

A Review of the Government Sanctioned Coopers & Lybrand Study-State of the Child Welfare Program

Released by the ESPC May, 1998

Process

The long-awaited Coopers & Lybrand Review of the Child Welfare Program was finally released May 13th, 1998-weeks after the legislature had finished the spring sitting. The document was supposedly handed to government in January 1998 which begs the question of why it took the department so long to release it to the public. The Department of Family and Social Services paid the accounting firm of Coopers & Lybrand \$90,000 to review the system and make recommendations for change.

This independent high level review was to provide the Minister of Family and Social Services with an assessment of the state of the current Child Welfare Program given the devolution of service delivery to community-based Regional Authorities. In reading the report Review of the Child Welfare Program one can't help but notice that it refers to child welfare as a "business," not a service and there is close attention paid to the notion of "value for money" which is a purely business concept.

The report authors point out that they were not asked to review the current state of devolution to community-based services but had to do so to do a credible assessment (pg. Overview-7). Their review methods concentrated primarily on senior administration-a top-down approach. This involved interviewing 27 regional directors and senior ministry bureaucrats. No one outside those paid by the ministry were interviewed. While the report claims to have consulted front-line employees there was no evidence to suggest that these people were in addition to the 27 regional directors and senior ministry bureaucrats. The information which was obtained from "a focused discussion with a selected group of front-line employees" provides a "reality check" for the review. (pg. 1-6)

No attention was paid to major reports by the Edmonton Gleaners Association and the Edmonton Social Planning Council's (ESPC) (Two Paycheques Away: Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton and A Return Look at Two Paycheques Away-Update '97), the ESPC's Redesign of Child and Family Services-A Frontline Perspective or to To Fend for Themselves-Alberta's Approach to Reforming Child Welfare (A discussion paper prepared by Alberta's Official Opposition, June, 1997) all of which involved quantitative and qualitative data. In the ESPC survey (Redesign of Child and Family Services-A Frontline Perspective) alone, about 240 people from Region 10 responded and these are people who are working with or concerned with the well-being of children.

Instead of consulting local studies, the Coopers & Lybrand report examined external literature which focused on Ontario and the United States. Given the availability of the reviews and reports of Alberta's Children's Advocate, the Auditor General and others, it would seem the report authors are avoiding any critiques or analysis of the work done by the department of Family and Social Services.

Despite avoiding outside (local) analysis the report does document and raise several concerns with the redesign. For example: "devolution could be one to two years behind schedule and take years longer to fully implement" (pg. 2-5) and in the context of an organization in transition the report states the redesign is "a devolution exercise that has gone on too long-community groups are tired, volunteers burnt-out and frustrated by the protracted timeframes" (pg. 2-7).

Concerns/Quotes

There are several other examples of statements in the report which contradict the Minister's claim that "the Coopers & Lybrand review of the Child Welfare Program reinforces, once again, that we are moving in the right direction."

- The child welfare program is "in the midst of significant staff turnover, increased workloads, increased complexity of cases and shortage of appropriate placement resources" (pgs. Overview-9 and 2-3).
- "Time and resource pressures are enormous-not only management imposed but often legislated" (pg. 3-2).
- "Policy is developed in reaction to a crisis situation" (pg. 3-13).
- "Increasing complexity of family and children's needs" (pg. 3-21).
- Program is "angst-ridden about direction and personal futures" and front-line staff and managers have been "discouraged from active participation in devolution process" (pg. Overview-10).
- "Community groups are tired, volunteers burnt-out and frustrated by the protracted timeframes" (pg. 2-7).
- "The vision is not commonly accepted across stakeholder groups" (pg. Overview-13).
- "We are not convinced basic ingredients for successful devolution exist within Ministry to support transition" and "we found significant gaps in the critical areas of 1) an accepted and clearly articulated strategic policy framework to provide guidance on how future accountabilities and roles and responsibilities will be defined; 2) business frameworks and organizational infrastructures to support these delegations; and 3) professional capacity to appropriately manage and support 18 Regional Authorities once devolution occurs" (pg. Overview-11).
- "Government may not have sufficient capacity to manage the creation and operationalization of 18 new Authorities, provide coherent guidance and support for these new authorities and manage its own operations concurrently" (pg. Overview-18).
- "We believe there are three areas where you, the Program and the future Regional Authorities face significant risk. These three areas are: 1) the overall health of current Child Welfare Program, 2) the extent to which the Program has operationalized the concept of "Value for Money" and is effectively managing its resources and 3) the extent to which the Program is ready to be devolved to the Regional Authorities and the communities are capable of accepting the service delivery responsibilities" (pg. Overview-12).
- "The community may be underestimating the challenges of managing the complexity of a devolved system..." (pg. Overview-19).
- "The manner in which staff are regarded and have been treated by many key stakeholders during the community consultation process, the degree of suspicion and mistrust, the significant attrition rate and low morale are of concern..." (pg. Overview-14).
- "Staff and managers have been poorly treated over the past few years..." (pg. 3-43).
- "The current organizational culture demands dedication to serving the public good through the protection of children at risk and through the provision of a range of children's services for those in need" (pg. Overview-15).
- "There is a feeling at all levels there will be too much focus on prevention to the detriment of protection" (pg. Overview-18).
- "The Child Welfare Program does not have a performance and outcome measurement regime and reporting mechanisms" (pgs. Overview-16 and 3-14).
- "The organization does not measure or monitor client or stakeholder needs and satisfaction with how services are delivered" (pg. 3-24).
- "We are concerned that given the challenge of managing the devolution of authorities and ongoing operations, the promised integration of services will not receive sufficient attention" (pg. Overview-18).
- "Commissioner's office focused entirely on devolution" (pgs. Overview-10 and 2-7).
- "The work of the Commissioner's Office has had a negative effect on the willingness and ability of the existing organization to actively seek management improvements. With the silos created, communications have been sporadic and poor" (pg. 3-33).
- "The Commissioner's Office has been for too long, working in isolation from the Ministry operations" (pg. 3-38).

