

Sean Leslie: Well, the B.C. Lions host the Toronto Argonauts tonight at B.C. Place. Now, amongst the fans at the Lions game tonight will be some 50 foster families who get tickets through a partnership between the team and the B.C. government. Joining us to talk about this is Tom Christensen, B.C.'s Minister of Children and Family Development.

Tom, how are you?

Tom Christensen: I'm not too bad.

Leslie: I'm also pleased to be joined by Jamie Taras, director of community relations for the B.C. Lions. Of course, Jamie spent 16 seasons with the Leos. He was on the offensive line, former team captain, four-time western all-star, two-time CFL all-star, other awards and honours too numerous to mention here.

Jamie, an honour to have you on the program.

Jamie Taras: Thank you, Sean. The joints are certainly feeling all those games; that's for sure.

Leslie: Tom, I'll start with you. Tell us about this program.

Christensen: Well, this is a program where the B.C. Lions have really stepped up to see how they can support foster families in our province. It started a couple of years ago. It's really one of the many legacies of Bobby Ackles when he was with the Lions. What they do is they provide 50 tickets to each game to foster families — so foster families in the greater Vancouver area or those that may be visiting Vancouver — and the B.C. Federation of Foster Parents distributes those to these families so that these foster kids can have a chance to come and see a Lions game. For many of them it's the first time they've actually been to a professional football game, so it's very well received, and it's a great community effort on behalf of the B.C. Lions, so we're really thankful to them.

Leslie: Tom, I imagine there is probably pretty big demand for these tickets. How do you decide who gets them?

Christensen: The Federation of Foster Parents actually does them through a draw. You're right, there is a pretty good demand there, and so they offer them through a draw, and it allows, as I said, a lot of foster kids to get a chance to go to a B.C. Lions game through the season.

Leslie: Yeah, what a highlight. Jamie, tell me about the team's decision to get involved in this.

Taras: Oh, it's really a no-brainer for us — you know, a tremendous relationship with the government, of course, and then, obviously, for the families and the kids to get a chance to do something that they maybe haven't ever done before and just to get a chance to do something unique and special. We also give them the opportunity to come down on the field pre-game to watch the guys warm up. You know, that's a special experience that our season-ticket holders don't get, that the regular fan's not getting, and it's a chance for these kids to feel special, and I think that

that's always very important for building their confidence in their future.

Leslie: Yeah, when I see the games, Jamie, I'm always up in the nosebleeds myself, but it must be a lot of fun for those families to be able to be down at field level and take in the spectacle of all that hoopla before the game and seeing the building fill up and just.... Just that feeling at B.C. Place when it's game day is just incredible to me.

Taras: Yeah, I think that you don't.... Sometimes, as a player who's been through it all, you don't appreciate the impact that you have on someone and on their family and their support as well, because it's an opportunity to get away from maybe some of the challenges you have elsewhere in your life and just enjoy a moment in time. I think that that's a very special thing.

Leslie: Tom, this is one of the perks offered to foster families. Are there many more? I mean, you know, we used to hear about foster families complaining that there weren't.... You know, there wasn't extra money to buy kids birthday presents and that kind of thing. What does the government do to sort of give these families some perks?

Christensen: Well, certainly, you know, part of the government's role is ensure we're providing financial support to foster families to help them in looking after these children, and the range of support varies depending on the age of the children and the needs of the children. But I think what's equally important is that organizations like the B.C. Lions — and there's other businesses in different communities around the province who will actually offer discounts or other benefits to foster families, recognizing that these families are making a really strong contribution to the future of children in our province....

I think what we have to remember is that the availability of people who are prepared to take children into their home when those children are in need are really the backbone of an effective child protection system, and we're very fortunate that we have about 3,200 foster families across British Columbia that today are caring for a little over 6,000 children and youth that really need that care. I'm very thankful for the contribution that they make, and we certainly work hard to support them, but equally so, we see organizations like the B.C. Lions and other businesses step up and look at how they might recognize the contribution that these folks are making, and it's just very gratifying to see.... As I say, I'm very thankful to the B.C. Lions for what they're doing here.

Leslie: Tom, is this a permanent program? I mean, when the Premier talks about eliminating some frills that government pays for, I hope this isn't one of those frills that might be on the firing line.

