

BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES

*An Action Plan
to Transform
Child and Family Services*

Introduction

Child and family services in the Northwest Territories are delivered under the authority of the *Child and Family Services Act* (the *Act*). The *Act* came into force on October 30, 1998, and provides the legislated mandate for child protection workers and other designated officials to intervene in situations where a child protection concern may exist. The *Act* makes it mandatory for anyone who suspects that a child is being abused or neglected to report the matter to a child protection worker. Child protection workers are required by the *Act* to investigate all reports of suspected child maltreatment, and to take action when children are being, or are at risk of being, abused or neglected.

The ultimate accountability for the delivery of child and family services rests with the Minister of Health and Social Services. Service delivery is delegated to the Boards of Management of seven regional Health and Social Services Authorities (Regional Authorities) by way of a Delegation Order under the *Act*. In addition, the Minister appoints a Director of Child and Family Services (the Director) to ensure that the provisions of the *Act* and its Regulations are carried out. The Director appoints the Chief Executive Officers of the Regional Authorities as Assistant Directors, and delegates the Director's duties and powers to them for their respective regions of operations. The Director also appoints child protection workers who assist the Director, and Assistant Directors, in the performance of their duties under the *Act*.

The paramount objective of the *Act* is to promote the best interests, protection and well-being of children. The *Act* applies to all children, from birth to age 16, with the option of extending services delivered under the *Act* to age 18.

In 2010 the Standing Committee on Social Programs of the 16th Legislative Assembly undertook a comprehensive review of the *Act*. The Committee commissioned work on best practices, received departmental briefings, met with stakeholder groups, conducted confidential interviews with current and former clients of child and family services, and heard from 266 people in ten communities in all seven regions of the NWT. In total, the Committee made 73 recommendations for improvement, both to the *Act* and to the delivery of child and family services, eight of which were pivotal and from which the remainder flowed:

- 1) Focus on prevention and early intervention, helping families to stay together and heal; including expansion of the Healthy Families Program into every community;
- 2) Take the least intrusive measures possible to deliver child welfare services, with increased emphasis on collaborative processes to solve family problems;
- 3) Set up and fund Child and Family Service Committees in every community, as set out in the *Act*; providing resources to communities taking more responsibility for child welfare;
- 4) Provide alcohol and drug treatment, readily accessible and convenient to all communities;
- 5) Extend child and family services to youth aged 16 – 19, with provisions to assist young adults to age 23;
- 6) Improve the administration of Child and Family services by updating procedures, with particular emphasis on increasing extended family placement, custom adoptions, and community-based solutions;

- 7) Develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that includes coordinating the work and policies of the departments of Health and Social Services, Education, Culture & Employment, Justice, and the NWT Housing Corporation in areas related to child welfare, such as social assistance, legal aid and housing;
- 8) Develop a strategic plan at the Department of Health and Social Services, incorporating the recommendations of this report, starting with a response within 120 days.

Significant progress has been made on most of these overarching recommendations. A recent 11-year retrospective examination of services delivered under the *Act*¹ revealed some very positive trends. The ratio of voluntary services to court-ordered services is increasing; voluntary plans of care are trending upward, while supervision orders and temporary care and custody orders are trending downward; the proportion of children receiving services at home is increasing. The initiatives within this Action Plan will maintain the momentum toward ongoing improvements to child and family services. In recognition of the commitment of the Standing Committee on Social Programs to the children and families of the NWT, the title of this Action Plan, *Building Stronger Families*, is taken from the subtitle of the Committee's report to the Legislative Assembly.

In October 2013 the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG) undertook an audit of the Northwest Territories Child and Family Services Program, delivered under the *Act*. The audit sampled 46 child protection files and 36 foster family files, drawn from the period April 2010 to September 2013, and selected from three of the seven Regional Authorities.

The Auditor General found weaknesses in both the administration of child and family services by the Department, and in the delivery of child and family services by the Regional Authorities. The Auditor General presented his report, with 11 recommendations, to the Legislative Assembly in March, 2014. The Department accepted all 11 recommendations, which ranged from changes in the accountability structure, through better performance reporting, to enhanced prevention programming. By the time the report was presented, the Department had in place a draft action plan to implement each of the recommendations.

In April and May of 2014 the Standing Committee on Government Operations of the 17th Legislative Assembly reviewed the OAG report, held public hearings, and issued its own report and recommendations. In addition to endorsing the 11 recommendations made by the Auditor General, the Committee added 19 additional recommendations of its own for improvements in the management and delivery of child and family services.

Over 100 recommendations with respect to changes necessary in child and family services have been made over the past four years. The nature and extent of these recommendations highlight the pressing need for instrumental changes in the administration, management and delivery of Child and Family Services. This Action Plan describes how these changes will be accomplished.

