 18 also continues, which is very positive.

The improvements we'd like to see are found in the areas of transition planning for emergent adulthood, as well as for the young people in care who must transition from one placement resource or foster home to another.

Our office continues to get calls related to family assessment and case planning issues with some frequency. At the heart of the call, a number of our

calls, is a lack of contact and communication with those most important in the system—the children and youth it is in place to protect.

So I look forward to responding to any of your questions that you might have with regards to our report. Also, I have some packages to be distributed of some of our very current outreach material, so I'd like to be able to share that with you.

Thank you.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, floor is now open for questions.

Mrs. Rowat: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank you for the opening statement. And what we're planning to do tonight probably is to go through some of the themes and recommendations and sort of focus on those areas, if that's acceptable. That'll keep us, sort of, organized in some way.

What we'd like to start with is the views of children and youth. And you'd indicated there—that, you know, there are at times a lack of contact between the children in care and whether it be the social worker, the case workers, someone within the system.

So I guess I would like to ask you: If you could just sort of indicate to me if you've seen some improvements in that area, what would they be? And if there's some challenges that you still see needing to be addressed in ensuring that, you know, the child is seen and that the relationship is actually being developed between the worker and the child because I think, you know, listening and reviewing the Phoenix Sinclair transcripts, we've identified, obviously, a lack of consistency in individuals assisting Phoenix and, I believe, there's other cases, like Gage Guimond, where there just didn't seem to be that connect.

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, thank you for that question. Basically, I think one of the things that we are still seeing is very large caseloads. And, although we do see that as a problem, what we've seen of children is that they have a right to be involved in their planning and that lots of times social workers are indicating because of their large caseloads they can't really engage with a child. And most of the phone calls that we get and follow up we see that they are certainly able to speak to their social workers and be part of that planning, and we really stress that from our office. So, when you asked about some of the things that may be in place that are so problematic, is the very large caseloads.

Mrs. Rowat: I know that at one point there was a significant amount of dollars put into the system to address staffing issues. And I do know that you had made an—either in comment last committee or this committee prior, you'd mentioned about Westman child and family and how, you know, caseloads were an issue and how, you know, they were receiving some dollars to address the caseload situation but trying to find qualified staff or staff to take on those roles.

And I've had a conversation with several agencies or authorities and they seem to be addressing some of the staffing issues and, then, in a sense, the caseload issues. Are you finding that, you know, that is actually happening, that the dollars have been assisting those agencies or authorities to address staffing and in that case addressing the caseloads?

Ms. MacDonald: You know, we are excited about the new funding formula that does allow for an increase in case carrying and prevention; however, it is difficult. We still don't see a large number of social workers graduating from the university, so that is problematic. And there are a number of agencies out there and a number of opportunities for people, so lots of social workers aren't picking child welfare. So it is problematic finding degreed social workers to work in the system.

Mrs. Rowat: Based on your experience or what you're seeing, is there—seems to be more of a challenge in getting child welfare workers in different agencies or authorities compared to others. Like, do you find that there seems to be some challenges in attracting qualified workers?

Ms. MacDonald: I think—I'm—a number of the agencies, I think, are having difficulty attracting child welfare workers, but I think the problems are more so in remote areas where, you know, people are—they don't have the qualified social workers to be able to offer the services. And—but overall, child welfare is not the No. 1—it's the No. 1 employer, but, actually, it's not the No. 1 choice of most social workers graduating from university.

Mrs. Rowat: In your report you indicated that you receive reports from children and youth related to the lack of contact with, or lack of response from, their social workers, and I found that interesting because usually you would think that it would be a parent or another individual, but it seems to be an increase in the number of children that are actually taking on,

you know, the issue of not having the social worker or the case worker support.

And I was just wondering if you'd like—if you could comment on that. Are you seeing improvements by these children coming forward and then getting the social workers involved, or is it continuing to be a challenge for that to happen?

Ms. MacDonald: I would like to say that maybe the increased visibility of our office has something to do with children coming forward. They are certainly aware of the office and they are quite vocal, so they are contacting—there's been an increase in contact to the office, and, in turn, then, our intake, our advocacy workers, are involved with those children and very much insisting that their rights are heard and contact with the agency. They'll accompany the child and they will follow up with the agency to make sure that child is part of the plan. So we're very impressed with that.

We're also doing a number of presentations in the community, so I am hoping that our outreach materials and the social workers themselves are more involved in working with the children to say, you do have rights and you need to be a part of your plan.

Mrs. Rowat: Could you indicate to the committee whether—or a breakdown of—are these foster children? Are these children that are in other different types of situations? Do you have a breakdown of where these children are coming from in—within the system?

Ms. MacDonald: Perhaps I can turn to my—she's indicating we could get that breakdown for you, but I do think where we are located, on Portage Avenue, there is walk-in traffic. We do have a number of foster parents who do contact us on behalf of their children, and so I could get you and send you later the exact breakdown of the numbers.

Mrs. Rowat: What are your comments with regard to the need for the development of meaningful and trusting relationships between workers and children or youth? And you've made a statement here just indicating that is an issue, but I just would love to—I like to hear you expand your thoughts with regard to that because it does, obviously, have a direct impact on trust and the continued working relationship with families. So, if you would just share your thoughts on that statement.

*(18:20)

Ms. MacDonald: I think it's extremely important for there to be a trust relationship. I also think it's extremely important to have consistency with the social workers so that—you know, my ideal goal would be to have one social worker with one child and to be able to follow that through the child's days in care. It doesn't, obviously, always happen, but I think it so important.

I was just at an age-of-majority celebration in Brandon and there were two social workers. The child was turning 18, and she had been with a consistent social worker from age 8 up until age 13, but alongside her was the social worker who took over from 13 to 18, and it was just fabulous to see that connection. And I just—and my hope would be that every child would have that opportunity to have one consistent social worker in their life.

Mrs. Rowat: I agree, and I think that what we've seen from reviews and the inquiry on Phoenix is that there didn't seem to be a consistent worker and everybody seemed to have a different perspective on what was required or what was necessary in the protection or the well-being of her care or for her care.

And I think that that leads to, you know, the distrust—you know, not trusting the individual who's trying to do things in the best interests of that child, and it also, obviously, takes away, you know, a relationship development between them.

Mrs. Bonnie Mitchelson (River East): Thanks for your comments in being as open as you are with expressing some of the concerns and the issues.

And I just wanted to go back to the whole issue of trained social workers and the—you know, the—I mean, I can understand sometimes why individuals that are trained and graduate from social work might choose other options than the child welfare system, because you're dealing with significant problems, and I know there are many issues. But I'm wondering if you could—because we have such an increase in the number of kids in care and most agencies are having difficulty attracting social workers, and skilled social workers, how is the system dealing with that issue? And I know in more remote areas it is more difficult, but I would venture to guess that, you know, it's an issue right throughout. And, you know, how are they dealing with things and how are they dealing with implementing the standards and ensuring that, you know, adequate social work is done?

Ms. MacDonald: My understanding is that most of the agencies—or most of the authorities, I should say, are working closely with the university. There are lots of distant education outreach. But the authorities have put in a good training package. It's far substantial than, say, when I was practising front line, and they do have it for over a period of two years pretty intensive training. Also, when—in this day and age, when a social worker starts they're usually not given a caseload for about six months to ensure that they have adequate training. So I've seen a great improvement in that. So that's pretty positive, but, again, people are having difficulty attracting social workers.

Mrs. Mitchelson: So, when you talk about large caseloads, what are we talking about? Are the caseloads significantly larger than they were? I know we've always had a caseload issue.

Ms. MacDonald: No, I think you're correct. We've always had a large caseload issue.

The new funding formula that I mentioned does give the numbers 1 to 25 for protection caseload, 1 to 20 for prevention. So that's, I think—you know, most of the social workers I talk to in the field, they say if they can get from 1 to 25 that would be substantially better and feel that they could have more relationship-building with their clients. So, I—the funding formula is fairly new, so we haven't seen, you know, the outcomes for that yet.

Mrs. Mitchelson: Yes, I was just going to say, it's probably more appropriate for us to ask the minister during Estimates what the caseloads are in each agency, I guess. For you, I don't know whether you're seeing—when you're doing the reviews and the child death reviews, whether you're seeing high caseloads being some of the issues and whether you're seeing that standards aren't being met or being followed in those reviews. And I know you can't speak specifically about individual reviews, but can you give us sort of a bit of an overview of whether, you know, standards are being followed?

