

# Ministry closing children-in-care homes; Move comes before government review of programs is finished

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Sun Aug 8 2010

Page: A4

Section: Capital & Van. Isl.

Byline: Lindsay Kines

Source: Times Colonist

The B.C. government is closing a number of staffed homes for children in care even before it completes a provincewide review of such programs, documents show.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development has served notice that it expects to sign a contract with a large agency in Kamloops to "wind down" the majority of its one- and two-bed homes that are staffed 24 hours a day.

As part of the deal, Axis Family Resources Ltd. will arrange for some of the children to live with a foster parent while receiving additional supports for their behavioural or mental-health problems. The foster parents also will receive extra help, such as respite care so they can take a break once in a while from their work as caregivers.

Older youth, meanwhile, will be able to live independently with supports, such as regular visits by a youth worker who will help teach life skills.

The ministry said it expects to save up to \$450,000 by closing the more expensive staffed homes run by Axis and switching to less-expensive housing models, according to the B.C. Bid website. Over a period of four to five months, Axis will close eight staffed homes with a total of 10 beds.

Children's Minister Mary Polak was unavailable for comment. But ministry officials stressed in a series of e-mails to the Times Colonist that the 10 beds will be shifted to a "preferred model" of care, rather than eliminated.

"The goals are to improve available services for children and youth, and make a family-like setting the preferred environment for residential care," ministry spokesperson Lianne Bowness said.

The ministry confirmed that other agencies already have closed several staffed residences in the Interior, including two four-bed homes in Kelowna, one two-bed home in Penticton and one two-bed home in Oliver for a total of 12 beds.

The total savings for the Interior region is expected to hit \$850,000.

Axis president Rick Gibson said the changes, which have been discussed for years, are "very positive." Though the agency will receive less money under its new \$1.6-million contract, it will be able to enhance services for children and youth by eliminating some of its expensive staffed homes and increasing the number of youth living on their own or with foster parents, he said.

"To have kids in staffed resources is, to me, not the best place for them to be," he said. "To have them in a supported-caregiver environment is a better place for them."

Axis will continue to operate some staffed homes so that there is a range of services, he said.

As they get older and are ready to go out on their own, the goal is to help them adapt to change by moving to semi-independent and, finally, independent living.

"Sometimes they're in a group home or a staffed resource and then they're 19 and 'Adios!' and there's not really a transition," he said.

"So what we're going to be able to do is provide a really nice, smooth transition."

Critics, however, are questioning the ministry's decision to close staffed homes midway through a sweeping review of residential programs.

"I think it's rash for them to take any action at this point until they've seen the results of their residential-care report," said NDP children's critic Maurine Karagianis. "Why undertake a report if you're not going to listen to those results and use that to help inform your decision-making in the future?"

Karagianis said the timing suggests government is less concerned about children than its budget problems. "Once again, this is about trying to save money on the backs of those who are least able to speak out for themselves," she said.

The review of residential services is being led by the ministry and the Federation of Community Social Services of B.C. The federation, which received a \$70,000 contract to do the review, has said that one of the "primary interests" is to look at the effectiveness of staffed homes.

The review team held a series of discussions this spring with foster parents, youth, ministry staff and agencies on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland. The talks are expected to resume in the Interior region this fall,

with a final report going to ministry leaders early next year.

The ministry defended closing homes before the review was done. It said the review is a long-term project that will be used to come up with a five-year plan. But ministry officials in the Interior were not prepared to wait before offering children and youth a "different, more superior model of care," the ministry said.

[lkines@tc.canwest.com](mailto:lkines@tc.canwest.com)

Edition: Final

Story Type: Business

Length: 762 words

Idnumber: 201008080010