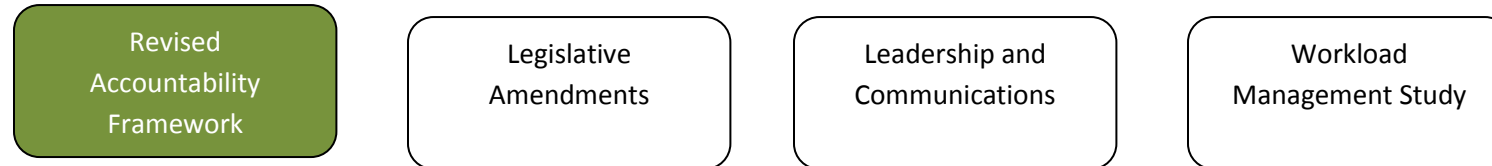
The overall goal of this Action Plan is to improve the quality of child and family services, with a view to achieving better outcomes for children and their families when they require services under the *Child and Family Services Act*.

¹ *Report of the Director of Child and Family Services for the Years 2002 – 2012*, Department of Health and Social Services, May 2014.

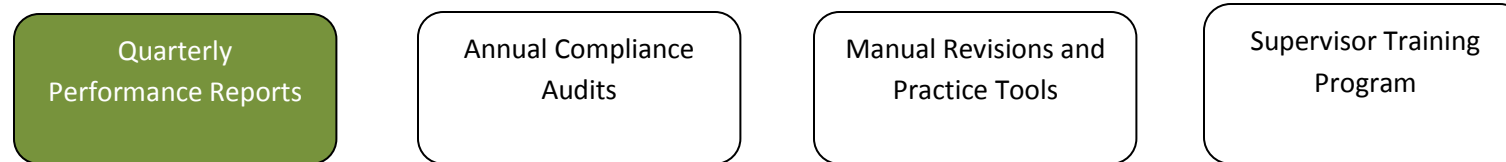
Scope of the Action Plan

Substantive changes are required system-wide: with respect to how Child and Family Services are *administered and managed*; to *risk management and quality assurance* mechanisms, and to how Child and Family Services are *delivered* at the community level. The major elements of the Action Plan are identified below:

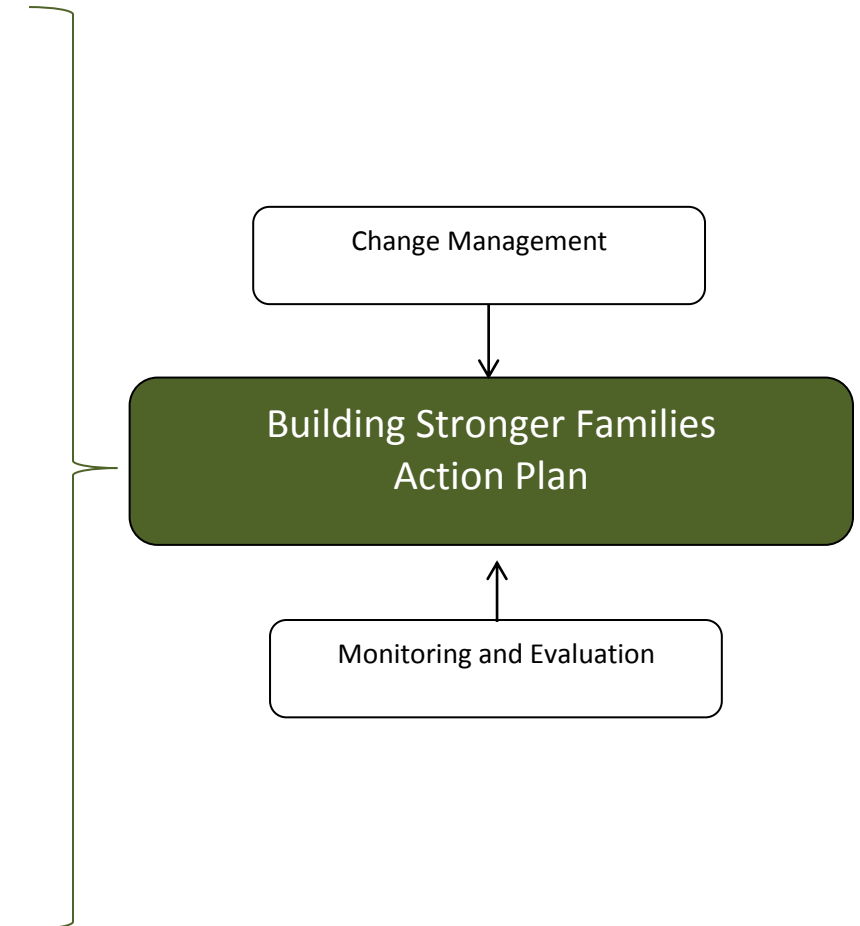
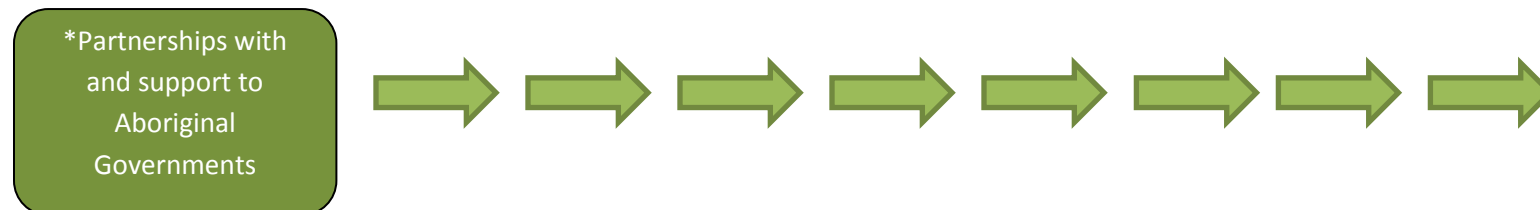
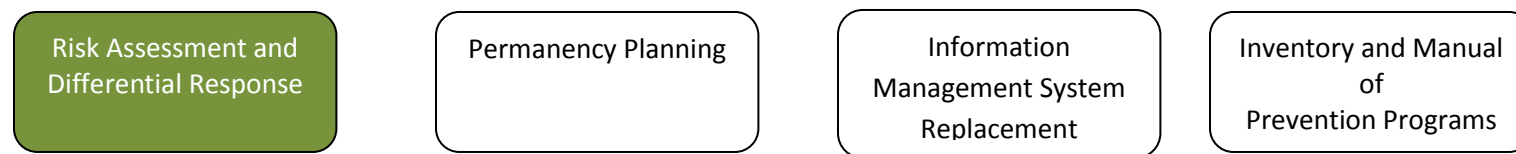
Program Administration and Management