Ms. MacDonald: I think standards are always a problem, and obviously when we do any kind of investigation we are looking at the quality of work, quality of services, and we are following up on standards. And we would cite a number of standards that wouldn't have been met, particularly like family assessments. We do see an improvement in risk assessments and the new signs of safety coming out, but we've just started to see that in our files that we're reviewing. So, hopefully, in the next year that

will improve. But we do—obviously, when we're doing child death investigations and advocacy as well, we do cite a number of standards that aren't being met.

Mrs. Mitchelson: I'll just ask one more question, then. What is the process when, obviously, you provide those recommendations? Those recommendations aren't public, but they go to the minister, and it's up to the minister whether those recommendations are made available. How do you follow up with the department to see whether directives have gone out and whether recommendations are being implemented?

Ms. MacDonald: As you know, the report does go to the minister, also the Ombudsman and the office of the Chief Medical Examiner. And there was a legislative change in 2008, so the office of the Ombudsman is vested with monitoring the implementation of the recommendations. So, actually, where we weren't receiving copies before, we now are and we meet regularly with the Ombudsman to ensure that recommendations are—not that we ensure, but that recommendations are followed up on. So we are seeing a more enhanced follow-up than we have before, and we also do have records from the Ombudsman of, you know, which authorities are following up on recommendations. We still really wish we would be copied directly on the answers to the recommendations, but—in some cases we are; in some cases we aren't.

Ms. Howard: One of the questions I wanted to follow up on is this issue of recruitment of social workers, and you said it's not the No. 1 choice of people coming out of the social work school. I wonder if you have some advice on what could be done to make child welfare a more attractive career option for people coming out of social work.

Ms. MacDonald: I think what—some good things are happening at the university. They actually do have a child welfare stream, so I think that's really important, where people are actually trained in child welfare prior to coming out of university. Also, more social work placements. I know, for instance, in the past two years, we have social workers that are coming into—or students that are coming into our office.

I mean, I know myself, I have been in child welfare all my life, and it certainly was my No. 1 career choice, and the other opportunity I had was to be able to move in various jobs within child welfare. And I think that's important, that people have the

opportunity to take on new experiences, not just have a generic caseload. I think specialization can lead you to continue to stay in child welfare, but yet learning new things every couple of years and also the opportunity to advance to specialization is important after you've done front line for a number of years, as well.

Ms. Howard: I think those are helpful, helpful points.

What do you think is responsible for social work students not seeing child welfare as a No. 1 choice or a career option that they want to pursue?

* (18:30)

Ms. MacDonald: I think there are many opportunities out there for social workers graduating, and, you know, also, I appreciate that the university now has put in a stream for child welfare workers, but I'm not sure if they promoted it as a great job opportunity. And I think we need help with that. And plus, like I said, there are lots of other opportunities for social workers graduating, so they do have their pick.

Mr. Ian Wishart (Portage la Prairie): And I noticed one of your recommendations regarding sleep environment. And, I guess, you note a number of child deaths associated with it, and as housing is one of the areas that I have an interest in, wondered if you would care to venture some thoughts about the relationship between limited housing, which is a challenge, especially in low-income brackets, and perhaps any cause of deaths or any relationship to injuries or anything along that line? We're seeing some concerning numbers that have come out of the social housing data, showing very high accident rates, in particular, in low-income social housing, and some, perhaps, leading to deaths.

Is there a linkage in here that we aren't seeing and that from your end you're seeing more information on that?

Ms. MacDonald: I can certainly look into that for you. But obviously, poverty is a significant factor as, you know, there are a number of factors involved in sleeping environment risks, and housing would be one of them, as well. I mean, we do—we have seen situations where inadequate housing, open registers, for instance, where children are laying in between the bed and have been burnt. We've seen, you know, a few situations like that, so that housing is a problem—or lack of housing, I should say.

Mr. Wishart: Well, and thank you for those comments. We, certainly—excuse me—wonder from the data that has come out, if there is a cause-and-effect relationship here. Certainly, poverty is, you know, a big part of the problem. But what housing is available seems to create quite a statistical difference between the regular population, even income-based, and those who are in Manitoba Housing, income-based. So, we're quite concerned, I guess—it's hard to draw a direct connection here. But the data is supportive of specific problems.

Have you seen anything to indicate to you that the services that they need and social housing isn't getting to them for some reason? Because that would be, obviously, your first—the first concern in this area. Have you seen anything to see that they're not getting enough supportive housing—supportive programs in social housing?

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not sure I can say that, but what I can say is we're not getting enough education out to parents about safe sleeping. And I think that's what's really problematic. With our public health or child welfare workers, you know, first point of contact, we'd be able to give them more information about safe sleeping; I think that's vitally important.

Mr. Wishart: And thank you for the comments. Perhaps another route to deliver this message is actually through the housing context because so many of these people are in public housing, and perhaps that message can be delivered that way. Perhaps that gets you to the audience a little quicker.

One of the things that is obvious about the Housing file is, when families grow, someone, you know, another child comes along, or someone moves in, or whatever, lots of combinations, Manitoba Housing is pretty slow about the process of getting them into housing that fits the number of rooms that they need. Part of it is built in intrinsic in the 'sishon'—in the system because the vacancy rates are extremely low. So, there isn't always a room to go to that meets their requirement.

We're quite concerned about, well, about the low vacancy rates, but the speed of getting them—I mean, we see people in one-bedroom facilities, six of them. You know, that's got to put children at risk. And the numbers, in terms of injuries, for instance, are very stilted towards younger people.

So how do we get this message out there? Is that an area that you might consider an initiative in that area?

Ms. MacDonald: Certainly, in one of our last child death—we did make recommendations towards housing, but that basically isn't under our mandate.

Mr. Wishart: Is it possible you could develop some type of liaison between our Housing Minister and Housing Department to deliver your message that way a little more effectively?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, I believe we can do that. As I indicated in one of our last recommendations, we did—the report does go to the Family Services Minister, and she, in fact, did send the recommendations over to the Housing Minister.

Mr. Wishart: Have you seen any action on that recommendation?

Ms. MacDonald: That was a very recent review within probably the past two months, so I wouldn't have received a response on that as yet.

Mr. Wishart: Thank you for your response. You mentioned that you're also responsible for The Adoption Act. Can you expand exactly what that means and what you have to do in regards to that?

Ms. MacDonald: Well, I mean, the—with regards to The Adoption Act, we would have people contacting—maybe adoptive parents contacting our office, probably more so foster parents who would like to adopt the foster children that they have in their homes.

And so, they would contact our office, and we would become involved with them in advocating on their behalf or making sure that they're heard and, in particular, the voice of the child is heard. If the child has been in their care for a period of time or if we find situations where a child may have been abruptly removed, then we follow up on that case as well. So those are the situations we would be involved with.

Mr. Wishart: Okay, kind of following up on that, transition is an area that you have already shown some concern about, and there's really multiple transitions. I mean, it can be into foster care from the birth home and how that goes and what sort of plan goes with that to make sure that there's visitation or whatever is appropriate, often court ordered.

Transition when they go out of foster care back into another environment: what's the process supposed to be regarding that? And then, of course, when they get to 18, that's a fairly significant transition for many of them out of foster care into whatever awaits them.

And I guess I'd like you to go through the different stages from your point of view as to what would be an appropriate plan for all of these, because I—we've certainly seen some people go through some stages of them without too much plan, and that concerns us. So, if you could put some comments on all three of those stages—tough question, I know.

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not sure I can do that justice at this point in time.

And basically there is the standards that one would follow when any child comes into care and what the expectations are or when a social worker gets involved with the family right from the intake assessment stage to what we would call is planning. You know, what is the plan for the child? Is the plan to return the child home? Is the plan for permanency planning? What kind of supports are necessary, et cetera, et cetera. So you might have a child that comes into care, and the child is a permanent ward and is going to be placed for adoption. Then there are certain criteria that you go through and the child is placed on the adoption list and it depends on if the child is Aboriginal or not as well. So there are different stages that social workers need to conduct assessments at and make decisions, but the most important thing is to have an adequate plan in place—not to let the child linger too long in care without having a plan in place.

So that was one situation. I'm not sure about your other situations. I know we talked about transition at—out of care. So, reunification—if the child is being returned home to a parent, it's really important that reunification happen properly that there'll be a number of visits for the child. What has the parent done to change the circumstances so that the child can be returned? What support systems are in place for the parent if the child is being returned? And also what follow-up is the social worker doing once the child has been placed back in the family home?

