

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
BC ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS
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“EXTENDED FAMILY PROGRAM” OFFERS IMPROVED SUPPORTS FOR SOME, BUT DISQUALIFIES TOO MANY OTHERS

Effective April 1st, the provincial government will institute changes to support services for family members/family friends who have stepped in to care for a child whose parents cannot look after them. The Child in a Home of a Relative (CIHR) program under the Ministry of Housing and Social Development will be phased out, with no new applications accepted after March 31st, 2010. The new Extended Family Program (EFP) under the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), heralded by the provincial government as a way to “support strong, stable home environments and ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth who are temporarily unable to live with their parents,” states its most important goal is to “improve outcomes for children and youth.”

The majority of these children will be living with their grandparents. In fact, there are more children being raised by their grandparents in BC than there are in the foster care system. A recent survey by Parent Support Services Society of BC and the University of Victoria School of Social Work indicated that half the grandparents raising their grandchildren had the children placed with them by MCFD. Grandparents have been referred to as ‘the underground foster care system’ for good reason.

The BC Association of Social Workers has reviewed the new Extended Family Program, and has identified some major concerns:

Although anyone currently in receipt of CIHR benefits will continue to be covered under that program until the child reaches the age of majority, after March 31st, the only apparent option for a relative who undertakes the care of a child is through the Extended Family Program. If they do not qualify, they will be left with very few supports – and indeed many will not qualify. Two major flaws are apparent in the planning for the EFP:

- The only gateway to the new program is through the child’s parent, who must request and agree to the arrangement. Too often that parent cannot be found, suffers from a mental illness or addiction, may be incarcerated or street engaged, may have an estranged relationship with the grandparents or simply may be unwilling or unable to cooperate for a variety of reasons.
- The new policy disqualifies any relative with legal guardianship of the child to receive services, even if they have great need. This is despite the fact that MCFD staff and often lawyers advise grandparents (or other relatives) to obtain legal guardianship because of the protection it affords the child and the grandparents in decision making and acquiring services for the child.

Unlike the CIHR plan, which covers children until they age out, the service plan under the Extended Family Program will be reviewed every six months, and supports will continue “as long

as there is an assessed need and the parent agrees that the out-of-home placement remains the best option for the child.” This leaves relatives unable to plan far into the future as all or some supports could disappear in a very short time. The agreements are “not expected to continue beyond 24 months maximum... unless an assessment of the child’s needs supports a longer timeline.” Two years in the life of a child who has likely experienced substantial turmoil, and whose parents may have chronic problems that interfere with their ability to parent, is extraordinarily brief. Many grandparents hope that their child will be able to parent again when well. Sometimes that is possible. Often the children stay with their grandparents until they are grown or the grandparents are too old or ill to care for them. But this program can only assure them they will receive help for between 6 and 24 months.

As for the screenings and assessments, we are concerned that these procedures now become the responsibility of MCFD. No new funding or staffing has been allocated to handle the additional workloads in an already under-resourced ministry. While we support the need for in-depth assessments, adding this task to social work caseloads which are already too high in most regions will only result in critical delays across the board to families needing help, and create untenable situations for professional staff.

We do not note any appeal system for people refused under the new program, nor is there any increased advocacy funding or service to assist with navigation, clarification, problem solving etc. In fact, it has been reduced, with the elimination of LawLINE, which was often the first step in receiving legal rights information.

We applaud the services the new Extended Family Program will provide – financial help, respite care, medical, optical and dental benefits, increased access to counselling services – it’s all good. But why, we ask, has this program been designed to deliberately exclude many of the families who need it most – the family members who cannot locate or have an estranged relationship with the child’s parent, the grandparents or other relatives who fought for legal guardianship to protect the child’s best interests – many of whom live near or beneath the poverty line or struggle on fixed incomes, and who have undertaken responsibility for a child or children who may have many special needs.

Currently, 4500 families receive benefits under CIHR and less than 200 under Kith and Kin agreements. With the tight screening criteria of the Extended Family Program, it is likely that few families will qualify. For those who do, it will be a wonderful benefit. For the vast majority who do not, it will be devastating.

BCASW asks the government to review this program in the light of our concerns, and institute the changes that will ensure no children are excluded from the help they need to live in a safe and secure family environment. Specifically, we ask that:

- Legal guardians be considered eligible for the EFP
- Caregivers be allowed to apply for the EFP in circumstances that preclude a parent from giving consent
- The program be reframed from a ‘temporary’ stopgap to one that offers help until a child reaches the age of majority, where it is in the child’s best interests.
- Funding be increased to MCFD to handle the additional workload

- MCFD establish an external advisory body that includes social workers, legal advocates and other stakeholders
- MCFD recognize the unique hardships and contributions of grandparents and other relatives/close family friends and demonstrate its commitment to supporting children to remain with extended family on a long term basis if needed.

For additional information, please contact:

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