Risk Management and Quality Assurance



Service Delivery and Child Protection Practice



The *Building Stronger Families* Action Plan encompasses twelve separate initiatives, along with a change management strategy and an evaluation component. The twelve initiatives are described in the pages that follow. There are three companion documents that form integral parts of the Action Plan (highlighted in green on the chart):

Revised Accountability Framework for Child and Family Services (Tab 1)
Quarterly Performance Reporting for the Management of Child and Family Services (Tab2)
Risk Assessment and Differential Response in the Delivery of Child and Family Services (Tab3)

All twelve initiatives are presented in tabular form in Appendix 1 (Tab 4), which identifies specific deliverables, responsibilities, time lines and current status. Appendix 2 (Tab 5) presents a chart in calendar form, outlining the timing and sequencing of each initiative.

“Respect, Recognition, Responsibility” is the foundation of the GNWT’s approach to working together with Aboriginal Governments in the NWT. It was developed based on discussion with Aboriginal Governments and community leaders. “Building Stronger Families: An Action Plan to Transform Child and Family Services” acknowledges the roles Aboriginal Governments play in the delivery of programs and services and recognizes their future interests in drawing down the authorities associated with the delivery of child and family services. We are committed to be open, flexible and responsive in working with the diverse governance structures of regional Aboriginal Governments and understanding the unique interests and challenges of each region and community. Upon request, the Department will work in partnership with Aboriginal Governments, share information and knowledge, and help build capacity.

Program Management and Administration

Revised Accountability Framework

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
Clarified roles and responsibilities for the management and delivery of child and family services.	Improved accountability for compliance with the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> and the Standards and Procedures Manual

Responsibility for the delivery of child and family services is delegated to seven Regional Health and Social Services Authorities (Regional Authorities). Child protection workers (CPWs) are appointed by the Director of Child and Family Services to deliver services under the *Act*. CPWs have a statutory reporting relationship to the Director, but within their respective Regional Authorities they report on a day-to-day basis to supervisors, who report to managers, who report to Directors, who report to the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs).

