

Check Against Delivery

Alberta Foster Parent Association Symposium June 11, 2014, Edmonton Honourable Manmeet S. Bhullar, Minister, Human Services

Good morning and thank you to the Alberta Foster Parent Association for hosting this event today, and for inviting me to join you.

I want to begin by welcoming delegates and professionals from across Canada who have joined us here today.

You woke up this morning in a province where many of your friends and relatives have moved to the place that created 87% of Canada's jobs last year, where we pay the lowest tax on property, income and gas in Canada...

...and where you can go to the West Edmonton Mall – see the Sea Lion – and pay no provincial sales tax on anything you buy.

Ladies and gentleman: Welcome to Alberta!

I've been thinking about what to say to you here this morning and there's one thing that keeps popping into my head: Thank God for foster parents and all of the work that you do.

Society faces deep challenges. Not just here in Alberta, but across Canada and around the world. Nobody is immune to it.

The average person may not realize or comprehend fully some of the things that go on in society and some of the awful things that people do to one another...

But as the Minister of Human Services, and you as foster parents, we know all too well some of the downright disgusting things that happen to some of our most vulnerable people – namely children.

The instances of substance abuse, sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, and just plain neglect makes your stomach churn.

As foster parents, you are there for some of the toughest moments in those children's lives, when they don't have their own parents or family to lean on for support.

You bring joy and hope into their lives so that they will have good memories of what a loving, nurturing home should be.

While it is no doubt scary and stressful for these vulnerable children to go into a stranger's home, I know that it's just as nerve-racking for you.

Sometimes it is 3 o'clock in the morning where something bad has happened and these poor children have nowhere else to turn, but no matter what time of the day or night, foster parents have stepped up because they know a child is in trouble.

Providing that consistency and stability to a child is a huge help to their emotional well-being and development, and can help to reduce the trauma from the volatile situation they were taken out from.

So I want to sincerely thank you for being there to catch them when they need it the most; thank you for your dedication, your compassion and hard work.

Thank God for foster parents.

A caring and supportive family is so crucial to a child's success.

Alberta recognizes the importance of foster parents in this role, and we want to make sure that you have the right supports and resources to ensure the children you care for can maximize their potential and live fulfilling, happy lives.

Many would agree that it would be best if a child remained with its parents or next of kin if it is a safe option, and I have made it my mission to make sure that happens where it is possible.

Unfortunately it is not always possible.

That's why foster parents have a critical role in ensuring a better future for the children in their care.

You also have an important role in mentoring kinship caregivers and biological parents who are struggling.

Your training and knowledge on providing quality care is highly valued.

Let me give you an example of why I say that.

One of the foster parents in our Fostering Connections program accepted a brand new baby boy into her home.

His mother was unable to care for him due to her own developmental delays, addiction issues, and domestic violence in the home.

The foster parent agreed to take on a mentorship role with her, in hopes of having her take over full-time care of her son in the future.

The foster parent taught the mom how to respond to her baby's need for food, comfort, and physical care.

And this gave her the opportunity to bond with him and love him.

The baby's mom developed a trusting relationship with the foster parent and they worked very well together as a team.

Over time, the foster parent adopted the baby but continued to have the baby's mother involved in her son's life.

This is an ideal situation as the baby's mom is not able to care for her son on a full-time basis.

But she is still very much involved in her son's life.

And she has also become part of the foster family's home.

I cannot think of a better example of why foster parents are so important to our wellbeing as a province.

And that is why I am proud to help support their efforts through funding and partnerships with organizations such as the AFPA.

I believe that enhanced education, training and support for child intervention workers is crucial to strengthening casework practice. And I believe that will have a huge impact on foster parents.

Our focus on improving training for case workers will enable them to provide even better support to you and other caregivers, and in turn our most vulnerable children.

It is essential to combine training with world renowned best practices such as the Signs of Safety approach.

This approach involves collaborating with families to increase safety and reduce danger at home.

It will help families build on their skills and resources to make things better — and will go a long way in achieving positive outcomes for kids.

This approach also aligns with Alberta's Child Intervention Practice Framework that is currently in development.

The Framework's principles will enable us to better support children and families.

This is especially true when a child must live with others to be safe.

The Framework will also help staff make decisions that are consistent with our organizational values and principles.

Ensuring foster parents have access to training will also strengthen support for Alberta's most vulnerable children.

Foster parents and kinship caregivers have identified time and travel as a challenge taking training.

That is why the Children's Mental Health Learning Series was developed.

This is an online resource to help all caregivers and case workers effectively support children with mental health concerns.

Caregivers or any interested parties can attend the sessions in person or by webcast.

To date, we have offered courses on brain development, mental health diagnosis, and creating safe and stimulating environments and trauma-informed practice.

Improving outcomes for children is never an easy task, but I am committed to making it happen.

That's why our government adopted the five point plan to help accelerate improvements to Alberta's child intervention system.

My priority is to put focus on quality assurance and continuous improvement.

We recently signed a new agreement with the Calgary Police to fast-track police checks and share more information so that we can expedite kinship care applications.

We're working on this as well with the Edmonton Police and with the RCMP.

Our government will also be extending support for young adults in care by two years, to age 24, to help youth transition more successfully into adulthood.

Children and youth who have been abused or neglected are affected by the trauma they have endured, so that's why Alberta invested an additional \$5 million towards mental health supports for vulnerable children and families to make sure they get the help they need.

I also want our system to be more transparent and accountable which is why we are looking at how we can consistently share information on the intervention system with the public.

To do this, I am encouraging my provincial colleagues across the country to share data so that we can ensure ongoing improvement and learn.

I always use the pop-bottle example to illustrate this point. It's a point made to me by Gord Phaneuf from the Child Welfare League.

He told me about the example of plastic pop bottles. Research had shown that too many children were being injured by those old glass bottles, so the industry moved to plastic bottles, not for any other reason but to make children safer.

Information is power and when we are equipped with the correct information, we can use that to affect change.

I believe all this work is going to improve the lives of children, youth and families in Alberta.

And they will better support our foster parents, kinship care parents, caregivers and caseworkers.

I thank you for your commitment, passion and hard work.

Because you are the ones who respond day in and day out, night and day, when vulnerable kids need someone.

I look forward to collaborating with you and professionals in other jurisdictions to learn about ways to improve our system.

Thank you.