

**Alberta Foster Parent Association Conference – Banquet
November 9, 2013
Honourable Dave Hancock**

Thank you for your kind introduction Martin.

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

I want to start by offering my congratulations to the 26 recipients of the foster family and Human Services worker of the year awards.

All of the award recipients are amazing and their work is an encouragement to me and all my colleagues.

As all of you are.

All of you should get an award and be thanked every day for your contributions.

I have met many foster parents who say they do what they do because it adds purpose to their lives.

But I know more support is needed to address some of the challenges you face as foster parents.

I committed to all of you last year that I would help reduce some of the barriers you face.

You spoke about the need to be empowered to respond to the needs of the children in your care in a timely and effective manner.

This is why we have taken several steps to enhance the supports you receive.

I am happy to announce we have increased basic maintenance rates by two per cent.

These rate increases will be retroactive to April 1.

In addition, I heard it is difficult for foster parents to care for infants because of the extra costs involved.

We are going to start reimbursing foster parents up to \$500 for infant equipment they may have to purchase.

That would include such things as cribs or car seats, so they can accept an infant into their home more readily.

I also know that diapers and formula are expensive, so we are going to reimburse up to \$150 per month per infant to help compensate for the costs of baby supplies.

But, this financial support is just the beginning.

I also heard that some of our policies were creating administrative burdens for you.

With this in mind, we are revising policies to reduce administrative processes associated with recreation and vacation funds and for travel within Canada.

This will make it a bit easier for your family to take that camping trip to B.C.

Or go see your family or your child's family in Winnipeg.

We hope these changes will help enhance your family life.

But we know there are some serious challenges to creating a calm and stable home life.

Children who are struggling with mental health issues is one such challenge.

All children deserve the best possible start in life.

That is why we are making it easier for caregivers to get the training and resources needed to support the children in your care.

The Children's Mental Health Learning Series will provide parents, caregivers and professionals with helpful information that will enable effective response and support of children with mental health concerns.

These online sessions are based on current and emerging research around topics such as:

- brain development,
- mental health diagnosis,
- creating safe and stimulating environments and trauma-informed practice.

For more information and to register for the series, visit humanservices.alberta.ca.

In addition, many of you took part in the Mental Health First Aid Training sessions that were offered around the province and here at the conference.

The intent of these courses is to provide more information on recognizing mental health problems, providing initial help and guiding individuals to appropriate professionals.

Mental health training is imperative as we have found that early interventions are effective in reducing mental health issues and create better outcomes throughout a child's life.

Over the long term, this saves money and builds safer, stronger communities.

Along with these new training opportunities we are also increasing the mental health supports you can access in your communities.

Staff in early childhood development programs, such as Parent Link centres, will receive training to increase the capacity for early screening of children with emotional and social difficulties.

All of these enhancements are intended to make your day-to-day lives easier.

And, ultimately, to help children adjust to become successful adults.

HUMAN SERVICES

I truly believe Human Services is about investment in the possibility of eliminating poverty, homelessness, family violence and bullying.

We are also investing in the possibility of creating safe and caring communities throughout Alberta.

Alberta is a place where there should be an equal opportunity for all of Alberta's children to be part of strong, caring families.

And the developmentally and physically disabled can take their rightful place in society.

These are lofty goals, but experience indicates they are achievable.

Our commitment to safe and caring families has resulted in more than 3,000 families staying together and almost 2,000 families being reunited.

Many of these reunifications have been possible because of the support you give to the children in your care and their birth families.

CHILDREN FIRST ACT

It is this commitment to families that we are trying to capture in order to support you in the *Children First Act*.

The legislation includes provisions to increase support and protection for vulnerable children and their families.

It acknowledges that children are the future of this province.

It calls for changes to the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* to further enable workers and foster parents to make timely decisions about the children.

It will help us to further address and prevent family violence.

And it increases supports for victims of crime and children's access to justice.

Children First is about breaking down barriers and encouraging collaboration to identify and meet the needs of young people.

PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Legislation is important; policy is important.

But I think you would all agree that where we make the most difference is dependent on the relationships we have with one another.

We need to support families to develop skills in addressing challenges such as family violence, abuse, addictions and poverty.

Rather than judgement, these Albertans need understanding and information about the kinds of help available.

Child intervention workers are a critical part of this support system for families.

And we have been hearing from them and you that there is a desire to be better able to connect values and beliefs, legislation and policy with their daily activities.

And that they want to be supported when they are doing this.

What this means is that workers need to continue to work closely with children and families and make decisions based on the law and policy.

But they also need a set of common principles that helps them approach their work in a thoughtful and consistent way.

We want to enable staff to empower families to identify what they do well, and what are the most effective ways of responding to their needs and cultural values.

Approaches that are supporting this direction include the Outcomes-based Service Delivery — legislation such as the Children First Act — work around enhanced information sharing to improve how services and supports are managed and delivered — and the development of Alberta's Children's Charter.

CHILDREN'S CHARTER

The charter will help ensure Alberta recognizes the following principles:

- that all children are to be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their circumstances;
- that a child's familial, cultural, social and religious heritage is to be recognized and respected;
- that the needs of children are a central focus in the design and delivery of programs and services affecting children;
- that prevention and early intervention are fundamental in addressing social challenges affecting children;
- that the importance of reinforcing that individuals, families, communities and governments have a shared responsibility with the parents, guardians and families for the well-being, safety, security, education and health of children.

CONCLUSION

Improving outcomes for children is never an easy task.

The good thing is we are not starting from scratch.

We have all of you to help move us forward.

We all share the same vision – a province where children and youth are safe, healthy and can take advantage of the opportunities Alberta offers.

And there is a lot of great work going on in communities in the areas of poverty reduction, parent supports and early childhood development.

We must continue to build on this work and these partnerships to achieve better outcomes for our children.

I'm very excited to continue working with you to look for more efficiencies in the system and streamlining more processes.

We can't make the right changes without your advice.

Please continue to share your ideas with me because they are making a difference.

Thank you for your invaluable service to your community.

Thank you for sharing your personal stories or challenges and triumph.

And thank you most of all for sharing your lives with children and youth in care.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.