In the words of the Auditor General, *“We found that the current accountability framework leaves the Director of Child and Family Services with little control over the day-to-day decisions for which he is ultimately accountable under the Act. The Director authorizes child protection workers to exercise many of his duties and powers, and to make decisions on his behalf. However, those workers are employed by the regional authorities and receive direction from management who do not report and are not accountable to either the Department or the Director for child and family services delivered in their jurisdiction.”*

This was the observation made by the Auditor General during the audit of the child and family services program, resulting in a recommendation that the Department review the accountability framework and find ways to improve it. The *Act* enables the appointment of Assistant Directors, to whom most of the Director’s powers and duties may be delegated for specific communities. Appointing the Regional Authority CEOs as Assistant Directors would make them accountable to the Director for the delivery of services under the *Act*, thereby significantly improving overall accountability within child and family services.

A companion document to this Action Plan, ***Revised Accountability Framework for Child and Family Services***, describes the many steps the Department will be taking to improve accountability in child and family services. In the shorter term, the accountability framework for child and family services will be strengthened. In the longer term, the accountability framework for the health and social services system will be revised to reflect a single operating authority. Some Aboriginal Governments have negotiated, or are in the process of negotiating, jurisdiction over child and family services; and may choose to draw down this jurisdiction in the future. The Department is committed to working with Aboriginal Governments to support a smooth transition of jurisdiction and will update the accountability framework accordingly as required.

Legislative Amendments

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To enact changes to the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> in response to recommendations of the Standing Committee on Social Programs	A revised <i>Act</i> that is more responsive to the needs of children and youth, and their families and communities

In 2009 the Standing Committee of Social Programs (SCOSP) was directed by the Legislative Assembly to review the *Act*. In so doing the Committee conducted a literature review, interviewed current and past clients of child and family services, received departmental briefings, consulted with key stakeholders and heard from over 250 people in 10 communities which the Committee visited. The Committee's comprehensive report was tabled in the Legislative Assembly in October 2010.

The Committee made a total of 73 recommendations for improvements to child and family services, including 13 that were directed toward amending the *Act*. In consequence, the Department will be proposing the following amendments to the current *Act*:

- Defining 'youth' as a person from the age of 16 to the age of majority (19);
- Allowing the Director of Child and Family Services to apply to the court for a declaration that a youth needs protection;
- Extending the services offered under support services agreements, including housing supports;
- Extending support services to youth who were in the permanent care of the Director of CFS before they reached the age of majority, until they reach the age of 23 years;
- Requiring the Director of Child and Family Services to develop a written transition case plan for youth leaving the permanent custody of the Director;
- Allowing for additional and optional roles for Child and Family Services Committees;
- Requiring the Director of Child and Family Services to advise a child, youth, and parents of their right to be represented by legal counsel;
- Requiring a child protection worker to notify a child's Aboriginal organization of an apprehension hearing, if the child is an Aboriginal child;
- Requiring the Legislative Assembly, or a committee designated or established by the Legislative Assembly, to review the provisions and delivery of the *Act* every five years;
- Adding prostitution and prostitution-related activities under the provisions stating the circumstances for a child needing protection;
- Amend the *Act* to remove the word 'repeatedly' from the provisions addressing the circumstances of a child needing protection during the exposure to domestic violence, s.7(3)(j) and s.7(3)(k);
- Establishing time limits for temporary care based on the child's age.

The legislative proposal has been reviewed by the Standing Committee on Social Programs, and has received Cabinet approval to proceed with legislative drafting. The drafting instructions were approved in May, 2014, and the drafting of the proposed amendments is proceeding. It is anticipated that the amendments will be brought forward to the Legislative Assembly in May or June of 2015.

If the amendments are passed, there will be a need to revise the standards and procedures manual, and to revise the statutory training program for child protection workers.

Leadership and Communications

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To support transformative change in the management and delivery of child and family services	Timely and effective management and operational changes

In some important respects the issues identified by the Auditor General reflected deficiencies in the leadership of child and family services, both within the Department and within the Regional Authorities. As the Deputy Minister noted during the public hearings held by the Standing Committee on Government operations, there had been significant changes in leadership at senior levels over the last ten last years. When leaders come and go, the initiatives that they champion are placed in jeopardy.

Senior public servants are notably risk-averse, with good reason. Child protection services are notably high-risk activities. The analogy of mixing oil and water comes to mind. For some senior officials, “out of sight is out of mind” defines the optimal comfort level when it comes to child protection services.

In spite of the fact that child and family services figure prominently in the Department’s strategic plan, *Building on Our Foundation 2011 – 2016*, in reality senior leadership is continually faced with juggling competing priorities.

However, these considerations should not diminish the need for stronger and more effective leadership. Steps have been taken to reconvene the dormant Directors of Social Program Forum (comprised of the Directors of Social Programs in the Regional Authorities and the Executive Director, Territorial Social Programs). The Forum will teleconference quarterly, and will meet annually, to consider directions and priorities for child and family services.