*(18:40)

Other situations that we've seen are when children—there needs to be standards in place when children are 15–13, 14, 15. If they're going to be in care long term, what is the plan for them that we call aging out of care and what support systems do they need to have in place so they're able to make a good transition at 18, or do they actually have to be extended in care, or do they need services like adult services? So at each point, the social worker needs to be involved in setting up those plans and hopefully

involving the child and other support networks with involving them in the plan as well—other community supports.

Mr. Wishart: And thank you for that response.

In the aging out of care, once they reach 18, do they continue with the same social worker or is there a transition to generally available social services?

Ms. MacDonald: It really would depend on the agency and, you know, what services they provide. If a child has a disability for instance, he may—he or she may have been referred at age 16. Adult services may become involved at that point and work alongside with the social worker until the child ages out of care at 18 or until there's an extension of care to age 21. But in some situations, it depends. If the child is a permanent ward, the child may be referred to a permanent ward unit. But, in other cases, the child does stay with their social worker.

Mr. Wishart: Well, I appreciate the comments. It gives me some idea.

And you made a bit of a generalization there, so that in some cases this is done; it's not regularly done. What percentage of the children in service or in care would reach age 18 and then not have a plan or a linkage to move on? Is that a small percentage or are we still dealing with significant numbers?

Ms. MacDonald: Well, clearly, our office, you know, deals with a number of complaints. I mean, we're complaint-based basically, so what would come to our office is a number of cases where there hasn't been planning and children are turning 18 and there's not an adequate plan in place, or no planning has been done and our job is to advocate on behalf of that child and, you know, to work with the agency to make sure a plan is in place. I'm not sure that you would be aware though, you know, our mandate is up until age 18, and we are pushing our limits and we have had some discussion with the minister about the fact that we would like our legislation changed so that we can stay involved with kids that are extended in care of the agency. But we have been doing that anyway, and, you know, on occasion there can be pushback. Why are you involved? The child is now an adult and you shouldn't be involved with the child. But we are following many, many cases. So I guess the short answer should've been to your question, yes, we do see a number of cases referred to us where there hasn't been transitional planning.

Mr. Wishart: Well—and I appreciate your comments, and one of the reasons I'm following up

on that, I've been dealing quite frequent with the homelessness issue. And there is, frankly, an alarming number of very young people that fall into that category and at least some of them have been—well, actually quite a few of them have been through CFS services and have come to their end of their time with Child and Family Services and really didn't have a goal in life, didn't have a transition that got them out into a stable situation. And that's very alarming because a poor start in life certainly has consequences, and, you know, not only for the child or the individual, but actually for all of the social services that we are providing to them. We don't seem to have a solid linkage there, it is a little—and I recognize that they're now adults and they have rights and privileges and they can find their own way in life, but we should provide them with some options even though they may choose not to follow up on them. And we seem to have a gap there, and I think you've seen that to some degree, and we're certainly seeing it in terms of the homelessness situation.

Ms. MacDonald: I was just going to mention that there has been additional funding, though, for some transitional services. And I would just like to mention the Metis authority and agencies that do a terrific job of their kids aging out and have a service where they, you know, at their age of majority, give names of a person that you can connect back to. Also, the CFS of Western in Brandon have a breakfast club that they have kids that have turned 18 come back on a monthly basis and connect with one another. So there are some good programs that are starting to happen.

Mrs. Rowat: Back to what my colleague was asking about with regard to the special investigation review program. You had indicated that the Ombudsman—like, you provide the recommendations, the Ombudsman then works at the implementation of those recommendations with the agencies and authorities? Am I correct in that?

Ms. MacDonald: What happens is we do our report and we make the recommendations and we sent that report to the minister, who in turn sends that out to the agencies—the authorities and the agencies, and then it's incumbent upon, I guess, the minister's office or the Child Protection branch to follow up on those recommendations. And, as I said, there were recent changes to the Ombudsman to, you know, monitor those recommendations to make sure that they are following them or at what stage they're in. Are they in progress? Have they completed the

recommendations? The Ombudsman then connects back with us to feel if we're satisfied—to ask if we're satisfied with how the recommendations are being implemented. So it's a close working relationship.

Mrs. Rowat: Is there a timeline attached to those, you know, from the recommendation to implementation, or monitoring, you know, to ensure that? You know, because often recommendations are significant to the worker, the children and most of them are or all of them are. So I'm just wanting to know if there's, you know, any way that there's an urgency or if there's a mechanism in place to ensure that they are adhered to.

Ms. MacDonald: I think I'd probably have to refer that to the minister for the Child Protection branch. I can speak from past experience, when I worked at an agency, when I received a report with recommendations, I had a timeline that I was told I would have to have the recommendations answered by such and such a date, and then they were then sent back to the Child Protection branch. But I can't speak to what it is today.

Mrs. Rowat: The joint protocol for developing recommendations from the child death reviews, is that protocol public information? Is—or something that we would be able to review?

Ms. MacDonald: I actually brought copies with me. What I need to say, though, it's still in draft. It hasn't been finalized yet, but we've been working with it for well over a year and seems to be going fairly well. A couple things we all have to tweak, but there is a meeting coming up in the next month. But I did bring copies of our draft protocol, which I'd be certainly willing to share with you.

Mrs. Rowat: Thank you. That would very useful so that we would be able to get up to speed on where you're at on that process, because I think it's an important piece.

Who's part of the decision making? Or who helps develop or formulate that process or protocol?

Ms. MacDonald: The protocol was started from our office. And I had conversations at standing committee where the four CEOs of the authorities sit, and basically we were hearing complaints from our office that people felt that they were receiving reports from us that didn't have all the information, that we didn't—it was almost called administrative fairness. A report would just end up on their desk, and they would have no opportunity to have any input into the recommendations or to be able to say,

hey, you missed a piece here or you didn't take this into consideration or, yes, maybe there wasn't any recording done, but we could speak to some things that were happening or we'd like to tell you some improvements we made in the system.

So I actually developed the protocol in conjunction with a member of the general authority who was appointed by the other authorities and we worked together and, of course, my program manager was very much involved in the process. So we ended up writing the protocol, but it is a drop protocol between our office, but I would say it was initiated by our office.

* (18:50)

Mrs. Rowat: Thank you, and I appreciate that and I look forward to seeing your work with regard to the protocol.

If an authority decides to not respond to a request to meet with you with regard to a case, how is that handled?

Ms. MacDonald: We follow up with that agency and, in particular, if they're not responsive, we then go to the authority and indicate that we are not getting a response, but we would try, I think, our darndest but we would go ahead and finish our report and they would not have any input into that at that point in time.

Mrs. Rowat: So would that be identified in the report, that there was a failure by, you know, a stakeholder in not wanting to engage in the review?

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not sure it would be identified in the report. Yes.

Mrs. Rowat: So that wouldn't be part of the joint protocol process, is to ensure that there is a representation from all stakeholders at a review?

Ms. MacDonald: It is definitely the reason for the joint protocol. I think at this point in time I'm not sure if we—I know we've had delays in meetings and—but I'm not sure that we actually have had a report go out where nobody has had any opportunity, or they have contacted us to say we don't need a meeting, we're fine with the report or we're fine with the information that's been passed on.

Mrs. Rowat: With regard to the recommendations that you developed from a review, I believe there were 69 formal recommendations from—I think I read that somewhere in here, or 61–60-plus. Would you be able to indicate to me whether most of those or all

of those have been responded to or, I guess, dealt with?

Ms. MacDonald: I think what I can say is the Ombudsman has just released his report, and my recollection, off the top of my head, is that he is indicating that the general authority and the Metis authority had responded to all the recommendations. Now this would be within a certain time frame, right. And this is his first report coming out, with regards to the recommendations. And the southern authority and the northern authority were very close in responding to the recommendations. I think it was like a 3 per cent that they're missing. So, in fact, people—or authorities are responding, taking these very seriously and responding to the recommendations.

Mrs. Mitchelson: When you talk about responding to the recommendations, does that mean implementing the recommendations or responding by saying that, you know, we have implemented this and this is still pending or this is still outstanding? What are we talking about with responses?

Ms. MacDonald: I think it's in various stages. As I said, the Ombudsman's report would say, for a while there, people were saying, in progress, and we need to know what is in progress, what does it mean, and they—the Ombudsman does connect back to our office to say, do you think this response satisfies this recommendation, and, you know, we will respond at that point in time.

Mrs. Rowat: With regard to foster care and the section 4 review where the, you know, the Gage Guimond review, there were a number of recommendations that have not been implemented. I believe there is 26 or 28, 26 recommendations that are still outstanding.

One that, you know, we've identified as a key piece, is the recommendation with regard to moving a child out of a home without providing written notice or reason for the decision to remove the child.

