

# N.S. steps in to oversee children's aid

## Move follows judge's ruling that agency workers deliberately misled court in child custody case

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SYDNEY — After an internal review of operations, the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services has stepped in to oversee the management of the province's second-largest children's aid society.

The move comes three months after the Children's Aid Society of Cape Breton-Victoria was sharply criticized by a Supreme Court judge who ruled two agency workers deliberately misled the court in a child custody case.

"This is a joint partnership and not one side taking leadership over the other," stressed Community Services Minister Judy Streach, during an interview Thursday.

Streach said an interim executive director is likely to be appointed next week who will report to both the agency's volunteer board of directors and the department.

As well, the department will conduct an audit of the agency's policies and practices within one year to determine whether a more permanent administrative authority should be established.

"The most important aspect in all of this is consistency," said Streach, adding it is a lack of consistency by the agency which is of most concern to department officials.

Streach met recently with the board to discuss the department's review findings and said members clearly understood that changes had to be made.

"We learned there were deficiencies in operations and we (the department) have expertise that can help ensure the delivery of the best possible service," said the minister, in explaining the rationale behind the new joint partnership.

In addition to the new operating agreement, agency staff must participate in a number of training programs.

"Training will be a main issue and staff will

undergo intense and immediate training sessions in order to gain a clear understanding of what is expected," said Streach.

The agency's current director, Marie Boone, was not available for comment Thursday nor was her fill-in. Board chair Murdock Moore was also not available for comment Thursday.

Streach said the board has also agreed to accept and implement all departmental policies, child welfare standards, and all other matters related to the Children and Family Services Act.

It was a scathing decision by Supreme Court (Family Division) Justice Theresa Forgeron that resulted in the department launching an internal review of operations.

In her decision, Forgeron said the agency breached the very act it is supposed to uphold by intentionally and deliberately withholding information in a child custody case.

"I find the agency did indeed mislead the court and the mother. It remained silent and provided affidavits and other documents which failed to disclose the true circumstances confronting the children," said the judge, adding agency staff went to great lengths to ensure negative information concerning their plan would not be reviewed by the court.

"I do not accept that this egregious failure to disclose could be anything other than intentional and deliberate. I find that the only plausible reason for doing so was to ensure the court accepted the agency's plan to have the children placed in their father's care," said Forgeron.

Forgeron singled out two agency workers for their roles in failing to conduct themselves properly.

Streach said Thursday she could not offer any comment on whether those workers were disciplined as such matters are deemed confidential.