



May 13, 2002

Ref: 106873

Liza Carter
President
British Columbia Federation
of Foster Parent Associations
301 – 3680 East Hastings Street
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Dear Liza Carter:

Let me begin this letter by stating how much I truly appreciated the open and productive discussion which took place at the meeting held on May 3, 2002, between ministry management and members of the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations' (BCFFPA) Board and Executive Director. The purpose of this meeting was twofold:

- to review the *Report on the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations* prepared by Internal Audit and Advisory Services, Office of the Comptroller General, Ministry of Finance; and
- the BCFFPA response to my letter of February 14, 2002, requesting the Federation's input regarding what organizational structures and related responsibilities might best meet the needs of foster parents at the community, regional and provincial levels.

First, thank you for the detailed response to the five key questions posed in my letter of February 14, 2002. I appreciate the limited timeline under which the Board and staff carried out this task. I understand that the document could only be submitted in draft form and realize that not all regional councils were able to provide submissions.

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The ministry will be posting the Office of the Comptroller General *Report on the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations* and associated BCFFPA and MCFD action plan responses on our website. A copy of this letter will also be posted.

All references to the audit on the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations and associated BCFFPA action plan response are provided in *italics*. The five key questions posed in the February 14, 2002 letter are in **bold print** and my feedback to the BCFFPA response to the letter is provided in regular text.

1. Is the current structure/system of services for foster parents the most effective and efficient way to achieve our goals?

The BCFFPA response concludes that the current system is not the most effective. The myriad of duties and responsibilities assumed by a working Board of Directors and resulting organizational constraints, are described as a major barrier. The response acknowledged that many services currently provided at the provincial level can be devolved to the regional level. This re-alignment of the current BCFFPA 15 regions to the MCFD five regions assumes that bilateral communication would become more streamlined and lead to a focused delivery of regional services.

I agree with your view that the present system is not functioning well. The BCFFPA has not been able to consistently demonstrate accountability, at both the regional and provincial level, for the services provided to your multiple customers which include:

- All BC foster parents
- Members of the BCFFPA
- The ministry (provincial and regional)
- Children and youth in care

The current inefficiencies and discontinuity of the BCFFPA structure has resulted in a loss of focus on the key services the organization is contracted to provide. As discussed at the meeting, the move to a regional governance structure provides us all with a unique opportunity to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the current service delivery system and find innovative solutions for what is not working effectively and efficiently.

The Audit Report pointed out that the structure and practices of the Federation are not sufficient to assure that BCFFPA services meet the needs of all BC foster parents or that the views and interests of all foster parents are represented when the Federation is providing guidance or consultation to the ministry.

The audit recommended reducing the number of voting board members and the number of committees. Clearly, the current board structure has become ineffective for a number of reasons, including role, clarity of purpose, size, internal and external communications.

The audit also illustrated a number of areas where there are significant inefficiencies and relatively high costs of conducting business, specifically travel, administration and operational costs. The Federation spends approximately \$200,000 or ten percent of funding annually on travel costs. The auditors note ways in which this cost could be reduced by up to \$100,000. Although the Federation agrees to reduce the number of regions and board members, in the action plan response, the Federation does not agree to reduce the frequency of provincial and regional meetings. The breakdown of regional funding also shows a significant percentage going to administrative and operational costs rather than to direct services for foster parents.

The ministry remains concerned that the BCFFPA is not approaching the cost of board meetings in a fiscally responsible manner even though this issue has been raised, in the past, by Wayne Matheson, when he was Acting Director of Child Protection. This will be a priority budget item for our funding discussions with you this year. All organizations must be aware of how their budgetary commitments are balanced in terms of the ratio applied to administrative and operational costs and direct services. The ministry places direct services to children and families as the top priority.

2. Within the context of five regional child and family authorities, how should foster parent support services best structure themselves and their relationships?

