

Alberta breaks promise to its children

On the frontlines of Alberta Children and Youth Services, the reality is grim. Kids' lives hang in the balance as caseworkers and crisis workers juggle crushingly heavy caseloads. They shoulder the fallout as the economy leaves the vulnerable behind and vacancies in the department remain unoccupied.

"We're going from one fire to the next," says frustrated AUPE VP and crisis worker Sandra Azocar. "This is a field you go into because you can make an impact on families so they don't become part of the system. But we can't support families enough to make the needed changes, so we see the same thing over and over again."

Every month Sandra and her colleagues deal with 9,000 children, youth and families that are in enough turmoil they require child intervention services. In some cases frontline workers have as many as 30 families that they are working with. Fifteen is common and is pushing the envelope of capacity. The optimal - the number ACYS uses in its outcomes based service delivery (OBSD) pilots - is six.

Privatization under any name

OBSD and privatization are one in the same according to Azocar. It is the latest trend in cost cutting in many of ACYS initiatives, although it is integral to the business plans in several government departments.

This new initiative involves delegating some services to for-profit and not-for-profit agencies. These are services like foster care referral or addictions counselling, for example. It uses specific and narrowly focused 'outcomes' or deliverables as a measure of success. It penalizes agencies for failure by withdrawing contracts; and financially rewards their achievement of these outcomes - but at what expense?

That's the question frontline workers in ACYS ask themselves as they reel from a \$28-million cut to their budget. And they worry about the children.

Compassion lacking in service rationing

These human services professionals come from a variety of educational backgrounds and specialties. Their connection lies in their fundamental belief they are performing a critical public service in the ethical tradition of their profession. That tradition views human services holistically, as opposed to OBSD that seeks to "ration" services.

Crisis worker and AUPE Local 6 council member Guy Quenneville says in its

zeal to streamline funding processes, create procedural efficiencies and cut costs - the Government of Alberta is cheating the very children it so loudly proclaims to serve and protect.

With this rationing, he explains, vulnerable families have become entangled in a patchwork of specific services delegated to outside enterprises with narrow functions - agencies that are rewarded to expedite a delicate process to achieve a specific short-term objective. Quenneville questions the ethics of this privatization of human services.

"What happens to them after the outcomes are met," he asks. "I'm not against working towards outcomes. What concerns me is the complete offloading of services from the public to the private sector in a model that has very mixed results."

Once again, his greatest concern is the people that could fall between the cracks. Even though he knows his own job is on the line.

He says the pilot projects being conducted in all ACYS authorities have optimal conditions, which don't reflect the reality in Alberta and especially not for government workers. He sees bureaucrats using the skewed results of the pilots to rationalize cutting jobs and services within ACYS with disastrous results for families and children.

Internal woes compromise child safety

Not only do Quenneville and his colleagues question the humanity and

effectiveness of OBSD, the haphazard implementation in the department leaves them rudderless. They feel the public is not being well served.

They welcome the collaborative possibilities and the opportunity to work with a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team to better help families. But they see their authority as delegates of the province being undermined as they are increasingly thrust in a brokerage role for agencies. That spells trouble says Azocar.

In her experience, agency workers sometimes assume leadership in cases where they lack expertise. They don't always consult government workers about their plan of action, leaving child intervention workers blind to often volatile and dangerous family crises.

"It worked in the past when they were a resource," Azocar explains. "Now they are making final decisions on the welfare of kids. Under Alberta legislation that's our job." She fears the worst for children as she and her colleagues - in their role as brokers to the agencies - are left to shuffle a relentless stream of paperwork they are required to fill out as part of the onerous reporting requirements in the model.

OBSD for human services questioned

Even with the best of intentions and the best ideas, poorly executed the experiment can become a disaster.

In April 2010 a for-profit Nebraska agency delivering foster care in a public- private partnership went bankrupt and could not honour its contract with the state government. As a result the lives of 81 foster families were disrupted and 360 employees lost their jobs. The outcome-based incentives were not enough to keep the agency profitable.

This would never happen with government-delivered services.

Some academics and industry experts argue that achievable outcomes in the human services are too complex to evaluate and don't fit into the OBSD model. The service delivery system's precursor - Managed Care

- was introduced into the medical system in the United States. Its objective was to consolidate services and cut costs.

In the past decades the system has been examined and in some cases, adopted by government social services departments, like Alberta's. This even though the system is novel to the human services field and evidence of its effectiveness is not clear.

The United Kingdom chose not to adopt the system because of the holistic approach required in delivering human services. Policy makers weren't comfortable providing financial remuneration to achieve specific human services outcomes.

Who's taking care of the children?

In Alberta, Premier Ed Stelmach's government has enthusiastically embraced OBSD.

Frontline workers in the department feel bullied under their leadership that seems determined to implement the new system - no matter what. They see standards of care dropping as agencies struggle to recruit and retain professionals at low wages and turn instead to short-term training for employees.

They see their own department's authority and capacity diminishing. They see kids being the big-time losers.

"You get the feeling the Alberta government is trying to divert its risk by privatizing services," Azocar notes. She sees this "privatization by stealth" resulting in suffering and calamity for Alberta's most needy families. "The

government needs to be accountable for the safety of children in this province."

The latest experiment in shifting costs and responsibilities away from government departments and onto private enterprises is seriously compromising standards of professionalism. And it threatens the jobs

of workers.

Most shameful of all - the government's actions are jeopardizing the safety of Alberta's children and the health of its families.