

*Outcome Based Services Delivery Model:
Divesting of Responsibility for Alberta's Children*



Alberta's children, our responsibility

*Policy Paper of
The Alberta Union
Of Provincial Employees*

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1. Introduction:

Privatization by stealth has been the mode of operands of this government and we must be in the forefront of denouncing this action.

Changes to Child Protection Services have always been brought about in accordance with the philosophical doctrine of this government: divestment and privatization. However when all the rhetoric and gloss are removed, this doctrine means one thing: the downloading and abandonment of responsibility by government of an indispensable moral obligation to the children of Alberta. It is the position of Local 006 members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), that the government's scheme to transfer responsibilities for Child Protection Services to private agencies will severely impede or even eliminate crucial services from being delivered to the children and families who need them the most.

Outcome Based Services Delivery (OBSD) is the divesting of responsibility of protecting children to contracted agencies. Our employer has done a great job of selling it, as "help" to the way we deliver services. Yet the manner in which they will be measuring outcomes is not realistic in the human services field. Children and families are not commodities like a barrel of oil. They are human beings and deserve to be given services that deal with the whole person, not some measurable index that ties closely to a contract for further financial compensation.

To fully understand the Outcome-Based Service Delivery model one must understand the concept of privatization.

2. - What is privatization?

Privatization is a fundamental change from the public delivery of a service to the private ownership and delivery of that service, with focus on profit for the owners of that service rather than the quality of the service. Profit, then, becomes the driving force of the delivery of that service. It is the sale, contracting out, transfer or other divestiture of government controlled operations or services. It is the removal from elected government representatives of accountability for a public service.

The term privatization is used in the case of full divestiture or when a specific function is turned over to the private sector and regulatory control remains a public sector responsibility.

The need to make a profit creates a dilemma between supplying the best possible service and reducing costs. In order to make a profit, private service providers must either: reduce the level of services to save costs, or increase prices for supplying those services by at least their profit margin.

Additionally, if the government requires specific standards in services, they have to spend money on creating a means of enforcing those standards.

Profit margins are created often at the expense of the taxpayer. For example, public/private partnerships or "P3s," use taxpayer money to subsidize private business. Meaning the private owner invests less of their own money, but still gets the benefits of service ownership (profits).

There is rarely enough: transparency, accountability, and public consultation.

Costs of enforcing levels of acceptable service are not included when considering partnerships. Can contractors always provide the best possible service, when the primary goal is to generate profits, accomplished by cutting costs?

Private contractor's basic objective is to provide the minimum level of service at the maximum price the market will bear. That is the way the market works. Any services beyond the minimum contractual obligation will only result in lost profits. These contractors have little incentive to be concerned about the long-term consequences of providing a service.

Government is elected. It is responsible for making decisions and being accountable for those decisions. A department using contracted agencies is still headed by an elected politician. All they've done is put a buffer between themselves and the people that elected them, which reduces government responsibility and accountability.

The general population frequently does not know who is responsible for the public service when that service is privatized. They do not know who to raise concerns about that service with, allowing politicians to "pass-the-buck."

Monopoly pricing practices

For many government services, as in the case of Child, Youth and Family Services, there are often few companies capable of delivering the service. In a lot of cases, and particularly in smaller centers, there may be only one. The result is not competition, but rather monopoly, leading to significantly higher costs, poorer quality services or both.

3. - Background on Outcome Based Services Delivery Model

In November 2001, Standing Policy Committee on Children's Services approved a set of significant policy changes collectively referred to as "Alberta Response."

The Alberta Response was the implementation of several complex activities that were set to address short term and long-term needs of children, youth and families who come into contact with the Child Welfare System.

The Alberta Response Model was the philosophical framework from which the government set out to institutionalize plans to increase the privatization of children's services delivery. In 2004 the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act was passed and it allowed this philosophical framework be entrenched in government policy.

In 2006 the Casework Practice Model provided the framework and tools from which Caseworkers were to provide services in one of two 'streams':

- Enhancement Stream - when the families involved were able and willing to work voluntarily with Intervention Services
- Protection Stream - when the families involved were not able or willing to work voluntarily with Intervention Services.

Given the ongoing increases of workloads numbers, Enhancement Streams quickly turned into protection stream, as families were not being provided with the timely services required to address the concerns that initially brought them to the attention of Child, Youth and Family Services.

The last step of ARM (Alberta Response Model) is the Outcome Based Services Model. Outcome Based Contracting is a performance based contracting and be generally defined as:

"A model that focuses on outputs, quality and outcomes of services provision and may tie at least a portion of a contractor's payment, as well as contract extension or renewal, to their achievement." In other words "Activity Based Funding" which fragments Child, Youth and Family Services to reward financially motivated agencies. A market oriented system that increases costs, encourages the provision of certain services over others, and it also leads to reduced services to the families that we strive to help.