I know that as the—as a fairly new critic for Family Services, I get a significant number of calls from foster families who are indicating, you know, why is this happening, you know, we can't get any answers, we've been misled, you know, the—so—you know, I'm just wanting to know what your comments are on that. And we've brought in a bill, and we're—we'll continue to do that until we see that, you know, that is—that issue is being addressed.

Do you want to comment on that?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, we see a lot of situations that you're mentioning. I think Mrs. Mitchelson has called my office on a number of occasions.

I had hoped that the foster home appeal would have tightened that issue, but we continue to see problems with that. And I think there is no time frame in the timing of the appeal, so it continues to be delayed. And we have brought that to the attention of the Child Protection branch as well, that we would like to see a very tight time frame.

As you mentioned, a number of times we see a child removed and it may largely be due to communication issues between the agency and the foster parent, so it is concerning.

Mrs. Rowat: We are finding that there seems to be an increase in the number of families that are—have concerns, and—so that was part of why I was asking for the breakdown of who is, you know, making the concerns known to you—the young children or the youth, is it foster family situations? There seems to be an increase in young people asking for support. So I'm just—was curious to know if that was foster families or not. So—and, I guess that's more of a statement than a question.

With regard to foster families, I—what I'm hearing is a number of them are not aware of the appeal process or do not have a fair understanding of what that process is or even that it exists. Do you get that concern raised by families to you? And do you see that—if you are—are you seeing an improvement in communication with families, or is it not something that you're hearing?

Ms. MacDonald: My understanding is when a child is removed, they—foster parents are supposed to be given the information on how to appeal the removal of the child. So I would have hoped they're given the information.

More of what my office is dealing with is, obviously, the very upset foster parent who, you know, is really not understanding why the child is being removed and wanting immediate solutions or help, and wanting our office to become involved with the situation.

Mrs. Rowat: Do you know if that information that is being shared with the foster family when a child is being removed? Are they receiving information on the appeal process? And are they receiving written information of why the child is being removed? I guess that's two questions, but.

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not sure I can answer that. But my understanding with—is that they are supposed to be receiving written information on how an appeal should be processed, and should be followed up with a letter. So, I would hope that they're getting that information.

I think what I was talking about is more the emotional, that we're hearing from our office.

* (19:00)

Mrs. Mitchelson: Yes, I certainly have—I've contacted the minister's office and the Child Protection branch and your office, many times, with many situations that are just really tough—tough to deal with. And from me being on the outside looking in, it must be even tougher for those that are having to deal one-on-one with very distraught foster families that have had long-term placements and, all of a sudden, without much notice, have had these children removed.

And, in many, many instances, those foster families put that child first and say what's happening to that child, and, you know, what planning has—you know, there hasn't been any planning done for the transition, and I know that most foster families recognize and realize that foster care is not always permanent care, and sometimes they do apply for permanent guardianship or adoption, but that isn't always the case. And when you go into fostering, you have to recognize and realize that it's not, you know, a permanent situation. But after five or six years, it becomes fairly permanent and those children do bond and connect.

And so the issues that surround removing that child without—in their minds, anyway, you know, a sort of a reason or a cause and without being involved in any sort of plan for transition seems to be the big issue.

And I guess my question would be: How do you find—I mean, do you find that the department is cooperative in—I mean, ultimately, you know, sort of the responsibility for providing, you know, safety and support for children in care falls in the minister's office. And I know that a lot of that has been devolved to new agencies and authorities through devolution. But, ultimately, you know, if the agencies and the authorities aren't responding in a proper fashion to make sure that the child is the first and foremost line of protection, then it does fall on the Child Protection branch.

And I guess I just was wondering whether you might comment on whether the Child Protection branch responds in a timely fashion to those concerns, or whether it's the child that kind of falls through the cracks and suffers as a result of the lack of action. And I know that, although I'm not the critic anymore, and I know a lot of—there are a lot of people that still contact me, and families that I still work with, and there are a lot of new families that are coming on, you know, coming on the scene. It's a big issue.

And so I'm just wondering if you might comment on, you know, sort of the child in all of this, when it seems like adults on all sides are getting in the way of, you know, that safety and security and the best interests of the child. And that's—I mean, I know that's what your job is all about, and that's what your office is all about, and I just worry that it's the child that suffers as a result of adults not communicating and not looking at the best plan and the best interests of that child.

Ms. MacDonald: I would agree with you that that's why our office exists, is for the best interests of children, and I would like immediate action because it is concerning that the young children that are removed and are lingering or being moved from one foster home to another or one relative to another, and it does seem to take time. And it is a complicated system, of course, with the agencies and the authorities.

So there are some time lags when even our office, particularly, will have to contact the agency and then the authority and then we do move it up, very quickly though, to the Child Protection branch for follow through. But I do agree with you that the concern, oftentimes, is communication or a lack of communication, and, as I said, our office does exist for the rights of children—and that, to us, is paramount, that this be—I'd like to see even a mediated response, right, so that it's dealt with very quickly. There are often long time lags that aren't acceptable for young children. Attachment is extremely important.

Mrs. Mitchelson: I was just going to ask: When we look at the concerns that come by category, then, to your office—I mean, I see that case planning has been superseded by rights for the, you know, the percentage of issues that come to your office. And I'm on page 17 of your report, and it's got just the different definitions of rights and I was wondering if you might just elaborate or expand on them a little

bit because I'm having a little different—difficulty understanding when you talk about information that's not been shared with an individual.

What are we talking about when we—or who are we talking about when we're talking about individuals? And maybe just go through those if we can do it sort of briefly, but just give us a little better understanding of, you know, what rights exactly means and who we're talking about.

Ms. MacDonald: When you're talking about the right to information, you know, it could be that children aren't aware of, say, what visits have been set up for them, that they have the right to be involved in their planning—just different information like that.

So the lack of consideration, lack of information, maybe not aware of their legal rights to legal advocacy, and, again, a big thing we would see is their lack of participation in their case planning.

Mrs. Mitchelson: Can I just ask, is there any breakdown on whether some of these would be foster parents that come forward with—is it the rights of the child only or is it rights of parents or foster parents included in those numbers?

Ms. MacDonald: Obviously, we would have a lot of concern from the foster parents as well, but I do believe the rights we would be looking for are the rights of the children. It's basically related to the entire case. The top priority of the case is the rights and it's all based on the child, so it centres around the child and child's rights.

Mrs. Mitchelson: All right, and then if the child really isn't old enough to articulate those rights, it would be then the family that surrounds him that would be concerned about the best interests of the child and they would be advocating on their behalf to the advocate's office.

Ms. MacDonald: That's my understanding.

Ms. Howard: Yes, I just want to touch on some of the issues we're talking about with regards to foster families and removal of children, and certainly, that happens for lots of reasons and some of those reasons have been touched on.

I think some of the hardest situations that I find to deal with is one that's happened because there's an allegation of abuse that needs to be investigated, and certainly some situations where I've been asked to directly intervene when there have been charges laid by the RCMP. And I have felt that, certainly, I'm not

an abusive investigator, I have no background in child welfare, it's—I have no way of being able to ascertain whether an allegation is valid or not. We have a system of investigation. I certainly have no way of knowing when the RCMP has laid charges of abuse whether or not that's valid or not. That's why we have a court system. So I find in those situation—those are probably the most difficult situations when a child has been removed from a home for those reasons, and certainly there's lot of emotion on all sides of that.

I guess in those situations, what is the best practice to make sure that the safety of the child is coming first in the situation?

Ms. MacDonald: I believe that would be on, obviously, a case-by-case situation. There may be allegations, for instance, of an older child or a foster child in the home—there are different situations that could happen. I guess what concerns me is the abruptness, not so much the removal but the lack of contacts, say, with the foster parent.

* (19:10)

Now, you want to be very careful when the investigation is going on. But, yet, I think it's very hard when you've removed a child who's been living in a foster home and attached to those foster parents for a very long period of time and you sever all ties. There are ways of having continued visits while the investigation is going on—can be supervised visits. But I think what's difficult for the child is to just—to be abruptly removed and then not understand why or not, you know, have contact with the foster parent.

But I agree with you. It—you know, the safety of the child is paramount, so it does depend on the situations.

Ms. Howard: And I think what I struggle with in those situations—and I take your advice that, you know, attachment is paramount with that—something that we certainly—safety is very important. Something we're also all coming to better understand is how important attachment is, particularly for children who've been traumatized.

