

# Number of children living in shelters and hotels soars, says new Winnipeg social services

WINNIPEG-The number of Winnipeg children living in hotels and shelters doubled in the last year as city social workers struggled with more kids and fewer foster homes.

Also, the number of aboriginal children in the custody of Winnipeg Child and Family Services tripled in the last decade and now accounts for two-thirds of all children in care.

The findings were contained in a report by the city social services agency, also known as CFS.

The report said that close to 10 per cent of children in the agency's care in 1997-98 spent time in temporary quarters that are expensive and don't provide a proper family environment.

The report said that foster homes are strained to the limit and despite efforts to recruit new families, the use of hotels and shelters is at an all-time high.

The agency said it paid for 71,000 child/nights in hotels and shelters last year at a cost of up to \$124 a night. That is eight times what it costs to keep children in a foster home.

"The emphasis for CFS

has always been the need to put children into care in a family environment," said CFS spokeswoman Michele Brown.

"This is obviously not the ideal way to operate."

While children are living in the hotels and shelters, they are given constant supervision by staff.

The problems have been compounded by a decrease in the number of foster families in the city — there are currently 800.

Family Services Minister Bonnie Mitchelson said the province has always come through with more money if the child welfare system needed it.

But NDP leader Gary Doer said the shortage of suitable homes is the result of government cuts that ended a support program for foster families and reduced payments to foster parents.

"We've heard that (there are no quick answers) every year and the government cuts and cuts and cuts," he said.

Regarding native children in its care, the agency report said that 1,200 kids — five per cent of all aboriginal children in Winnipeg under the age of 18 —

are under the agency's protection.

The report warns that number will grow as poverty and deteriorating social conditions combine with high birth rates and a large migration of people off reserves.

Mitchelson said the issue is key to addressing the needs of the growing aboriginal population, adding that a committee has been created with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and other aboriginal groups to get community input.

Solutions being discussed include creating an aboriginal child welfare agency to deal with Winnipeg residents or extending the reach of on-reserve agencies to allow them to operate in Winnipeg.

Wayne Helgason of the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, said the numbers show there needs to be an "overdue radical rethinking" of the way such services are delivered.

The number of aboriginal children in government care rose from 400 to 1,200 between 1986 and 1996.—CP—