The Forum will also become the corporate entity responsible for the implementation of this Action Plan.

The Forum has been given a seat on the Joint Senior Management Committee (comprised of the Department’s executive committee and the Chief Executive Officers of the Regional Authorities), and social program updates will become a standing item on the Committee’s agenda. As noted previously, the Regional Authority CEOs have been appointed Assistant Directors under the *Act*, and have been delegated the Director’s powers and duties.

Effective leadership requires effective communications. A communications plan specific to the initiatives contained within this Action Plan is under development.

Workload Management Study

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To assess the human and financial resources required to meet the obligations of the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i>	A fair, equitable and adequate distribution of resources across all seven Regional Authorities

In the report on the audit of child and family services, the Auditor General observed that:

“At the time of the authorization in 1998, the Department set the level of funding that each regional authority was to receive to assist in the delivery of child and family services. However, the Department provided no evidence that these funding levels were based on an assessment of resources required to deliver on obligations under the Act...”

Consequently, the Auditor General recommended that the Department, in conjunction with the Regional Authorities, undertake a detailed assessment of the human and financial resources required to deliver child and family services. To a large extent, the financial resource requirement will be driven by the human resources required to meet the obligations of the *Act*.

There are no national standards for child protection caseloads, although 20 cases per worker is a number that appears frequently in the literature. The difficulty in arriving at an acceptable caseload number is that each child and family requiring services presents with issues that can vary widely in complexity. Case complexity determines the amount of time, effort and resources required to provide appropriate services. There are no universally endorsed methods for measuring case complexity. Nevertheless, the Standing Committee on Government Operations is of the view that caseload standards must be established, and consequently made a motion to that effect:

*Committee Motion 67-17(5):
Caseload Standards for Child Protection Workers*

Moses: I move that the Department of Health and Social Services establish territory-wide caseload standards for child protection workers. And further, that the department ensure that the caseloads are fairly balanced across regional authorities. And furthermore, that the due consideration be given to regional variation of duties, demands and available resources.

The motion carried.

The first step in determining the human resource requirement and establishing caseload standards will be to measure current workloads, and to determine how workloads are currently being managed. Toward that end, the Department will engage the services of the Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC). The CWLC undertook a review of the child and family program shortly after the *Act* was proclaimed in 1998. The results of that study, which included an assessment of caseloads, were published in 2000 in the report *It Takes A Community*. The report anticipated the challenges which will have to be overcome in order to assess the human resource requirements in child and family services:

“There is no useful quantification of child welfare work in the NWT. Although several offices have developed methods to serve their immediate purpose, none of the information provided the kind of dynamic data which could support effective planning and resource deployment, nor could it tell the story of what was occurring on a case basis. There was no consistent agreement on what constitutes a case, what work should be counted, and on the amount of time or percentage of full time equivalency that a social worker dedicates to child welfare. Therefore, the development of a benchmark is not readily achievable.”²

That was the situation in the year 2000. Fourteen years later the situation remains the same. The Department will be contracting with the CWLC to conduct a workload study as the first step in assessing the human resource requirement in child and family services. The project charter is expected to be completed by the end of August, work will begin in September, and a final report will be due by the end of March, 2015.

² *It Takes a Community*, Child Welfare League of Canada, 2000, p.39

Risk Management and Quality Assurance

Quarterly Performance Reports

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To achieve regular and consistent performance reporting in the delivery of child and family services	Improved program management, monitoring and evaluation, and quality assurance

In response to the Auditor General's recommendation that the Department review the accountability framework for child and family services, the Department committed to several actions, including the development of a quarterly performance measures report that each Regional Authority will submit to the Director. In reviewing the Auditor General's report, the Standing Committee on Government Operations confirmed the need for quarterly reports, as expressed in a motion presented to the Legislative Assembly:

*Committee Motion 49-17(5)
Quarterly Updates*

Nadli: I move that the Department of Health and Social Services provide quarterly updates to the Standing Committee on Social Programs on the improvements to child and family services. And further, that these updates replicate indicators associated with exhibits three, four, five and six of the Auditor General's report pertaining to the following areas respectively:

- *Conducting investigations.*
- *Addressing confirmed child protection needs.*
- *Attending to children in the care of the Director.*
- *Screening and reviewing foster homes.*

The motion carried.

