

February 16, 2010

NOTE: The following are my personal notes and perspectives on the discussions – they are not official minutes and are shared for information only!

Background: In Nov. 2008, senior MCFD staff invited MOMs to join reps from 5 – 6 other provincial agency and parent groups representing children & youth with special needs (CYSNs) to discuss plans to transfer CYSN services from CLBC to MCFD. On the eve of the transfer last fall, the group was reconvened for an update. In essence, the plan was to complete the transfer and work out the kinks before changing existing programs – that will be phase 2. The second point was that most CYSN programs, like other MCFD services, would be split up by region and managed by five new regional authorities, with separate CYSN managers & staff in each region.

A third meeting was called for Feb 15, to provide another staff update and report on our advice that MCFD develop 1) More formal & inclusive mechanisms for consultation and 2) A provincial issues list to log key concerns (e.g. waitlists) and track Ministry progress in responding.

Feb 15 MCFD Teleconference Notes:

I represented MOMS and also filled in for the BC FamilyNet president, who could not make it.

1. Budget: MCFD's Chief Operating Officer Mark Seiben assured us that while budgets are not yet finalized, MCFD does not plan any further budget reductions for CYSN services for 2010-11 (i.e. the next fiscal year starting in April).

Some cuts were already made in the current fiscal year (e.g. closing EIBI programs & provincial offices for Infant Development and Supported Child Care.). MCFD says it also cut \$32 million in administrative costs and redirected those saving to new unfunded demands and cost pressures.

Last week, the Ministry confirmed plans to cut \$10 million in 2010-11 from agencies that deliver most front-line children's services, and to reallocate a further \$5 million to boost services for Aboriginal children. Other ministry programs will have to absorb the \$15 million impact, with MCFD insisting there will be no across-the-board cuts and every effort to minimize impacts.

Last February's pre-election budget promised budget increases for children and youth with special needs in 2010-11 and 2011-12 but those increases have now been cancelled. And while CYSN programs are excluded from next year's cuts, senior MCFD acknowledged that current funding will not cover significant new cost pressures and demands, both of which continue to further strain programs that are already severely strained. MCFD Regional Managers will also continue to hunt for "efficiencies" that may result in some CYSN contract reductions.

Discussion: MOMS voiced concern that while MCFD consulted agencies on budget priorities, families have been shut out, with no process in place to voice family priorities. I noted grave concerns about any further potential cuts, given those already made and the severe strains on existing programs. We stressed again the need for more formal and transparent consultation processes to bring forward diverse family interests, concerns and priorities.

Other issues: In follow-up correspondence, we've asked MCFD to consider creating a News page on the CYSN section of the Ministry website, and to post information such as a synopsis of our meeting, other updates and notices to parents, and the following additional budget info:

- Where was the \$32 million in savings spent?
- Estimates for unfunded new costs and new demands for CYSN services, broken down by region and program.
- A detailed baseline for CYSN program budgets by program/region, and a reporting mechanism to provide ongoing transparency in ensuring that funds are spent as promised.

2. Update on transfer of services: Regions are working to stabilize service delivery and a few staff vacancies remain to be filled, but apart from the challenge of fully implementing promised youth transition protocols, everything seems to be going as smoothly as can be expected, given the challenges.

Youth transition protocol: I asked about the youth transition protocol, and MCFD staff initially responded that families would be contacted by a social worker to start planning when youth turn 14. Upon further questioning, CLBC staff clarified that only those expected to be eligible for CLBC's adult services were actually being contacted to initiate adult transition planning and that first contact was not happening until the youths turned 16 or 17.

It seems there's still a way to go in living up to the Minister's promises re these new youth transition protocols. I couldn't secure anything more from staff than advice that families should be in regular contact with their social workers and should initiate a discussion if their social worker doesn't. ***So don't wait!*** *Given the lengthy waits for all adult services, it's critical that parents get the ball rolling and requesting a copy of the transition policy if necessary.*

Question: No news is assumed to be good news and no one was aware of concerns about MCFD's new management of services for CYSNs, but please let MOMS know if there are any kudos or complaints so that we can pass them on.

3. Provincial stakeholder table: Participants agreed that the communication exchange offered via this forum was very useful and that a provincial table should be formalized. I again stressed:

- The importance of transparency: the proposed mandate, membership, rationale and activities of this body should be formalized and publicized for broader comment ASAP.
- Given the diversity of parent experiences, MCFD should complement a provincial table with local/regional bodies that allow broader input to ensure that parent voices help shape policy to maximize effectiveness. (In most cases, local staff is also probably best placed to resolve local concerns – if not, issues can be referred to a provincial table.) Some MCFD regional managers say they already have local consultation frameworks in place, but I stressed the need to formalize and publicize them to ensure they're widely accessible.
- To be effective, a provincial table should have a narrow focus on key strategic issues, with operational issues brought forward and addressed through complementary local/regional mechanisms.

MCFD staff said they would develop and circulate draft terms of reference for a stakeholder table ASAP.

4. Waitlists: Stakeholders had identified waitlist tracking as a top priority in the fall 2009 teleconference. MCFD staff report that they are trying to adapt CLBC's waitlist tracking process to document waitlists for CYSN services. Work has started with the MCFD regions, but there is a long way to go. A key issue is validating waitlists, staff claimed, because children may be waitlisted for more services than they actually need in order to ensure they get the first thing available.

5. CYSN capacity mapping project: Bruce Sandy of BCACDI reported on this project, which was undertaken with funding from a provincial grant to map service capacity and gaps in services for children with special needs around the province. The first draft of the report is expected to be ready at the end of April. BCACDI will "own" the information, not government.

That's it. Frankly, I remain undecided re how much of this is a PR exercise vs. a real commitment to engaging parents as respected partners (especially after the Minister tried to bury the \$10 million MCFD cuts by announcing them the day before the Olympics opened!), but it's worth giving it a try. I believe there are good intentions and ministers of course want successes to boast about, but they're all working within a political and fiscal framework that does not remotely reflect the Premier's promise to build the "best system of supports in Canada" for children with special needs. MCFD has also not had a strong culture of engaging parents as respected partners, so that seems to be a big learning curve as well.

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