Omissions

The Minister of Family and Social Services initiated the study shortly after the release of To Fend for Themselves-Alberta's Approach to Reforming Child Welfare (A discussion paper prepared by Alberta's Official Opposition, June, 1997). The Coopers & Lybrand study was publicly promoted in the legislature as the Ministry's explanation for the increasing child welfare caseloads. But the report gives no explanation of why cases have dramatically increased or about the relationship between poverty and child welfare. The report authors instead state the study was "not intended to determine the root cause for the increase in caseload/cost

per case" (pg. 1-7). The report authors also state that "we did not find evidence that the program had undertaken a comprehensive analysis of what was driving up caseloads and cost per case; most of the evidence we were provided with was intuitive and anecdotal" (pg. 3-30).

Independent analysis shows the Ministry is not adequately tracking abuse, neglect, or deaths of children in care but the report did not address this issue.

There is no discussion of whether the "vision" is appropriate or not; just whether it is being achieved.

There is no discussion of whether funding is adequate, or whether resources are adequate. Instead the discussion is about managing (current) resources. There is the usual rhetoric about "fiscal implications, cost management and containment" (pg. 3-20), "driving up the costs" (pg. 3-21), "to do better/more with less" (pg. 3-33), "cost containment/reduction" and "fee for service" (pg. 7-3).

It seems ironic that the first Regional Authority has been appointed in Calgary and services have been transferred even though the report states that the roles, organizational structure and staffing have not yet been defined.

Other Comments

The Coopers & Lybrand report justifies the fact that Child Welfare Program is not in good shape by concluding that "we had no sense that the Child Welfare program was in 'worse' shape than similar programs across the country or in North America" (pg. 3-2). This is an example of negative benchmarking, of going to the lowest common denominator and of the race to the bottom.

According to the report there is currently a consultant's study underway to study residential care (pg. 3-22).

"Alberta is seen as a pioneer in the area of Child Welfare and is leading the way in moving to community-based and integrated service delivery model" (pg. 3-29). Who sees Alberta as a pioneer and why, except for those whose agenda it is to cut and privatize social programs?

The report refers to problems, for example the isolation of staff, as being "shortcomings" rather than conscious policies. Now that the redesign initiative has progressed far enough to become a fait accompli, the strategy may well be to do a lot of apologizing and say everyone should work together on the Ministry's "vision."

"A recent Coopers & Lybrand study on transformation concluded that the longer it takes to implement change the less likely you are of achieving the benefits of the change"(pg. 3-40).

After documenting all the problems the report seems to be advising government to go full steam ahead. "The Minister and the Deputy Minister must show strong leadership and champion the vision" (pg. 4-47).

In a letter which was sent to interviewees it said "The Minister, Dr. Oberg, has recently requested Coopers & Lybrand to undertake a high level analysis or review of the Child Welfare Program-to assess the effectiveness of programs and operations, the efficient use of resources and the "value for money" of program expenditures (pg. Appendix 2-3). It would seem to be another budgetary exercise to further cut programs and resources.

The letter also states "you have been identified as one of the people who will give us the most benefitÉ" (pg. Appendix 2-3). Who identified the people to be interviewed, the Ministry? If it was a hand-picked group it is obvious that not everyone thinks that all is well.

Conclusion

The report identifies serious shortcomings in the program and in the process of devolution. The implied solution is to speed up devolution, while at the same time look for more ways to cut the system. Strangely, even though there are a lot of problems cited, there is not even a hint that the best solution to the problems may

be to forget about regionalization, to increase resources and funding and to let the front-line workers play a major role in any future redesign initiatives.