The indicators within the exhibits to which the Standing Committee was referring are reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1

Exhibit 3	Exhibit 4	Exhibit 5	Exhibit 6
Investigations	Plan of Care	Temporary and Permanent Care	Foster Homes
All child protection concerns brought to the attention of child protection workers must be investigated	A plan-of-care agreement must be signed within 23 days after a child protection worker receives a report of concerns about a child's safety or well-being.	Regular contact must be maintained with children, according to the minimum contact guidelines set out in the <i>Act</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One face-to-face contact must take place every two or three months (depending on whether the child is in temporary or permanent care); • At least every second visit must take place in the home; • At least one private contact with children must take place every six months (if in permanent care). 	Foster care applicants must be screened to determine their eligibility as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference letters must be obtained from three people who have known the applicants for a minimum of three years (for regular foster care homes); • Criminal records checks must be completed; Departmental record checks must be completed, to identify and previous or outstanding child well-being or safety concerns about the applicants; • Medical information must be obtained (for regular foster homes); • An initial home study must be completed; • An agreement and oath of confidentiality must be signed.
All investigations must be completed within 30 days after the initial report of concern	All parties involved in the plan-of-care agreement must agree with the conditions and sign the agreement.	A case review must be conducted every four months (for children in temporary care) or every six months (for children in permanent care) to determine whether any changes in services to children are needed.	Annual reviews of foster care homes must be conducted to help ensure ongoing high quality of care.
In each investigation, interviews must be conducted with the parents, the children, and others who may have relevant information about the child and family	Compliance with the conditions of the plan-of-care agreement must be monitored according to the minimum contact guidelines set out in the Child and Family Services Manual: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one face-to-face contact must take place with the child and his or her family per month; • At least every second visit must take place in the home; • One private contact with the child must take place every six weeks. 		
In each investigation, a safety assessment must be conducted to determine whether there are any factors threatening the immediate safety of the child			
Each investigation must include a longer-term assessment of risk of future harm or the potential for re-occurrence of abuse or neglect.			

In the continuing effort to improve the management of child and family services, in September 2014 the Regional Authorities will begin the process of quarterly reporting on a standardized set of performance indicators. The quarterly reports will monitor caseloads using a dashboard approach, which will allow for tracking changes over time, for making comparisons across the Regional Authorities, and for consolidating regional information at a territorial level.

The dashboard will track both voluntary services (plans of care, voluntary agreements and support service agreements), and court-ordered care and custody (supervision orders, interim orders and temporary and permanent orders). It will also track reports of suspected child maltreatment, investigations, and investigation outcomes. The dashboard will also monitor the opening and closing of foster homes, will record foster home inspections, and will provide information on the types of foster homes in operation (regular, provisional and extended family).

A companion document to this Action Plan, ***Quarterly Performance Reports for the Delivery of Child and Family Services***, provides an example of what the quarterly reports will look like.

Annual Compliance Audits

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To achieve regular and consistent assessment of compliance with the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> and the Standards and Procedures Manual	Improved risk management, quality assurance and accountability

The Auditor General recommended that the Department conduct annual audits on each Regional Authority, and that the Regional Authorities also regularly assess their compliance with the *Act* and the standards and procedures manual. The Standing Committee on Government operations concurred with the Auditor General's recommendations, and made motions to that effect. Both motions passed.

Having the Department and the Regional Authorities each conduct annual audits would not be the most effective use of existing resources. Consequently, this Action Plan proposes the deployment of three-person audit teams which would see each Regional Authority audited for compliance on an annual basis. The audit team would be led by the Quality Assurance Specialist in the Child and Family Services Program, and would include an internal auditor from the Regional Authority being audited, along with an external auditor from some other Regional Authority. This approach meets the spirit of the recommendations, in that both the Department and the Regional Authorities assess compliance on an annual basis. It also adds objectivity by having an external auditor involved in each audit.

The implementation of annual compliance audits will require the design of a common audit tool and a common reporting template for use in each Regional Authority. The audit tool will be designed so as to capture, at a minimum, the data set contained within Exhibits 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the Auditor General's report on the

audit of child and family services. The audit tool will need field-testing for validation, and the three-person audit teams will require training on the proper use of the audit tool.

The audit tool will be developed in the fall of 2014 and field-tested during the winter. Annual audits will be initiated at the beginning of the 2015/16 fiscal year.

Manual Revisions and Practice Tools

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To provide child protection workers with guidance and tools to support their functions under the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> .	Fair, equitable and consistent service delivery in all NWT communities

Revisions to the *Child and Family Services Standards and Procedures Manual* (the Manual) have been ongoing for several years. Both the Auditor General and the Standing Committee on Government Operations recognized the need to complete the revisions on an urgent basis. So too does the Department, and consequently this action item has been given a much higher priority.

