

**Alberta Foster Parent Association Banquet
November 3, 2012 - Jasper, AB
Hon Dave Hancock, Minister, Human Services**

I am honoured to be here again on behalf of Premier Alison Redford and the Government of Alberta.

I want to start by offering my congratulations to the 22 recipients of the foster family and Human Services worker of the year awards.

It is quite apt that the theme of this year's conference is "It's all about kids."

I know foster parents make it all about kids all the time.

Your willingness to share your homes, families and affection with children in need is truly inspirational.

Thanks to many of you, I learned a great deal about the challenges you experience as foster parents as well as the rewards.

Some of the challenges you face come with the territory.

However, I want you to know that I am committed to helping reduce the barriers which make sense.

I want to ensure you are able to respond to the needs of the children in your care in a timely and effective manner.

I believe the system we have in place is a good one, but it is one that can be improved.

By working together, I believe we can make things better, both for the children we serve and for foster parents.

That involves my listening to your concerns and responding to them.

The system has grown and changed just as Alberta has grown and changed.

And our approach to foster care during the past 20 years has improved.

We understand the needs of foster children better and we take a much more holistic approach to meeting those needs.

It's never an easy thing for children to be removed from their families and placed with new temporary families.

But, one thing we have learned over time is that all the adults in children's lives play a crucial role in their development and success.

That is why the policies and initiatives that have been developed recently are based on a philosophy of collaboration and teamwork.

Though all adults in a foster child's life have important roles, as foster parents, much of the day-to-day work that must be done falls to you.

You can only meet the needs of a child in your care if we provide you with the means that enable you to do so.

I know many of you have advocated strongly over the years to get the government to understand the importance of extra-curricular activities such as playing sports and going on vacations for the children in your care.

I know your efforts have met with varying success.

On the one hand, we have asked you to bring children into your homes and to treat them as if they are your own.

And on the other, we have sometimes made it difficult for you to make the family decisions that any loving parent would make for their child.

I recognize that in some cases, it has been a challenge for you to get your foster child's needs met in a timely fashion.

I am committed to changing that.

You may have heard recent media reports about a fatality report involving a medically fragile child.

The media suggests that we could have done better in providing a more co-ordinated service to this child.

The fatality inquiry determined that the child died of natural causes. (Pause)

The system has changed a great deal since this child came into care.

Our current system encourages and supports foster parents, foster support workers, caseworkers and involved family members to work together and have ongoing communication for planning and supporting children in care.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the foster parents who have also been impacted by this child's passing and are still shaken by this tragic event.

We need to keep improving service delivery and supporting you in your role as parents.

With that in mind, we are working towards a shift in practice with a particular focus on supportive relationships and communication.

We are committed to finding the right things to support, setting some guideposts and then getting out of the way so the child's team can provide the support they know the child needs.

We will also be clear on the outcomes we want to see for foster children.

But we will be flexible on how best to achieve those outcomes.

Every child in your care has unique needs and your voices can best describe how to meet those needs.

I am pleased to be able to say that work is starting to pay off.

Building supportive relationships with families, communities and service providers is critical in offering quality programs and services for vulnerable children and families.

This is particularly true when it comes to Aboriginal children.

We need to listen to and learn from Aboriginal parents, communities and partners.

Currently, there are approximately 8,600 children in care.

68 per cent of those children are Aboriginal.

The challenge of over-representation of Aboriginal children in care is not unique to Alberta.

But how we address it can be uniquely suited to the needs of Aboriginal people in our province.

During the last 10 months, Human Services has hosted conversations to begin identifying the root issues that result in so many Aboriginal children in care.

I had the opportunity to attend a session with a group of mothers who have been involved in the child intervention system, either as a child in care, or as a mother having her child taken into care, or both.

Those mothers told me that though their experiences were traumatic, they were happy there were people and a system to bring hope to their children.

The community conversations are helping create solutions and strategies that will inform the development of a framework to enable change.