The Federation response provided an overview of a reorganized BCFFPA. This included a description of the proposed organizational structure and changing the current “working” role of the Board of Directors to an advisory role. This structure proposes a provincial board of eight members, with five regional boards who in turn would link into 17 area boards and numerous local boards.

The Federation noted the services that should continue to be carried out at the provincial level, namely the insurance program, the coordinator program and the support worker program, and which services could fall within both provincial and regional governance, namely training and education. The response omitted to mention the fosterline service and the consulting role the BCFFPA have traditionally undertaken, providing input to working groups on policy and practice concerning foster care.

The ministry agrees that programs are best delivered and managed at the regional level as this ensures responsiveness to the unique needs of each region and their communities. Expedient delivery of all fostering services will be a priority as we move to regional governance and define the provincial role of the ministry.

I appreciate the discussion and thought that went into the proposed reorganized Federation; however, in the ministry's view it remains an overly complex organizational structure. Within such a structure, there will continue to be inherent struggles to provide effective strategic planning, maintain open and clear lines of communication, accountability and monitor effectiveness of service delivery.

The Audit Report concluded that significant changes to the Federation's organizational structure are necessary. In the action plan response to the Organizational Structure and Service Delivery section of the Audit Report, the BCFFPA proposes the setting up of a planning committee to report back on the recommendations in six months. The expedited timeframes the ministry is currently working to with all aspects of the Service Plan and Regional Governance implementation results in your plan being significantly out of step with all other processes taking place.

Although I understand the voluntary nature of the working board and associated committees and the limits this imposes in terms of timely actions, I have to advise that this timeframe to develop a plan to re-structure is too long, particularly when this is simply to develop a plan, not to actualize it.

Given that the audit highlighted some concerns over the large number (13) of committees that are already in existence, the creation of yet another committee is not the best solution.

3. Where best are specific programs delivered or managed? Headquarters? Regions? Government? Non-government organizations?

The BCFFPA response highlights the strengths of non-government organizations in terms of their flexibility, ability to be proactive service delivery providers and respond to regional needs. I welcome the idea about the benefits of a non-government organization being involved in the recruitment, approval and retention of foster homes. The Federation's experience with the Coordinator and Support Worker programs has no doubt provided further insight into the complexity of foster family recruitment and retention.

The Federation noted the developments that have taken place in the delivery of adoption services by non-government agencies and indicated that certain fostering support services could follow suit. I agree, there are clearly a number of advantages to having an agency within a region deliver services directly to foster parents. A combination of agencies providing a range of fostering support services and foster parent associations or federations providing broader systemic advocacy and consultation, are found in a number of jurisdictions in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

4. What strategic relationships (both inside and outside of the fostering community) should be leveraged at a provincial, regional, or local level that would improve outcomes for children in care?

The Federation response describes the established infrastructure of the BCFFPA and current role in representing a significant number of foster parents in the province. The ministry is aware that concerns have been raised, for some time, within the fostering community about the level of support and communication the BCFFPA provides to members and foster parents in general. Simply having a local/regional/provincial infrastructure in place does not guarantee a well functioning, highly representative, responsive and accountable organization.

Further, the Audit Report remarked on the Federation's lack of accountability to stakeholders, and identified the Federation's organizational structure as problematic because it does not assure accountability.

The audit made several observations about the Federation's strengths and weaknesses in this area, in particular defining clear objectives, record of services and reporting back to foster parents and the ministry. While the provincial office can demonstrate completion of most contract obligations, there are significant gaps in reporting on regional activities, even though the majority of the ministry's funding is provided for such regional services.

The BCFFPA action plan describes the intention to complete and review a foster parent survey. Given the level of criticism and dissatisfaction that has been expressed by members of the fostering community over a considerable time period, it is surprising that the Federation has not already undertaken such a survey to obtain the views of stakeholders. The action plan does not indicate how the BCFFPA plans to improve overall communication with foster parents or describe how the Federation would change practices to report directly to stakeholders on the organization's plans, objectives, operating activities, service provision and financial performance.