I think what I struggle with as a minister is when those requests come to my office, and the request is directly for me to intervene in the investigation, to stop the investigation, to return the child immediately. I don't feel that I have the authority. I certainly don't have the experience to ascertain, you know, whether—and I think, you know, in some of my past discussions with people who work in child

welfare, one of the things they'll tell me that they're very—continue to be very concerned about is that there isn't political interference in the work of child welfare.

So, in those situations, you know, certainly we try to work through the Child Protection branch, but is there anything additional that I should be doing as a minister when I'm asked to directly intervene in an abuse investigation or a criminal investigation?

Ms. MacDonald: Again, I think it depends on the actual case, as you say. If RCMP or police are laying charges, that's one thing. If there isn't just—if there is an allegation of abuse, then I think we need to look into—are there any other circumstances that we can look at so that we can safeguard the child, but yet keep the attachment to the foster parent, depending on how long they've been there.

But child welfare is—it's so individually based on case by case, so I think it's hard just to give a blanket answer to that.

Mrs. Rowat: Just back to providing transitional supports for youth: You'd identified that you were—in the report or in your—yes, your report—that you had concerns that youth at—that were at high risk—these youth are being discharged from care too soon to have a chance to succeed.

Can you indicate to me what you've, you know—advocate—or who you've advocated to—to, yes, have a stronger mechanism in place to provide those supports and what types of supports you were wanting to see available for them?

Ms. MacDonald: Let's see. I did have some stuff written here.

I guess a large part of that is in our Strengthening Our Youth: Their Journey to Competence and Independence. We had referred a number of recommendations to the department, and what we were suggesting as standards for services to prepare youth for leaving care, they haven't been completed. And this includes standards for service to Aboriginal youth in care, youth with disabilities leaving care, standards regarding mandatory needs assessment and individualized transition plans and, again, standards regarding post-care services. So those were some of the things that we were looking at.

We're talking about a core set of life skills competencies for kids that are—our youth that are age 18, and, you know—not 18—are like 15, 16, 17. And

we are also looking for a directory for independent living programs and resources in the province.

And I would say, there have been some additional money allocated to the CFS system for enhancing services, and there is some funding where the authority is to develop youth engagement initiatives. But still the current system, I think, of providing services to youth really varies from agencies—or authority to authority, agency to agency, so there's an absence of policy and standards and accountability and consistency. *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Mrs. Rowat.

Mrs. Rowat: Oh, sorry. Thank you.

You were looking for standards. So, if you can walk me through, have you created ideas or—with regard to standards or some recommendations on these standards, or have you identified the need for a working group to develop these standards or have they been developed and they're—haven't received approval yet? Like, is there a timeline issue, or?

Like, I'm just trying to get a sense of—you've identified a need and, obviously, standards for various areas and high—identified that there is obviously a policy weakness. Can you just indicate to me where you're at on it, because you, obviously, I think—I'm very interested in knowing, you know, how we can move that forward.

Ms. MacDonald: I have attended standing committee, and, as I said, meeting with the four CEOs of the authorities and have indicated there is a need for standards to 'debee'—to be developed and protocols to be put in place for when kids are actually reaching 15 years of age so that we recognize that they will be rid—ready to transition at age 18. Some of the authorities are in the process of coming up with individual standards. But, no, I haven't seen any consistency at this point in time.

Mrs. Rowat: So where would the leadership come on that? Where do you see—does that come from, you know, the department or does that come from the working group, or—because I do believe that, you know, if we can have consistency across the board for the agencies—or the authorities, then I think, you know, it's a win-win situation, because then it's an equal playing field and those resources are identified—or our resource requirements are identified and put into place. I'm just needing to know, you know, who needs to have a little bit of a push to move this forward?

Ms. MacDonald: I think it would be the standing committee that would have oversight, because that is where you have the, you know, assistant deputy minister and the CEOs of the four authorities. So I think that is the place where this should come together.

Mrs. Rowat: And your recommendation, how long ago have you had this on your radar?

Ms. MacDonald: I've been there two years. So I believe it's been two years, in any case, so.

Mrs. Mitchelson: I'd just like to follow up on that. And I think I understand that standing committee is the vehicle or the place, but how long can we wait? I mean, we've waited two years, now. And, at some point in time, someone has to play a leadership role, and my sense would be that it should be, you know, within the department that has the ultimate responsibility under legislation to make sure that children are protected and the proper services are in place. And we're putting a lot more money into the system. And, I mean, money should be going towards this initiative. And if we don't have consistency—and we've obviously also shouldn't have two-tier or three-tier or four-tier support services for children that are aging out of care. And so there needs to be some consistency. So, I guess, you know, I know you're working on it.

Is any one of the authorities there today with a—you know, a plan that would work? Or, I mean, are we close? I know that you've indicated that some are further ahead than others. You know, I guess my sense would be, do you think there's any urgency to making this happen? And, you know, I guess it'll be up to us to try to, you know, sort of, hold the system—*[interjection]*—yes, accountable. And I—you know, I don't want to get into the politics of it. I guess I just want to know, you know, whether you believe that there should be some standard, and I guess that's obviously what you're pushing for and working towards and that's what your recommendation would be, to have those standards in place.

Ms. MacDonald: That's correct—the short answer, sorry.

* (19:20)

Mrs. Rowat: I'm going to go back to just the categories of concern and on the rights and the case planning, et cetera. Why do you think, do you have an opinion on why—you know, case planning is still quite high; that's not going to take away from it being a key issue. But why do you think the rights

have become the top issue with families or advocates who have concerns with regard to the system? Do you have a sense why that percentage is and what is creating the jump?

Ms. MacDonald: As I said, that is from our office or what we see as rights. And I think it's partly because we're so focused on children's rights.

We're in the process also of working with an Aboriginal artist who's going to portray 42 of the children's rights. And I think, hopefully with our presentations, that we're out there more; we're talking with foster parents; we're talking with MMF, to Manitoba foster federation, to put kids' rights front and centre so—and I would think that's why our office exists, for the rights of children. So that would be one of our top priorities, yes.

Mrs. Rowat: Education would be a significant player in that, so that makes sense.

Mr. Wishart: Mr. Chairman, one of the areas I was particularly interested in is mood and talk about inquiries about rights. We know we have significant problems in terms of mood and mental health issues, many of which are undiagnosed, especially in the younger children. But, as they age, it more often becomes known and diagnosis. Do you get many inquiries in your area of rights regarding what services are available to them in terms of that area?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, we get—we would get a number of referrals with concerns to what resources are available or, more importantly, I guess, what we're hearing is the lack of resources available for children with mental health.

And we also did recently author a report on complex needs of children, talking about the importance of community partners coming together to wrap around services for the child and how important that is.

Mr. Wishart: And thank you for those comments. And that report's available on your website, is it?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, it is.

Mr. Wishart: So you see this as an area where you're getting increasing number of inquiries? During your two-year period, which, I know, is relatively short, I would assume there were some statistics earlier, but, as I mentioned earlier, there isn't—especially for younger children, there isn't a lot of really good numbers on the frequency. So is this an increasing area or static or?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, we're seeing it as an increase.

Mr. Wishart: Would you care to venture a percentage on that?

Ms. MacDonald: No, I couldn't at this point in time.

Mrs. Rowat: In looking at the total case files, or who contacts your office, you know, 65 per cent are family members, 3 per cent is—are CFS. And I'm just curious to know what that 3 per cent would represent, Child and Family Services contacting your office—

Mr. Chairperson: Ms. MacDonald. *[interjection]*

Sorry, Mrs. Rowat.

Mrs. Rowat: Thank you. Just some examples of situations, not specific, but generally on why they would contact your office and what they would be either asking or sharing.

Ms. MacDonald: There would be a variety of situations where an agency may just call for some advice, may ask us to become involved as the advocate for the child. Maybe help accompany a child to court. They may also feel that they're not getting anywhere within their agency, say, on transitioning a child out of care or in sending a child in care, so they may ask us to be involved with that and in a number of cases just looking for resources.

Mrs. Rowat: I'm going to go back to section for review, I'm just wanting to get your comment on the 26 or 28 recommendations that are still outstanding in that review. That's a significant number, and just wanting to know if you could share with the committee your thoughts on, or your comments on the ones that are—have the most impact on your office or you believe Child and Family Services as a whole. Which ones are, you know, front and centre that have not been implemented that are a concern to you?

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not sure what you're referring to. Are you referring to the Gage Guimond review?

Mrs. Rowat: Yes.

Ms. MacDonald: Of course, that would've been—I'm familiar with the report, but it would've been before my time, and again our office—I guess wouldn't be aware of the recommendations that were followed up on. Actually now I'm aware of it. It was a section four report, so our office wasn't involved in that report at all. So it wasn't a child death report it was

an internal report that the authority would've conducted.

