

Taming the child welfare bureaucracy

On the surface the two situations were exactly reversed. An Indian Child and Family Service (ICFS) agency ignored the written recommendation of a southern psychologist and sent two foster children to live at a therapeutic group home. The Department of Social Services (DSS) agreed to place a youth in a therapeutic group home on the advice of this psychologist in 1999 but three years later the boy was still waiting.

It did not surprise me to learn that the ICFS boys were involved in a mini-riot at what used to be known as the Prince Albert Residential School. Research has shown that youth who are institutionalized, when they should not be, often develop anti-social behaviors.

It did not surprise me to learn that the DSS youth had been charged with a serious criminal offense. Conduct Disordered youth need very specific treatment that often includes the kind of structure that only an appropriate institution can provide.

Budgets are part of every bureaucracy. The Prince Albert tribal council had failed in its attempt to keep the P.A. residence open as an educational institution. The federal government was no longer in the business of funding Indian residential schools. The tribal council's fall back position was to keep it open as a therapeutic group home. Indian Affairs officials would not agree to global funding but would agree to pay on a per child per day basis. Indian Child and Family Service (ICFS) agencies in the north were then given quotas to insure that the institution stayed financially solvent.

It was bound to happen. Youth were sent to the residence cum therapeutic institution, not because they needed the treatment, but because the institutional quota needed to be met. Yet, when I asked the director of the La Ronge ICFS about his decision to institutionalize boys against the recommendations of a psychological report he would only say "It was my decision to make so I made it".

Money may also have been a factor in the DSS failure to provide for treatment. According to the father of the youth, a DSS worker told him that his son could go to Ranch Ehrlo, a therapeutic institution based out of Regina, if he agreed to pay for it. With fees well in excess of \$200 per day, this is more than the father could afford.

In an ideal world child welfare agencies would always work together with professionals who are ethically bound to make recommendations in the best interests of the children and youth involved. Unfortunately, bureaucracies sometimes make decisions for bureaucratic reasons. When challenged on these decisions, they will respond bureaucratically: by appealing to rigid rules and by casting the families of the children involved in a bad light. In the DSS case the department responded by attempting, unsuccessfully, to apprehend another child in the family on the grounds that the boy who should have been in care was a threat.

There are a number of things you can do if you believe that you and your family have been a victim of a child bureaucracy. First, under "Freedom of Information" legislation, you are entitled to see the files the agency has on you. But be prepared to go thru some bureaucratic hoops to gain access to such files.

Second, you have the right to obtain an independent professional opinion on your child and your family. In some, albeit rare, occasions DSS has actually funded independent professional interventions.

Third, you have the right to appeal decisions and actions of the child welfare agency. In the case of ICFS agencies, appeals can be made to an ICFS board. In the case of the DSS, appeals can be made right up to the level of the minister in charge.

Finally you have the right to take the child welfare agency to court. I testified in court with respect to the youth who was denied the services he needed. In this instance the court was not impressed with the child welfare bureaucracy. By such actions we hold bureaucrats accountable.