I appreciate the ideas on ways to improve the outcomes for children and families. The points about the role of foster parents in the planning process for children in care, the development of assessment homes to decrease multiple placements and the role of wraparound services in the community to support children in both their natural and foster family, are well taken and have a place within the foster care program.

5. If we were to identify three or four strategic shifts that need to be made in the foster family care system in order to improve outcomes, what would they be?

The BCFFPA response provides an overview of the strategic shifts that the Federation views will improve outcomes. I have already covered the reorganization of the Board above. In the Standardized Framework of Service Delivery, most of what you describe is business as usual and although the activities are all credible, putting this into action within the revised organizational structure as proposed remains problematic.

The Audit Report notes that service delivery by the organization tends to be more reactive than proactive. The weakness in your accountability measures which results in regions not being required to submit plans or report on service activities is just one of the areas that keeps the Federation in reactive mode. Clearly, this finding in the audit did not come as a surprise to the organization and I expect it has been an area the Federation has attempted to resolve in the past without success.

In the action plan for the regions, the Federation agrees with the audit recommendation to integrate regional operations and provincial office planning, but no plan has been developed as the Federation feels unable to act due to the move to regional governance.

Once again, I welcome the good ideas concerning a Community Support Network. As the ministry and regional authorities work on developing the scope of fostering services, Federation input about the types of programs and services that will be of most value to children, their families and foster families will continue to be sought.

Several of the regional councils that gave input to the BCFFPA response provided a number of creative ideas and I noted the strong support for moving foster parent recruitment and support services to an agency type structure.

In summary, the BCFFPA has historically provided a range of services at both the provincial and regional level. The organization has been required to adapt to a number of changes within the ministry, including two major re-structuring processes within the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Despite the best intentions, the reality of providing responsive services in the complex, ever changing world of social services, has proved to be very challenging for the BCFFPA as an organization. A great deal has been asked of what is essentially a grassroots, volunteer organization, whose scope of services and responsibility has grown considerably.

The Audit Report noted how the BCFFPA has lost some of its service focus and, where provided, there is inconsistency accounting for the quantity and quality of such services. Overall, the BCFFPA action plan response indicates that taking the necessary steps to create a streamlined, focussed organization, that is ready to meet the challenges of the changes that will be occurring, is a difficult task for the Federation to achieve.

Our recent discussion recognized the increasingly complex role of foster care support and acknowledged that professionals typically carry out such activities. It is timely to review how the Federation could return to its original roots as an advocacy organization, supported by and accountable to the foster parent membership.

Given the new regional governance structure, the ministry is consulting with community, stakeholders, consumers and the BCFFPA on how best to deliver the majority of foster parent support services, including recruitment, retention and support, education and training at the local and regional level. One of the government priorities relating to MCFD is the New Era Commitment to work with foster parents to help them improve care and placements of foster children. A fundamental component is the improvement of the foster care program by strengthening regional foster care services.

I concur with all the findings of the Audit Report including:

*The structure and practices of the Federation are **not** sufficient to assure the following*

- The Federation's services meet the needs of all BC foster parents. The Federation does not have processes to measure the effectiveness of its services or to ensure that all contracted services are consistently and equitably available to all BC foster parents.*

- *The ministry receives support and guidance from the Federation that reflects the interests of all BC foster parents. The Federation does not maintain sufficient direct contact with foster parents to ensure that its positions are representative of foster parents in general.*
- *The Federation's organizational structure does not assure accountability to the ministry and BC foster parents in some fundamental areas.*

Ministry staff look forward to participating in the Focus Group at the BCFFPA Annual General Meeting on May 24, 2002. The objective will be to use a change approach focus group to share ideas and identify next steps for regional contracting of fostering support services.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development is committed to promoting and developing the capacity of families and communities to care for and protect vulnerable children and youth.

Sincerely,

[original signed by]

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