Mrs. Rowat: With regard to the number of calls that you get, what percentage of the calls are related to the information and self-advocacy, the number of calls for the, you know, brief services and the third advocacy intervention? I'm trying to get a sense of what types of examples you would have with regard to the calls that are made.

There's been a significance difference in numbers from last year to this year for information in self-advocacy assistance. I see the numbers have gone up by about 300. Brief service actually has gone up about 50 or so. Total case files have gone up by 300. And I guess the other question would be, why would the advocacy intervention have dropped by 80, that's page 15, I guess.

Ms. MacDonald: My understanding is you're talking about—the advocacy numbers have dropped because we had increased our number of intake workers from three to four so they're able to handle a number of more calls within the first 90 days. So those calls are being—well, hopefully some of them are being resolved, and then the more complex ones are being sent through to the advocacy officers. And my understanding is we've changed the data collection to more robustly capture information. It's good I have my team behind me. Thank you, for that.

* (19:30)

Mrs. Rowat: Thank you, so, obviously you're tracking more, there's different scenarios. Okay, that makes sense.

With regard to the 90 day—in reading the statement made in the report it says expected to be concluded within 90 days at the intake level, expected was a word that caught my attention. Could you give me a scenario where that may be a challenge or an issue and, obviously, with an extra worker, that probably would be less of a challenge or an—you know, but if you could just explain to me the process with regard to the brief service, and I guess that's where the intake worker would take it and then refer it on to the assessment officer. I think page 15, yes.

Ms. MacDonald: Basically, that would be a situation that would stay on brief services because they're waiting for more information, or we're waiting for an intervention that we may be expecting to occur.

Mrs. Rowat: So what would cause a delay? So that would be a situation. So how do you address that and what seems to be the most common delay in—or the common factor in not being able to conclude within 90 days?

Ms. MacDonald: We may be waiting for information from the agency with respect—or the other thing is that there may be a complaint situation, and we have asked the contact person to go back and follow procedure because they haven't talked to the agency or their social worker or the social worker's supervisor. So we may be asking them to do that and then keeping it in brief service to make sure that we follow up so that it is resolved.

Mrs. Rowat: What is the longest pending or outstanding timeline that you have currently in place, and what would the reason be for that?

Ms. MacDonald: Excuse me, did you say with brief service or—

Mrs. Rowat: Yes. With regard to the 90 days, are there any that are past 90 days at this present time, and if there is, what is, you know, the longest outstanding brief service requirement that is out there?

Ms. MacDonald: I was going to say that. There wouldn't be any outstanding after 90 days because we would have then transferred it on to the advocacy worker. So brief service would be our intake workers holding things for 90 days, and, as I said, sending it on to our advocacy worker, so, if we thought something was 'complexed' or not resolved because obviously we don't want our intake workers caught up with long-term service.

Mrs. Rowat: So, then, the advocacy workers would then be tasked with getting resolution. Are there any that are outstanding for a significant period of time, and if that happens, you know, obviously, the case wouldn't be left without resolution. What would happen, I guess, when you get to a point where it becomes critical that you get the information?

Ms. MacDonald: We would definitely follow up if the issue was with the agency. We would follow up with the authority, and then we would follow up with the Child Protection branch, and, depending on the seriousness and if there were safety issues with the child, we'd follow up. We would miss a few of those steps to follow up and ensure the safety of the child, and we would not close off anything without a resolution of some kind.

Mrs. Mitchelson: I just want to look on page 24. We talk about removal of foster children, foster parent appeals, and I see there's three bullets here. The first bullet talks about you continuing to receive requests for advocacy services related to the removal of children from foster placements as it pertains to children and youth being moved from foster home, from the foster home prior to the completion of the foster parent appeal process. And that this contradicts CFS standards and regulations. Can you tell me how often that's happening?

Ms. MacDonald: I couldn't give you a percentage, but, as I said, and as you're well aware, our office is complaint-based, so the number of concerns we would receive, would be around the length of time of an appeal process is taking. So, yes, we would see a few—a number of those.

Mrs. Mitchelson: Which I find extremely concerning because if the appeal process and the timelines aren't being followed—and there are certain timelines for the first levels of appeal. And then when it gets, maybe—and I don't know whether you can just clarify for me—because I do know that, you know, when a child is removed, there is supposedly, and most often, I think, a letter that does inform foster families, that they can appeal, and that letter would come from the agency. And then there's a certain number of days that the foster family has to appeal that, and it's quite—it's a short time frame. And then the next level of appeal, I believe, is to the authority. And then the next level of appeal would be to the branch. And so—and I don't know whether you have that information at your fingertips here for me or not.

Ms. MacDonald: The deputy is telling me it's in the regulations, and he does not have a copy of that. But, you're absolutely right with your—how you just indicated what the first level of appeal is.

Mrs. Mitchelson: And so, can you anecdotally, or do you know that, whether the complaints that come from foster families are at the first level, the second level or the third level, that things aren't moving, or is it at all three levels? I mean, are they getting past, you know, the first? Are the timelines for the first level of appeal being followed or is it further on in the appeal process?

Ms. MacDonald: I believe the issue is at the authority level because there is no timelines for the authority level.

Mrs. Mitchelson: So then, for clarification, there would be nothing in the standards that is—it's in the regulations, so if there's any issue to be taken, it would be an issue to be taken with that length of time at the authority level. That, obviously, it appears to me—and I see the minister's taking a little—making a little note of this. So I think it's probably something that we could have some dialogue and discussion about because, you know, the longer that appeal process goes on, and the child is removed, the more damage there is potentially to that child, with the uncertainty of knowing what the end result will be.

Now, just if you could clarify for me, the longer term placements that originated as places of safety. Is—are places of safety being used in a manner that they shouldn't be used in? I need to understand the distinction between a place of safety and a foster placement. And places of safety, I guess, are shorter term placements of children, but they wouldn't be licensed as a foster home. They're licensed as a place of safety so they—and, you know, are we seeing children remain in places of safety longer than what would have been anticipated, when this structure was set up?

Ms. MacDonald: As you know, places of safety are oftentimes, are really a good thing for children because they're relative placements, but they are meant to be very short term. And, in some situations, and maybe due to workload, they—if the child is there longer—and I believe it's 60 days—it could be 90, but I think it's 60 days—they are supposed to be licensed as a foster home.

And, yes, we are seeing situations where kids are staying longer in places of safety and they are not turning over as licensed foster homes.

Mrs. Mitchelson: So, then, if they're not a licensed foster home—now, can you indicate to me whether this place-of-safety placement might go on for a year or two years? Are we seeing some of that in the system?

* (19:40)

Ms. MacDonald: I can't comment currently on what we're seeing, but we are quite aware that places of safety are lasting much longer than would have been anticipated.

Mrs. Mitchelson: So, then, my question would be: If they are long-term placements, and children are bonding with the families that they have been placed with and then are removed, there's no ability for that

family, because they are not licensed as a foster family, to appeal the removal of that child?

Ms. MacDonald: I think, in some cases, that certainly the Child Protection branch has allowed the appeals to happen. I mean, technically, because it is a place of safety and not a foster parent—not a foster placement—they would not have to hear the appeal, but in some cases they are allowing the appeal to be heard.

Mrs. Mitchelson: Then I guess, if the Child Protection branch is making that determination, do they go directly to the Child Protection branch for that appeal, or do they have to still go through the process of the agency and then the authority and then the Child Protection branch?

Ms. MacDonald: I believe they would still have to go through the process, but—

Mrs. Mitchelson: Okay. Now, I guess I—and I'm thinking after, I mean, if they're a place of safety, and they're not allowed to appeal, they wouldn't be given the information from the agency that there is an appeal process, so they wouldn't know to appeal to the agency. Would it be as a result of, say, calling your office and having you do some advocacy that they would go to the Child Protection branch? I guess I'm thinking that the other levels of appeal aren't available to them through any type of regulation.

Ms. MacDonald: Certainly, if anybody contacted our office, we would be telling them what the appeal process is and where they need to go.

Mrs. Mitchelson: I'm wondering if you could—and I know you won't have the information at your fingertips, but I'm wondering if you could, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, to try to provide for us, at a later date, you know, where the appeals are being bogged down. Are you seeing concerns come to your office because, you know, I think it's the seven-day time frame at the agency level, isn't being followed? Is it, then, the appeal at the authority level, like how many would be—how many different—what are the numbers? I don't know if that can be broken down by authority, and I don't know how much work I'm asking you to do, but I'm wondering if that kind of information is available or could be made fairly easily available, and then are we seeing any breakdown when it gets to the Child Protection branch in delays? Is that information possible to be compiled and provided?

