



## **Standing Committee on Oversight of Government Operations and Public Accounts**

*Report on the Review of the 2023 Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the  
Legislative Assembly of Nunavut: Child and Family Services in Nunavut*

**2<sup>nd</sup> Session of the 6<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly of Nunavut  
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## Introduction

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada's *2023 Report on Child and Family Services in Nunavut Services* was tabled in the House on May 30, 2023.

The Standing Committee on Oversight of Government Operations and Public Accounts held a televised hearing on the Auditor General's 2023 Report on September 19 and 20, 2023. Transcripts from the hearing are available on the Legislative Assembly's website.

Witnesses appearing before the standing committee included a number of senior officials from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada and the Government of Nunavut's departments of Family Services, Health, Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs and Human Resources. The Standing Committee extends its appreciation to the witnesses for their contributions to the proceedings.

The Auditor General's 2023 Report follows two previous reports by the Auditor General on this same subject, one in 2011 and one in 2014.

The Auditor General of Canada's *2011 Report on Children, Youth and Family Programs in Nunavut* audited a number of areas relating to child, youth and family programs and services in Nunavut to evaluate the government's performance in carrying out its own procedures and following its own laws in these areas.

Fourteen of the twenty recommendations in the Auditor General's 2011 report addressed services relating to children and youth. The Standing Committee on Oversight of Government Operations and Public Accounts reviewed the report and in June of 2011 presented a report with seven recommendations for the government.

The Auditor General of Canada's *2014 Follow-up Report on Child and Family Services in Nunavut – Department of Family Services* focused on compliance with the *Child and Family Services Act* and included six recommendations which echoed many of the recommendations in its 2011 report addressing staffing, training, compliance with standards, the collecting of basic information and community and parental engagement.

The Standing Committee on Oversight of Government Operations and Public Accounts reviewed the report and in the fall of 2014 tabled a report of its review with nine recommendations for the government to address issues raised by the Auditor General. It was noted at that time that the committee was disappointed with the lack of progress made in addressing recommendations brought forward following the 2011 audit.

In 2014, the Department of Family Services brought forward a comprehensive Action Plan to address the numerous issues raised by the Office of the Auditor General and, at the request of the committee, tabled several updates to the re-named *Quality Protects Action Plan* over the next few years indicating what progress had been achieved in each identified area.

In September of 2017, the government’s final update of its *Quality Protects Action Plan* was tabled in the House, indicating each and every action item as completed. However, the necessary changes do not seem to have been effected.

The Auditor General of Canada’s *2023 Report on Child and Family Services in Nunavut* again focused on the provision of services to protect and support the well-being of vulnerable children, youth and their families in accordance with legislation, policy and program requirements. The report included findings in nine key areas but contained no specific recommendations. Instead, the opening lines of lines of the report declare:

*“This audit report describes a crisis. It is a call for change. We are urging the Government of Nunavut to take immediate action to protect the vulnerable children and youth of the territory.”*

### **Historical Context**

The historical context is important. More than a decade has passed since the Auditor General first addressed this topic. As noted by a witness from the Office of the Auditor General:

“Our [2023] report gave the Legislative Assembly a picture at a point in time. That picture was not very different than the picture that we gave this Legislative Assembly in 2011 and 2014, and that’s a reason for sadness.”

### **Standing Committee Recommendation #1:**

**The standing committee recommends** that the Government of Nunavut carefully consider all three reports of the Office of the Auditor General on its reviews of Child and Family Services in Nunavut; the full transcripts of all three Standing Committee hearings on the Auditor General’s reports; the recommendations made by the Standing Committees of the day; the government’s Quality Protects Action Plan for lessons learned; the context of current circumstances; and to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

It is critical that new approaches, new commitments and new energy be brought to address this crisis. During the Standing Committee hearing, a witness from the Department of Family Services responded:

“Perseverance, in my mind, is you don’t keep trying the same thing and expecting a different result. It means that you try different things and hopefully achieve a different result. The important part of perseverance, in my mind, as it relates to what we are discussing today is that we’re consistently trying or achieving success in implementing a response to all of these root causes as a whole-of-government.”

## **First Steps**

It is clear to the Standing Committee that the need for change in delivering services to vulnerable children, youth and families in Nunavut is urgent and critical. The Minister of Family Services has indicated that the department is taking immediate and sustainable steps to address the findings noted in the Auditor General's report.