The current Manual contains ten sections:

1. Philosophy, Principles and Mandates
2. Child and Family Services Committees
3. Administration of Child and Family Services
4. Referral and Investigation
5. Voluntary and Support Services
6. Plan of Care Committees
7. Court Requirements
8. Case Management
9. Placement Services, including Foster Care
10. Permanent Custody for the Purpose of Adoption

Overall, the current Manual contains almost 200 standards, forms and attachments which need to be reviewed, verified and updated if necessary. In addition additional standards, forms and practice tools need to be developed to reflect legislative and policy changes, and the emergence of new best practices, since the Manual was originally prepared in 1998.

By mid-summer, 2014, revisions to five of the ten sections (3, 4, 7, 8, and 10) were well underway, with the expectation that by the end of September they will be ready for peer review by teams of child protection workers and supervisors from the Regional Authorities. The process will be repeated for the remaining section in the fall of 2014, with a view to having the revised and updated manual ready for distribution by January 2015.

Supervisor Training Program

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To provide supervisors with the knowledge and skills required for effective case work supervision	Improved case management and compliance with legislation, policy and standards

At the present time, supervisor training within child and family services happens on an *ad hoc* basis, depending upon individual needs and the resources available within the Regional Authorities. There is an emerging consensus within program management that many of the compliance issues noted by the Auditor General could be alleviated through more effective case work supervision. Consequently, the Department has committed to developing a supervisor training program that would become required for all supervisors. This would be similar to the statutory training required of all child protection workers, but with a focus of supervisory functions.

Jurisdictional research and a review of best practices in supervision is scheduled to begin in October, 2014, with a view to developing the curriculum, resources and training materials during the last quarter of 2014/15. The goal will be for all current supervisors to complete the training program in 2015/16, and thereafter to make the training program mandatory for all new supervisors.

Service Delivery and Child Protection Practice

Risk Assessment and Differential Response

<u>Goals</u>	<u>Outcomes</u>
To adopt a standardized approach to assessing immediate safety needs and future risks of harm	Better decisions about the steps that need to be taken to protect children from harm
To enable a different set of interventions in cases of child neglect as compared to the interventions for cases of child abuse	A more family-centered and supportive response to alleviate child neglect and prevent children from becoming in need of protection

In its 2010 report to the Legislative Assembly, the Standing Committee on Social Programs noted,

“The intention of the Act is to create collaborative conditions for child welfare decision-making. Traditionally and historically, child welfare practice has been highly adversarial; it has been characterized by the assumptions that parents are wrong and the government is right, and if this assumption was disputed, the parent was expected to prove their innocence in court against the case file of the child protection worker, often without any legal assistance.”³

The first two over-arching recommendations made by the Standing Committee to the 16th Legislative Assembly were responsive to this observation:

- 1) *Focus on prevention and early intervention, helping families stay together and heal;*
- 2) *Take the least intrusive measure possible to deliver child welfare services, with increased emphasis on collaborative processes to solve family problems.*

Adopting a differential response approach will go a long way toward meeting those recommendations. Differential response is a relatively new way of dealing with child protection concerns, which over the past decade has been adopted in many jurisdictions, including some Canadian provinces. It is grounded in the observation that child *abuse* and child *neglect* are different. They have different origins, run a different course, and have different impacts and outcomes for children. The idea behind differential response is very simple: one course of action is appropriate for cases of abuse, and a different course of action is appropriate for cases of neglect.

In applying a differential response approach, cases of abuse are dealt with in the conventional fashion, through the conduct of investigations and intervention in court. Cases of neglect however, are dealt with in a collaborative fashion, by offering supports and various forms of assistance to parents and family.

³ Report on the Review of the Child and Family Services Act, p.25

The first step in moving toward a differential response approach requires that Child Protection Workers have tools at their disposal to allow them to assess threats to a child’s immediate safety and the potential for future harm. As the Auditor General observed in his report to the Legislative Assembly,

“We found that regional authorities did not always perform the required steps within investigations to determine whether the children were safe. Required steps that were not performed included completing a safety assessment...In addition to requiring investigations of immediate safety concern (the Act) also requires longer-term risk assessment...Neither the Department nor the regional authorities had developed a tool to assist child protection workers in assessing longer-term risks to children.”

In response to this observation and the Auditor General’s subsequent recommendation, the Department and the Regional Authorities will be adopting a set of standardized risk assessment instruments that will assist Child Protection Workers in assessing both immediate safety threats and longer-term risks of future harm. A companion document to this Action Plan, ***Risk Assessment and Differential Response in the Delivery of Child and Family Services***, provides greater detail on the adoption of risk assessment tools and outlines how the introduction of differential response will be integrated in this Action Plan.

