

Martha's Monthly
January 2006

A Little Red Wagon and some Stone Soup

Like you, Martha spent some of the last month hosting and attending holiday events. It meant she also spent a lot of time in the local grocery store buying supplies. Every time she entered the store, Martha's blood pressure would rise, her breathing would get shallow, and her palms would sweat. Martha has nothing against grocers or their stores. What caused her panicky, angry state was a small sticker on the door of the store that has a little red wagon on it. The sticker is for Alberta's Promise. (If you haven't seen the sticker then check out the website: www.albertaspromise.org)

According to the website, Alberta's Promise is "a movement to inspire communities, businesses, service clubs, foundations and agencies to work together to direct more resources to benefit our children and youth." The motivational quotation from Colin Powell ("every child should have a little red wagon with which to pull around the heavy load of life and all his dreams") begs for a violin solo. That little red wagon makes Martha **see** red! It is not so much that the idea of motivating community "partners" to invest in children is a bad idea. It is just that the little red wagon highlights how very LITTLE the Alberta *government* has invested (in the monetary sense of that word) in ensuring that Alberta is the best place in the world for children to grow up.

What Alberta has done, in recent years, is contract out Child Welfare services and pay bonuses to Deputy Ministers and Managers for keeping costs down in the Children's Services department. That's right, achievement bonuses of around \$700,000 are paid out each year to Children's Services managers who have managed to pay less for more. That would be paying less to foster families, social workers, and child welfare investigators while getting more and more children into care.

The Annual Report of Children's Services paints a bleak picture: "In 2004-05, on average, the ministry provided services to 13,800 children each month. Approximately, 8,400 of these children were in the temporary or permanent care of the Director." During that same year 22 children were seriously injured or killed while in care. (see [Children in Care report](#) and [Annual Report](#))

But luckily, the hard work of managers and CEOs meant that the government came in 0.9% under budget (that is about \$6.7 million!). And as a result of coming under budget, **\$640,000 was doled out** to a handful of managers. The performance bonuses are based on coming under budget, meeting performance goals (set by the managers themselves), and having positive client surveys (administered and collected by the managers themselves).

Now, Martha might be a little small-town in her understanding of these things but her father was a farmer and Martha remembers him saying that if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it'll make a good duck soup. Martha thinks that someone in Alberta is dining on duck soup and the rest of us are being fed stone soup. (In case you don't read children's stories as often as Martha, Stone Soup is a classic tale of a stranger who comes to a poor town and convinces the townspeople he will make them stone soup from his stone but it needs a few little ingredients from them like a carrot, an onion, a ham bone, etc. which the townspeople all provide. He is a hero while all the people do the work and provide the food!)

While the Alberta government has, by its own accounts, more money than it knows what to do with, Alberta Children's Services is keeping costs low while they provide services to more than 13,000 children in need. And who reaps the benefits of cutting costs? Not the thousands of children waiting for a permanent home. Not the 22 children who spent the night in hospital or died as a result of their "care" and not the thousands of foster families who survive on paltry amounts (about \$300 per child per month if you are related, more if you are unrelated).

The people who have benefited from achievement bonuses are those deputy ministers and managers who have overseen the goal setting and performance measures and then provided client surveys that "confirm" how satisfied people are with their service. If this all seems a little, well, potentially problematic to you then you would not be alone. The Alberta Liberals and the Alberta New Democrats have both raised concerns in the Legislature. As Dr. Raj Pannu, former leader of the Alberta New Democrats stated in 1999 during debate of the \$27.4 million achievement bonuses for that year: "...the question was raised about the potential conflict of interest the system will engender when public servants address the issue of, on the one hand, making sure that the department lives within the budget...and on the other hand then delivering services of high quality to citizens who need them without having to disqualify a certain number in order to meet the objectives of keeping expenditures under budget or within budget. So there is a conflict of interest there."

If you think money budgeted to Children's Services should be spent on **children** and not on achievement bonuses for senior managers then please forward the following letter to Premier Klein. And pass this email on to your friends so they can send the letter as well. Send your letter to: premier@gov.ab.ca, calgary.fishcreek@assembly.ab.ca, edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca, edmonton.millwoods@assembly.ab.ca, marthasmnthly@yahoo.ca (If you copy and paste these all in a row on your To: box you will find it saves time!)

January 8, 2006

Premier Klein
Alberta Legislature

Dear Premier Klein:

A very Happy New Year to you and all Albertans. I write you today with a concern over the children of Alberta and especially those most vulnerable: the more than 13,000 children in care of Child Welfare. I am particularly perplexed at the recent 2004-2005 Annual Report from Children's Services, which highlights the millions of dollars saved in the department. I, and my fellow Marthas of Martha's Monthly, do not consider this a great thing. I find it a shame that we would celebrate saving money while thousands of children need permanent homes and more than 20 were seriously injured or killed in care.

I believe that we need to heavily invest in providing excellent care for these vulnerable children by improving foster family pay, increasing allowances for recreation, clothing, etc., and seriously reducing the caseloads of frontline social workers so that they can help build a stable support network for these children.

I also find it very problematic that managers are personally rewarded with achievement bonuses based on the department's cost cutting. I have some deep ethical concerns about this system of performance evaluation and bonuses to senior civil servants. I call on you to review this policy, particularly as it pertains to Children's Services, and ensure that independent reviewers do evaluations. I further call on you to remove the goal of budget cutting for these performance bonuses so that all the money allocated to Children's Services is spent on providing services to vulnerable Albertan children.

Sincerely

Your name

Your address

(please include your full address so your correspondence is "counted" as correspondence and not spam.)