

Auditor General flags 'unusual payments' to child protection staff

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P.E.I.'s auditor general has raised concern over cash advances paid to staff in the Summerside child protection office in her 2014 annual report.

The Department of Community Services took the unusual step of calling in the AG to probe the Summerside office's accounts after department officials noticed an unusual number of cheques being issued to staff.

Auditor General Jane MacAdam found there was not enough oversight or accountability over cash given to and managed by staff for children in the province's care.

While there are legitimate reasons for staff to be issued cheques outside their salaries for reimbursement of costs incurred while performing duties for children in care, MacAdam found multiple payments made to staff without proper receipts, approvals or oversight.

As such, there was no way to determine whether the money was appropriately spent on the children under the province's protection.

"(The Community Services Department) had concerns because there were an unusual amount of payment to staff in the Summerside office," MacAdam said.

"In many cases there was not enough authorization for the payments that were made, the cheques to the staff, and also inadequate

documentation to support payments in a lot of cases."

Many of these payments arose as a result of overpayments to a foster parent. The AG found several instances where these funds were paid back but were not re-deposited into the province's bank account.

There were also concerns about monthly allowances given to group homes for children's incidentals that were not being tracked, so it was not clear how much was actually spent on each child. In many of these cases, the allowances were being kept in cash at the group home and being used without any accounting or tracking measures.

Although these concerns arose in the Summerside office, MacAdam stressed the weaknesses identified and recommendations for changes should be reviewed and considered for all child protection offices across the province.

MacAdam forwarded her concerns with the unusual cash and cheque payments to the Department of Community Services, which in turn referred it to the provincial attorney general's office for further scrutiny.

"I did receive correspondence from the attorney general's office that they did not plan to take any further action," MacAdam said.