Ms. MacDonald: I can ask our now more robust data gathering, however—so we will look into that information for you and get back to it. I would hazard to guess that it's probably at the authority level.

Mrs. Mitchelson: Okay, then. I just look at the final comment in this part of your report. It says: While the Child Protection branch reports having made efforts to clarify the expectations regarding foster parents' appeal for agency staff as well as foster parents, we continue to receive reports about the above concerns on a regular basis.

So, again, then, my question would be, I guess, and that obviously the issue isn't being addressed in any significant way or you should be seeing better results. Would that be a fair comment?

Ms. MacDonald: I think our office is concerned. We had hoped, as I mentioned before, the appeal process would be tightened up, and, you know, we obviously are still getting complaints, so it hasn't been. So we would like to see timelines tightened or, as I said, like a mediation process involved.

And, if I can just go back to your other question that you did have, we probably wouldn't have the numbers. As you know, we wouldn't be involved in all places of safety, so the authorities or the Child Protection branch would have those numbers. We would only have what would come to our attention.

Mrs. Mitchelson: And thanks very much. Those are very fair comments, and we'll have to pursue it through that venue then. Thank you.

Mrs. Rowat: Could you just indicate to me, or share with me, how you see a mediation process working with regard to this process, and when would that be a relevant step?

Ms. MacDonald: I'd like to see mediation involvement fairly soon because it is an extremely emotional process, and, as I indicated, there's times that for a variety of reasons communication breaks down, so I think, if you could involve a mediator to hear both sides and allow the people to talk, maybe communication issues that are getting in the way could be resolved rather than the removal of the child.

Mrs. Rowat: So that would be with a case worker or with an agency or authority? It would be whatever bodies are involved in the—

Ms. MacDonald: I believe that's right. I believe the mediator needs to be an impartial person.

Mrs. Rowat: And that impartial person would be, then, working with whoever the stakeholders are involved with that child.

Ms. MacDonald: That's correct.

Mrs. Rowat: With regard to family assessment, a major concern that I've been hearing and that we've been hearing about are cases where there's been little or no assessment conducted at critical times. And you had indicated earlier that you believe that some of the risk situations have been improving, but we still see a significant number of cases where there's been little or no assessment conducted.

Is that more—is that across the board or is there one authority over another that is—can be identified as needing supports in that area? I just would like you to comment on that statement.

Ms. MacDonald: I don't think I can comment on one authority versus another, but lots of situations that we're seeing are very crisis oriented and that we're missing key assessments at key intervals in a case, for instance, you know, in the plan, whatever the plan is, how are we going to support the plan if the child has been reunified with the parent, what supports are in, how long is the social worker remaining involved, what community supports are in there. So it has to be an ongoing assessment at different points in the case, not just, okay, here is the case, here's the plan and here's closure. There has to be a varieties of steps, and I think you have to continue to look at the case and see what changes have been made with strengths, what's evolving and what needs to happen to keep this family intact.

Mrs. Rowat: So what I'm hearing, then, is it's almost like a team approach with different facets that may play a role in that young person's life so it could transition, but just ensuring that there's some consistency and that, you know, protocols are being followed with regard to the needs of that child, like I'm—it's late, I'm trying—does that make sense?

* (19:50)

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, I think what I'm alluding to is not having crisis intervention, that, you know, the social worker intervenes and the crisis is resolved and then the case is closed. There has to be ongoing assessments at various levels of the case planning, and there has to be some, you know, long-term involvement. I don't mean, like, lengthy involvement 'til the kid is 18 or whatever, but I do mean at various levels in the case. You just don't do one assessment,

and you have to see if the goals and situations are changing on an ongoing basis.

Mrs. Rowat: That sounds, you know, the way it should happen. And I agree that, you know, it's an important factor in the, you know, in the child's life and also in the family's life.

But we also know that there are caseload issues. So, do you think some of this is not happening because there is a significant caseload factor, or is it because there's, you know, children that move from one area, or one authority, to another, or—like, what is causing that challenge? And is it staffing? Is it caseloads? Is it transient, you know, families, or—what are the challenges that are creating obstacles to that?

Ms. MacDonald: I think caseload does remain a factor because social work is all about relationship building, and you need to have the time to develop that relationship. But I do think we're seeing some good tools that are currently in the system and some improvement. And I think our point here was, you know, we're still seeing a lot of crisis work. Hopefully, that's improving with the new tools that are in place, but a—you know, a reminder that family assessment has to be ongoing and at critical points in the casework plan.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): I—question to the Children's Advocate, and welcome here this evening, and thank you for your report. Can you hear me okay? I'll be a little louder, if you like. Is that better? Okay, good.

As I think you're probably well aware, I've been quite concerned about the number of children in care, that we have about 10,000 kids in care in Manitoba. And as Marni Brownell and others have had a look at, that that's about, per capita, about 10 times the number of kids in care in the States, in United Kingdom, in Sweden, in New Zealand, in Australia. And, as Marni Brownell testified before the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry, when she communicated this to people in other countries, they were absolutely astounded at the numbers of kids here. In fact, I think she said at the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry that we have—we may have, the highest number of kids in care per capita anywhere in the world.

Can you tell us, you know, why we have so many kids in care?

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not sure I can answer that. There could be a number of factors. The other situation is we don't know how Family Services is

counting their numbers as well. We may have a number of kids that are in family placements. For instance, BC, they don't count kids in care in kinship placements, but Manitoba does. So, I guess, what I'm trying to say is that we're not sure what the numbers actually mean. There are, as you say, a very large number of kids in care. But we don't know the breakdown. We don't know if they're temporary wards, if they're permanent wards, if they're home with families, if they're open and have support systems in place. So I think we have to do a better job of breaking down the numbers to be able to indicate why we have so many kids in care.

Mr. Gerrard: Yes, I mean, I think that the article which Marni Brownell was a co-author on in *The Lancet*, and where they did some very rigorous comparisons between Manitoba and the States and the United Kingdom and Sweden and New Zealand and Australia, that, I mean, 10 times as many kids per capita in care, I mean, it doesn't matter which way you look at it. It's not because there's some minor differences in how we define what's in care, particularly when you're looking at the whole range of other jurisdictions where they're much, much lower than we are. And, you know, I think they were pretty careful—right?—in doing their comparisons, and that, trying to explain this just on the basis of, you know, some categorization difference, you know, I don't believe that's likely. There may be some differences, for example, as you say, between here and British Columbia, but just in terms of what is defined, but in terms of the comparison that Marni Brownell was involved with between here and elsewhere, I mean, the differences are so large and so striking that, you know, I don't believe that it's explainable just on the basis on some different—slight different classification approach.

Ms. MacDonald: No, I would agree with you that, I mean, obviously, Manitoba has a large poverty issue, and housing issue as well.

And, you know, I haven't had the opportunity to read her information, but I look forward to doing it. We certainly had a senior member of our management team involved in phase 2 and 3 of the inquiry, and we're hoping to have all that information to take a look at that as well.

Mr. Gerrard: I think that when you mention housing, that from I can see and as I've travelled around and talked with people—I was in one First Nations community where I was talking with people involved in the child and family services agency

there, and they said, right off the bat, that about a third of the kids were there because of—the housing conditions weren't up to standard. And so, I mean, I can see that's a significant issue and contributor and something that could be addressed clearly.

I think that I heard you say earlier that housing really wasn't in your sort of jurisdiction, but, you know, if it's that big a contributor, at least in some communities, to this, then maybe it's something that, in some fashion, you could look at, because of the implications for what's happening to kids in care.

Ms. MacDonald: No, I agree with you, and, as I said in one of last child death reviews, we did make a recommendation towards housing, but it is currently not under our mandate.

Mr. Gerrard: One of the things that I've been finding is that there are children who have been in Child and Family Services, where there seems to be an automatic assumption that because they were raised in Child and Family Services, they're not good enough to be a parent and their kids are taken away too quickly.

I mean, I was working with a family not very long ago, and this came up as a problem. They were initially told that they were going to be supported, and then just before the child was born, when the workers came back to them and had done virtually nothing for the whole pregnancy and then came in and said, oh, we're going to have to take your child away, instead of supporting.

I mean, I don't know if this is something which has come up in the concerns that have been raised with you and whether you would have any suggestions in this respect.