Permanency Planning

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
A long-term plan for every child in permanent care and custody, at the earliest opportunity	Each child’s needs and entitlement to permanent caregivers are met, at the earliest opportunity

Permanency planning is based on the principle that every child has the right to a permanent family, with the child’s family of origin as the first option. Every child who is taken into care should have a permanency plan – a plan that lays out the steps, the services and the outcomes required to re-unite the child with his or her family. Best practice in permanency planning is to develop the plan at the moment the child is first taken into care. Best practice also includes concurrent planning (“Plan B”) in the event that efforts to re-unite the child with the family of origin fail. Concurrent plan options might include permanent placement with extended family, kinship care, adoption, or other arrangements for the child to live in a permanent family setting. For older youth, permanency planning involves preparing the youth for the transition to adulthood, and ensuring that in doing so the youth has a lasting relationship with at least one other adult.

As of August 1, 2014 there were 142 children and youth, ranging from less than one year old to 17 years of age, in the permanent care and custody of the Director. Almost all of these children and youth came into permanent care because their child protection worker believed that their parents would be very unlikely to ever adequately care for them, and the court agreed with the child protection worker. Sometimes the parents also agree, and the application for permanent care and custody is uncontested. A number of children in permanent care have specialized medical and/or psychological needs that are well beyond the resources of the family.

Most children in permanent care live with foster parents, some of whom are members of the child’s extended family. Foster parents provide a loving home and a nurturing environment, and give their foster children what any parent would. However, the Director remains their legal guardian, and as such cannot delegate his parental responsibilities to children in permanent care and custody. Thus, the Director, and by implication, the Minister and the Department retain a special relationship and obligation to these children – that of a parent.

When an ordinary child reaches the age of majority, their parents continue to be their parents for the rest of their lives. Not so for children in permanent care; when they reach the age of majority the Director’s parental responsibilities cease under the *Act*, and the young adult effectively becomes parent-less. Ideally, every child coming into permanent care and custody would be adopted, thereby acquiring new and permanent parents. In reality however, that happens only infrequently. The older a child is, and the longer the child has been in permanent care and custody, the lower the chances of adoption.

Of the 142 children and youth in permanent care and custody on August 1, 60 (42%) were between the ages of 15 and 18 years. At those ages youth are unlikely to be adopted, and are expected to make the transition to adulthood as permanent wards of the government. On average, these youth had spent between nine and ten years in permanent care and custody. Another 39 children (27%) were between the ages of 11 and 14 years, and on average had spent between six and seven years in permanent care and custody.

The Director has initiated a formal review of all children and youth in permanent care and custody. This review will not only assess compliance with the requirements of the *Act* and Manual, but more importantly will determine the adequacy and appropriateness of each child’s and youth’s permanency plan.

Information Management System Replacement

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To replace a dated and unsupported management information system with a more functional and fully-supported system	Accurate and timely case practice and program management information

As of January 1, 2014 the current child and family services information system was no longer supported by the original vendor. Anticipating this event, during 2013 the Department sought and received approval and funding to replace the information system (\$3 million over three years). The information system must serve several functions simultaneously: it provides a documentary record of services delivered under the *Act*; it provides management information required for program planning and administration; and most importantly, it is a tool that enables child protection workers to perform their duties effectively and efficiently. The existing information system could be much improved in each of these functions.

The project charter for information system replacement was approved early in 2014, and a Request for Proposals (RFP) for project management services was issued in May. The sole proponent to the initial RFP did not fully meet the required qualification, and consequently it has been re-issued. Once the project manager is in place, the first task will be to develop the Terms of Reference for a second RFP, this one seeking a qualified contractor to replace the existing information system.

Inventory and Manual of Prevention Programs

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
To compile a comprehensive listing and description of all prevention programs available in each NWT community	Child protection workers are informed of all prevention programs that might be of benefit to their clients

The Auditor General noted that...

“...neither the Department nor the regional authorities had developed comprehensive guidance to assist child protection workers in identifying and accessing available prevention programs and services that might aid children and families.”

Given the importance accorded by the Auditor General to prevention programs, he recommended that the Regional Authorities, in consultation with the Department, develop guidance to assist child protection workers in identifying and accessing prevention programs. The Regional Authorities accepted this recommendation, and will action it by compiling an inventory of prevention programs available within their respective communities and regions. The inventory will be updated semi-annually, and will form part of the resource materials distributed to child protection workers.

The inventory will contain information for child protection workers on how and when to access prevention programs.

Moving Forward

The initiatives outlined in this Action Plan will each contribute to significant changes in the operation and delivery of child and family services. Moving forward, these changes will need to be managed if they are to be introduced successfully. Further, the impact of these changes will need to be evaluated.

Change Management

Strategy to be developed in collaboration with Assistant Directors when the initiatives are approved.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation plan to be developed in conjunction with Planning, Research and Evaluation when the initiatives are approved.