As a first step, the Standing Committee welcomes the Minister's recent apology for the impacts that the government's systemic deficiencies have had on vulnerable Nunavummiut. As stated by a member of the Standing Committee:

"What we know is that healing begins with apologies and taking responsibility."

Throughout the hearing, government witnesses gave a number of assurances and made numerous commitments to address deficiencies identified by the Auditor General.

It is important that those words lead to real action and change.

Following some of the responses provided by government witnesses, a witness from the Office of the Auditor General noted:

"The aspects that [the witness] was covering relate to things that *should* happen. There isn't evidence that they were happening, and that's important... I wanted to make that clear. That as we're talking about what should happen, it's where we need to focus the lens in the future."

Although the individuals in roles of leadership and decision-making may have changed, the institution which has the legislated responsibility for safe-guarding Nunavut's children, youth and families remains. Trust in this institution has been eroded over the past decade and possibly longer, and it will take significant work to regain it. As we move forward, that trust will need to be earned.

## **Whole-of-Government approach**

One of the key findings in the Auditor General's *2023 Report on Child and Family Services in Nunavut* focuses on 'root causes'. The report notes:

"We found that the Department of Family Services' inability to meet its responsibilities to Nunavut's at-risk children and youth is linked to many intertwined root causes that have contributed to this persistent and chronic crisis."

"These interlinked root causes will need to be addressed through interdepartmental collaboration. That will require the government to oversee a whole-of-government approach."

During the course of the committee’s hearing, a number of aspects relating to the root causes referred to in the Auditor General’s report were discussed, including, but not limited to:

- The role of the Department of Health in ensuring adequate levels of counselling for mental health, substance abuse and youth-focused services and the role of community health staff in addressing situations of child abuse or neglect;
- The role of the Department of Human Resources in removing systemic barriers to the employment of individuals as community social services workers and family resources workers; initiatives to fill community social services worker positions; and the priority allocation of housing to such frontline personnel as community social services workers;
- the role of the Nunavut Housing Association in ensuring that staff housing units are made available for such staff as community social services workers and ongoing efforts to increase the availability of housing in Nunavut’s communities to alleviate situations of overcrowding;
- the role of Nunavut Arctic College in providing training, education and certification for such programs as social work, family resource work, and mental health work;
- the role of the Department of Education in addressing situations of child abuse or neglect and the sharing of information related to the care and well-being of children at risk;
- the role of the Department of Community and Government Services in accessing adequate safe and comfortable office space for community social services workers; and
- the role of the Department of Justice in sharing information related to the abuse or violence involving children and youth.

In response to the Auditor General’s report, on May 30, 2023, the Premier of Nunavut stated:

“Taking a whole-of-government approach, [the Department of Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs] EIA will provide oversight across departments for services related to the wellbeing of children, youth, and families.”

**Standing Committee Recommendation #2:**

**The standing committee recommends** that the Government of Nunavut provide updates to the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut on the status and progress of every specific task(s) assigned to each department which are directly linked to the root causes which affect the provision of services related to the wellbeing of children, youth and families in Nunavut.

**The standing committee further recommends** that these updates be tabled on the first day of every sitting of the Legislative Assembly on an ongoing basis.

Continuous communication between departments and key stakeholders on these issues will be key to collaboratively addressing the root causes impacting the Department of Family Services' ability to meet its responsibilities to Nunavut's children, youth and families.

The Standing Committee further encourages the establishment and ongoing support of community-based interagency groups to address related issues and provide local support to both front-line staff and residents in all of Nunavut's communities.

### **Next Steps**

In addition to undertaking a number of specific initiatives to address concerns raised by the Auditor General, the Department of Family Services has committed to implementing two critical tools to address the current crisis, its Strategic Plan and the Matrix case management software. This software will, in addition to other functions, collect data, and track and monitor the numbers and whereabouts of children and youth in care and the services being provided to them.

The Standing Committee notes that the lack of specific timelines for actions to address the commitments made by the Department of Family Services is concerning.

### **Standing Committee Recommendation #3:**

**The standing committee recommends** that the Department of Family Services' Strategic Plan in response to the Auditor General's report be provided to the Standing Committee at the earliest opportunity and tabled no later than the Winter sitting of 2024.

**The standing committee further recommends** that the commitments established in the Department of Family Services' Strategic Plan are clear and concise, that the expected results related to each of those commitments are straight-forward and measurable, and that each commitment and its expected results have specified timelines and accountabilities for achieving those timelines.

**The standing committee further recommends that** a comprehensive evaluation framework be established as a component of the Strategic Plan.