Ms. MacDonald: I would hope that agencies are offering support to young moms, and I know there are a number of good programs like Villa Rosa, and—but, you know, I would be very concerned, particularly if cases come to our attention, where services haven't been offered to adolescents prior to having their children, because I do believe it's really important to have a plan and to put supports in place. That's what's going to prevent the child from coming into care.

Mr. Chairperson: We've now reached the order of the day. It's 8 o'clock. We'd agreed to revisit at this point. What is the will of the committee?

Mr. Dewar: Mr. Chair, I suggest we sit until 8:30 and check the proceedings at that time.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Dewar suggests 8:30. Any other advice? Agreed?

* (20:00)

Mr. Mohinder Saran (The Maples): Mr. Chairperson, 8:30 or sooner, whenever questions finish, 8:30 or sooner. Otherwise, we will visit at 8:30.

Mr. Chairperson: Eight thirty or sooner, is it agreed? *[Agreed]*

Floor is open for questions.

Mr. Gerrard: One of the things that I note in your report is that you raise some concerns about the assessments that are being done. And I've found some instances where assessments at the time that a child is taken into care are not as thorough as I would have expected and that if there had been a more thorough assessment, it is quite likely that an alternative approach could have been used.

I wonder if you would comment about what you're finding in terms of assessments in general.

Ms. MacDonald: As I said, I think there are some new tools that have been developed and, hopefully, that agencies are better at just getting out of the whole crisis mode.

But, again, what I've indicated before that assessments need to be done on an ongoing basis, not just at a point of entry into child welfare and have an assessment and, then, you know, not have supports in place and close the case. I think it has to be ongoing and we are seeing some better assessments due to the new tools that are put in place—are currently in place.

Mr. Gerrard: Yes. One of the things in your report, and I refer you to page 26. There's quite a nice letter from a boy who was asking for an extension of care. But one of the things which was really of major concern to me was his statement that, I've been in a lot of bad foster group and shelter homes. You know, that's not what sort of the general public perceives as happening, that we've got a lot of bad foster group and shelter homes. But, you know, I do hear people, particularly who have been in care, talking about this kind of negative experience in—while they've been in care.

I wonder if, you know, you've—get a lot of concerns raised from children who are in care and perhaps you could expand a little bit on what you—is this a typical kind of description?

Ms. MacDonald: I can only comment that this child actually wrote us a letter and that's what we used in this annual report.

But we do have a number of children that contact our office on a regular basis and they would be contacting us because they are concerned about either where they're placed or, in particular, that they're not involved in their own planning so that we would help them with this. Obviously, this child was wanting an extension in care and felt that they were able to turn their lives around. So we're very grateful when we can hear situations such as that.

And, as I said, our office is more complaint-based so we are hearing negative things, but we also hear some very good outcomes from children such as this person who was able to be extended in care.

Mr. Gerrard: I mean, I think it's—there's absolutely no doubt that very positive experience in a foster home can be an extraordinary beneficial experience for a child. And can, in fact, turn a child's life around and that's important to recognize.

One of the things in your looking at the special investigation reviews, nine suicides in the reviewable deaths seems very high.

Can you, in looking at those, those were obviously reviewed, do you have an explanation for why that's as high as it is?

Ms. MacDonald: No, I don't believe I have an explanation except, yes, it is very concerning that suicides, you know, seem to be fairly high. But I think it is somewhat typical of the whole population. I'm looking at my program manager for special—sorry, I have no explanation.

Mr. Gerrard: I think that, when you look at the reviewable deaths, would be children who have been in care or were in care for the year before, and the rest of the deaths, the non-renewable deaths, would be in the rest of the population. And you know, although when you include the year before that you would get, you know, you might get a number as high as 7 per cent of the kids. But, even if it was 10 per cent, for example, you would've expected, you know, instead of 13 on the other side, you would've expected, you know, about 80 on the other side. So, clearly, the number, or the proportion, of reviewable deaths is really strikingly high in comparison to the general population of children that we're dealing with, and I would suggest that that's something that you take a look at and—because, if you can provide

some help and an understanding in terms of why that should be the case, maybe there would be opportunities or avenues to prevent suicides in this group.

Ms. MacDonald: Thank you for that information.

Mr. Gerrard: One of the other things that I was looking at in terms of the child-in-care deaths—this is on page 22—is that there were two deaths, one accidental and one undetermined, of children who were in apprehension, and I would presume for the most part that the children would only be in apprehension for a relatively short periods of time until they are transferred to an agency. I don't know if you have, you know, statistics on how much time they would be in sort of the apprehension phase. But that seems like a significant number, even though it's small, during that phase because I would've thought that that would—phase would be fairly short.

Ms. MacDonald: That phase can be fairly long, actually. It's not often short term because it depends on the resolution of the case. If it goes to court quickly, a child could be returned home or there could be a voluntary placement agreement or the child being made a permanent, so it's not a short-term category.

Mr. Gerrard: And, you know, that is of concern in and of itself, because you're taking a child out of their home. You've got them in an apprehended phase and they're in limbo in uncertainty for a period of time, and, if that's a long time, that can be quite disruptive to a child's life. Have you got any suggestions for shortening that period?

Ms. MacDonald: There is a very quick turnaround time where children have—agencies have to appear before the court to justify the apprehension. But, after that, I can't comment on how long it takes the court process to determine the outcome for the family of the child.

Mr. Gerrard: One of the things that you mention in the report, and this has been the subject of other reports as well, is that the—for the children who have been in care that their high school graduation rates tend to be very low in comparison to the general population. Do you have an explanation for why that should be?

* (20:10)

Ms. MacDonald: I don't believe I have an explanation, but we are extremely thrilled to see that the University of Winnipeg and Red River and, as I

said, I was at a meeting in Brandon where Assiniboine and also Brandon University have come on board with extending free tuition for kids in care. So, hopefully, we're going to see a number of more kids graduating and having the opportunities whereas a number of kids in care at age 18 felt like they didn't have the opportunity to go to university or why bother completing high school. So, hopefully, we'll see an increase in that.

Mr. Gerrard: I think, like you, that this is a very positive development in terms of what's happening at the University of Winnipeg and Red River, and, hopefully, some of the other post-secondary educational institutions will take this up as well.

But, I mean, what's clear is that young people have to graduate from high school in order to have that opportunity, and one of the challenges, clearly, that we face is to, you know, increase the number of kids graduating from high school, and so, I mean, I ask that just in terms of anything that, from your experience and from dealing with these children, that you may have to recommend that would help that.

Ms. MacDonald: Again, I believe that the opportunities that exist with the universities, I think there's more incentive for children to complete high school and hopefully more resources for them at an earlier age. Maybe we could look back at, you know, early childhood education and put resources in place and help foster parents and help families so that the children do stay in school.

Mr. Gerrard: One of the issues that has come up in the last two years is the sense from a number of people in the Aboriginal leadership, chiefs, councils and so on, that, you know, they would like to have as in fact the act kind of gives them, more ability to have an influence or participate in what's going on, not necessarily in terms of individual cases but in terms of policies and approaches, and I wonder whether you would comment on that.

Ms. MacDonald: I'm not quite sure what you're referring to.

Mr. Gerrard: Well, I mean, it's been quite clear in terms of for instance, what's happened with the southern agencies that a number of chiefs—

Point of Order

Mr. Chairperson: Honourable minister, on a point of order.

Ms. Howard: I believe the question that the member is putting is probably more appropriately addressed to me, perhaps not at this committee, perhaps in Estimates or in the House. It is a question really of a political nature and not a nature that is covered by the Children's Advocate report.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Gerrard, on the same point of order.

Mr. Gerrard: No, I'll let you rule on the point of order.

Mr. Chairperson: Clerk's assistant has advised me that the minister does indeed have a point of order, that the question was political in nature and that it would be advisable to put it to the minister instead of to the Children's Advocate.

* * *

Mr. Gerrard: Yes, well, I may have an opportunity to ask questions related to that in Estimates or elsewhere. I'm going to pass this back to the MLA for Riding Mountain.

Mrs. Rowat: I just want to say before we review or pass the report that I want to thank you and your staff for the information that you provided. I, as a new critic—and I think this is the first time I've done the committee work with yourself, so I've enjoyed it. I've learned a lot and I look forward to working with you in the future. So thank you for the opportunity, all of you.

Mr. Chairperson: No further questions? Let's move on.

Annual Report of the Children's Advocate for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2012—pass.

The hour being 8:15, what is the will of the committee?

Some Honourable Members: Committee rise.

Mr. Chairperson: Committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 8:15 p.m.

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/hansard/index.html>