The predominant benefit to Agencies has been noted to be:

- Flexible funding mechanisms
- Potential for longer term funding commitments if they meet contractual obligations
- Ability to internally measure performance, self-assessment rather than regulation
- Engagement with the broader system as a partner
- Ability to reinvest committed dollars into programming at the discretion of the agency
- Increased communication between agency and CFSA caseworkers

4. - How is OBSD being used?

Agencies are being asked to report on outcome indicators that are based on the National Child Welfare Outcomes Indicator Matrix. These indicators focus on four domains: safety, well-being, permanency and family and community support.

Safety: Two key child protection indicators are included in the index; recurrence of maltreatment and child injury (an indication of severity of maltreatment).

Child well being: Does not lend itself well to tracking, therefore two proxy indicators have been identified. School attendance/graduation and Criminal charges under the Young Offenders Act in Canada.

Permanency: Three indicators selected for these indexes are: placement rates, placement stability and permanence.

Family and Community Support: Three indicators of family and community support have been selected including family functioning risk ratings, number of family moves and placement matching.

Outcome based approaches have a specific time limit whereby an outcome, negative or positive, is expected. To impose such criteria on individuals is simply unrealistic. When families and children come to the attention of Child, Youth and Family Services it is often at a point where the family is in crisis and other community interventions have not been successful in addressing the concerns. Families' "progress" comes about as a result of a complex mix of supports and circumstances being in perfect balance. To dismiss an approach or intervention because it is not measurable seems inappropriate when dealing with human beings. Outcome based approaches demand a formulaic outcome and place emphasis on numbers often losing sight of people.

5. - Impact of using OBSD:

- A decrease in government accountability and responsibility
- A decrease in professionalism, standards and regulation
- A decrease in funding to front-line services
- Higher costs due to increase in bureaucracies, duplicated services and profit margins
- Increased costs in the areas of health, justice, welfare and EI

- Most significantly, and increase in the number of children at risk of abuse and neglect and in need of protection

6. - Barriers and challenges:

As when any new approach is implemented, there are a number of barriers and challenges. The main challenges identified from the pilot sites have been around the issue of information sharing between agency workers and caseworkers. As per Legislation, Caseworkers are ultimately responsible for the safety and well-being of the children on their caseloads. Not having first hand information regarding the family functioning and well-being of the child can ultimately result in outcomes that negatively impact the safety, development and well-being of the children we set out to work with.

OBSD was not test run in an urban aboriginal population even though aboriginal people make up a significant number of CYS clients. In Edmonton for example all the families receiving OBSD services are non-aboriginal.

Agencies providing OBSD services in rural communities do not have enough staff to meet their contractual obligations and are resorting to hiring individuals who may not necessarily meet the skill set required to provide the level of services needed by families. Files are not being assigned in a timely manner and again families are being left without timely services.

7. - Recommendations:

Recommendation #1:

That the Government of Alberta continues to exercise direct responsibility for child protection. Only through direct government involvement will elected decision makers be held fully accountable for their decisions.

Recommendation #2:

That the government recognize the benefits which accrue in terms of professionalism, a healthy and productive service delivery environment and a committed workforce when all workers delivering child protection services are unionized.

Recommendation #3:

That the Alberta government prevent costly and inefficient bureaucracies as well as duplication of administration and service by maintaining child protection as a public service in the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

Recommendation #4:

That the Alberta government eliminate any duplication and bureaucracy inefficiency in the Ministry of Children and Youth Services by ensuring public funds go directly to front-line services.

Recommendation #5:

That the Alberta government move to protect public financial interest through full public detailed disclosure of contracts between Children and Youth Services and private agencies and individuals delivering services to children.

Recommendation #6

That full public funding be maintained and the provincial government continue to be directly involved in the public delivery of child protection services.

Recommendation #7:

That the Alberta government abandons its plans to privatize and divest its responsibility for child protection services and instead commits itself to the improvement of existing public services.

8. - Conclusion:

In conclusion, it makes little sense for a government that emphasizes fiscal accountability to eliminate less costly and more effective public services in favor of deregulated, unaccountable, profit motivated and fragmented private interests. As Social workers we have always worked closely with community services and stakeholders to serve the families and children of this province. We recognize the importance and professionalism of the community agencies that we work with on a daily basis, and we truly believe in the idea of a true partnership between agencies and the public sector. Not a partnership based on private investor profit and cost to taxpayers, where costs go up, quality goes down and there is no accountability.

This government must fund Children's Services appropriately so that we have the resources we need for the families we serve. With a shift in attitudes in Children's Services and a fully staffed, publicly funded workforce, we will ensure the real outcome that is used to evaluate our effectiveness is that our families are left in a position where they are making healthy and realistic progress with the overall best interest of children, families and communities as the main focus.

