

Health, Safety and Well-Being of Children Placed in Temporary Emergency Arrangements and Child and Youth Care Homes

Department of Community Services

Key Messages

- Weak oversight of children in temporary emergency arrangements and child and youth care homes is increasing the risk that vulnerable children will not be properly cared for.
- Social workers are not meeting with children at the required frequency impacting their ability to properly plan for the child's care.
- Missing and outdated plans of care may result in the needs of children not being addressed.
- No assessment or analysis by the Department of over 1,900 critical incidents or serious occurrences that could impact the health and safety of children.
- Weak agreements do not allow the Department to hold service providers accountable for the quality of care provided to children.

Why We Did This Audit

- Children in the care of the Minister are a vulnerable population.
- Temporary emergency arrangements and child and youth care homes only to be used after other options exhausted or the needs of the child cannot be met elsewhere.
- 271 children placed in child and youth care homes between April 2021 and March 2023 at a cost of \$40 million per year.
- 227 children placed in temporary emergency arrangements between April 2021 and September 2023.
- The annual cost of temporary emergency arrangements increased \$23.3 million over five years to \$28 million per year.

Weaknesses in Oversight of Temporary Emergency Arrangements Putting Vulnerable Children at Increased Risk

- Number of children in temporary emergency arrangements has increased from 36 in 2017-18 to 138 in 2022-23, while the annual cost has risen from \$4.6 million to \$27.9 million over the same period.
- Temporary emergency arrangements are not licensed or inspected by the Department.
- Average length of stay in a temporary emergency arrangement is over eight months when these are intended to be only used for up to four days.
- Implementation of recommendations from a 2022 internal review assessing the Department's compliance with temporary emergency arrangement policies not tracked.
- Social workers not having enough contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements.
- During the audit period, temporary emergency arrangement service provider agreements were missing key terms and conditions that could impact the quality of care children receive.
- Management indicated the increase in temporary emergency arrangements caused by several factors including fewer foster families, increased needs of children in care, and child and youth care homes not accepting placements.

Placement Decisions Not Supported

- No explanation why children are placed in specific child and youth care homes.
- Placement information collection tools outlining the needs of a child outdated and missing information.
- Department policy does not require documentation to explain placement decisions.

Policies for Plans of Care Are Not Followed

- Plans of care for children in child and youth care homes not completed or completed late.
- Quarterly and annual reviews of plans of care not completed or completed late.

Social Workers Are Not Always Meeting with Children In Child and Youth Care Homes At The Required Frequency

- Social workers are not always meeting with children within seven days of placement in a child and youth care home or having contact with children every 30 days as required by Department policy.
- Social worker contact with children not always occurring at the child and youth care home.

Health and Safety Risks to Children in Child and Youth Care Homes Not Analyzed

- The Department relies on child and youth care homes to track incidents that could impact the health and safety of children in care.
- Over 1,900 critical incidents or serious occurrences that could impact the health and safety of children in child and youth care homes reported to the Department, but no analysis completed to determine causes, trends, or patterns.
- The Department does not know how many allegations of child abuse or neglect were reported by children living in child and youth care homes.

Improved Quality Assurance Process for Child and Youth Care Homes and Temporary Emergency Arrangements Needed

- Department's quality assurance work limited to when files are closed or transferred, so active files may not be reviewed for compliance with Department policies.
- Current quality assurance work does not examine the placement decision for a child, or the frequency of social worker contact with a child in care.
- Improved quality assurance processes needed for the Department to identify situations where Department policies are not met and take corrective action faster.

Significant Inconsistencies in Funding for Child and Youth Care Homes

- The Department has not completed a review of how child and youth care homes are funded.
- No explanation for the differences in funding models for third-party child and youth care homes.
- Funding per bed for third-party child and youth care homes was 16 to 27 per cent higher than funding for government homes between 2020-21 and 2022-23.
- Significant differences in funding per bed for third-party child and youth care homes ranged between \$164,000 and \$335,000 in 2022-23 with no explanation for the difference.

Weaknesses in Agreements with Child and Youth Care Home Service Providers

- Service provider agreements with third-party child and youth care homes service providers do not outline performance standards for the care of children.
- In 2022-23 \$20 million in funding provided to third-party run child and youth care homes but agreements do not include terms to hold service providers accountable.

Child and Youth Care Homes Licensed and Inspected But Improvements Needed

- Child and youth care homes are inspected twice per year as required by policy.
- Inspections identifying violations such as incomplete training, missing vulnerable sector checks, and missed fire inspections.
- Improved policy guidance needed for determining timelines for the correction of violations.
- Inspection process does not verify if staff background checks are renewed at a regular frequency.