I trust you will take comfort from the fact that some of the themes emerging from these sessions match up with what you have told me:

1. The system must be family focused.
2. We need to work better together.
3. Our practices and decisions need to be inclusive of Aboriginal culture.
4. We need increased community capacity and programming.
5. And we need increased awareness of historical trauma. (Pause)

To meet the needs of foster children, their biological families and foster parents, we must focus on breaking down our barriers and trying different approaches.

As with any effort to make improvements, we must engage in deliberate and thoughtful change.

Doing so begins with a commitment to collaboration and sharing of information. (Pause)

We all have an opportunity to continue to build strong collaborative relationships — internal and external to the GOA — with the aim of creating more resilient citizens.

Collaboration amongst ministries, service delivery partners, and the individuals involved in a child's life is imperative to achieving the best outcomes for children and families.

I have heard foster parents comment that more support is needed in the area of children's mental health.

We are working with Health and the AFPA to ensure you have access to mental health first aid training to support you in caring for children who have mental health issues.

This is new training that you will be hearing about very soon.

We will also be working with Health to ensure other supports are put in place to help you deal with those children under your care who are struggling with behavioural and mental health issues.

Collaboration works best when we can openly share information to plan programs as a team.

Which department provides a service or support is of little interest to Albertans.

What they need to know is that the right supports are available at the right time in the right place.

So government ministries are joining forces to share information and look for new ways to deliver services to Albertans by developing a new Information Sharing Strategy.

This strategy will enable information sharing among government, service agencies and as appropriate with anyone involved in supporting a child.

We also believe the Information Sharing Strategy will support better collaboration (Pause) and encourage effective relationships between the child's team and other government systems, and community services.

This leads me to the recent work to develop a social policy framework for Alberta.

I encourage you to bring your unique perspectives to the second phase of the Social Policy Framework.

During the summer, thousands of Albertans participated in conversations — describing their vision for our province and discussing better social outcomes for our society.

They told us they want social policies and investments to focus on creating positive opportunities for all Albertans to succeed (pause) based on principles like respect, inclusion and mutual responsibility.

The second phase of this conversation now shifts to roles, responsibilities and strategies: How can we achieve our shared vision for Alberta? And who will do what?

You know better than most that a number of social challenges hold back our development as a province.

These include poverty, mental health, family violence, addictions and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

We need your knowledge and experience to help define roles and responsibilities.

You can be instrumental in developing strategies to help every child grow up in a nurturing home and vibrant community.

You can help create an Alberta in which every individual can live in dignity and have the opportunity to contribute to our society.

You can now take a new online survey, start or comment on a new blog, and edit the refreshed framework in the wiki.

If we want to do better for Albertans, we need to consider how all of our policies and programs serve the whole person, throughout their life.

We are now asking “How will we get to where we want to be and how are we going to work together to do it?”

The families and communities that we work with have many of the answers to the complex challenges facing all of us.

With approximately 4,600 children in foster care and under 2,500 foster homes, there is work to do in the area of recruitment.

It takes a special kind of person to be a foster parent.

Your flexibility, adaptability, compassion and strength are admirable.

Caseworkers, specialists, teachers and other professionals enter your lives at any time to talk about any number of issues regarding the children.

We also ask you to give your heart to children who might be with your family for just one day or maybe 15 years.

Many of you have walls filled with pictures of the foster children that have been warmly welcomed into your home and your lives.

Many of you talk about the positive aspects and benefits you have received from fostering.

Research indicates that foster parents who feel valued and supported are the best recruiters of other foster parents.

We will be doing our part to recruit new homes, but I would like you to know how important you are to the recruitment process.

I’m pleased to say that our system is always learning and evolving.

We are open to hear your thoughts and perspectives on how to address specific issues and seize opportunities.

We will continue to work with the provincial and local Foster Parent Associations, CFSAs and DFNAs to create opportunities for you to highlight and resolve issues that you are facing.

Logical, practical approaches that improve the quality of our support is our ultimate goal.

This is going to take team work and you are all a part of this important team.

We need localized solutions that address community needs.

Strong families contribute to strong communities, which in turn, creates a strong future for Alberta.

Thanks to all of you for your commitment to the children of Alberta – those who need a home when their families cannot be there for them.

Enjoy the banquet.