Christensen: This is a program that's been in place since 2006 because of the generosity and the partnership with the B.C. Lions, so I think this is something that's there to stay. It's something that's very popular with foster parents. As I say, it's a true partnership that's of real benefit to these kids.

Leslie: I know it's game day, so Jamie can't stay too long. Jamie, before I let you go, I want to ask you a few more things. I mean, this is obviously one of the community outreach programs you folks do at the Leos. I think sometimes you get overshadowed by the Canucks, which are such a huge presence in B.C. and in Vancouver. You know, how important is community

outreach and community relations for the B.C. Lions?

Taras: Oh, it's a huge part of what we do. Obviously, we feel like, you know, we want to be part of our community, we want to have a positive impact on our community. This is just one of the ways that we do it. You know, we have many, many other programs that involve both minor football, the school systems and other families that are in need that we also bring to games through the Courage for Kids program. You know, it is part of our mandate. It's something that Bob Ackles — the minister mentioned him — you know, brought back to the club. From when I left the club in 2002 to when I rejoined the club last year, it was amazing to see how much structure they had put into the programs and how much commitment they had to the community. It was tremendous to be a part of it.

Leslie: Obviously, the tragedy with Bobby Ackles dying this year, Jamie.... I know it affected the club deeply, but the Leos have been playing great the last few weeks. Your thoughts on this game day. How important is this game tonight? The Argos aren't really a huge force, but how important is it for the Leos to get a win tonight?

Taras: Well, it's really important in terms of momentum, moving on to the playoffs. You know I wouldn't take the Argos lightly. Coach Matthews is the most winningest coach in the CFL, has not yet won a game as the head coach of the Toronto Argonauts since he returned, and so, you know, knowing his mentality — he was my first coach here — he'll have those guys ready to play. And a lot of guys will be playing for next year, and that's also a desperate team to play, so it should be a very, very good game. And from our guys' perspective, they got to continue to improve and continue to get momentum moving into the future, because our playoff picture is still murky, and there's still some things to be decided.

Leslie: Well, you're winning more games than the Canucks these days.

Jamie, I'll be flipping between the two. Good luck tonight. Thanks for coming on today. I appreciate it.

Taras: Thanks so much.

And I'll look forward to seeing you at the game, Minister.

Leslie: Yeah, Tom, you get to go tonight, do you?

Christensen: I do get to go, which is a great opportunity for me. You know, Sean, it's wonderful just to see the looks on some of these kids' faces, particularly when they're down on the field looking up inside B.C. Place. It's a pretty awesome place to be, and they, as I said, really do enjoy it, and I do again want to thank Jamie and all the B.C. Lions for their effort in making this such a special experience for those kids.

Taras: Well, you're welcome. We'll make sure we keep you out of harm's way, not too close to the big guys.

Leslie: There you go. Jamie, thanks very much.

[Break]

Leslie: Do they do this once a year, Tom, this program?

Christensen: No, they do it, actually, each and every game.

Leslie: Oh, each and every game. Great.

Christensen: In October they sort of talk it up a little bit more and make sure that the pre-game warm-up down on the field is part of it, and that's in recognition that October is Foster Family Month. It's a month where we have a number of events around the province to show our appreciation for foster families, and for me it's always an opportunity to hear about some of the great work being done by foster families. I'm continuously impressed with the dedication that some of these families — or all of these families — have to vulnerable children in our province. They're just doing a remarkable job in providing safe and loving homes to kids that are often in some pretty difficult circumstances.

Leslie: You've mentioned that it is foster family awareness month. What would you like the public to know about the importance of foster families and getting involved in it?

Christensen: I'd like the public to recognize the contribution that foster families are making, you know, each and every day of the year to children who need care. I'd also like the public to recognize that we are always looking for additional foster families. It's one of our ongoing challenges — is to find people who are prepared to open their home to a child who may be in need. In some cases that's only for a few days. In some cases it can be much longer-term.

You know, what always impresses me in conversations with foster parents is how much they feel they and their family benefit from having these children in their home and learning about what some of these children are going through and being able to help them to a better future. It's an incredible experience for the foster parents themselves, so people that are interested... I encourage them to contact the ministry and look into becoming a foster parent, because we can always use more.

Leslie: Do you need, in particular, foster families, Tom, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds?

Christensen: Absolutely, Sean. I think that's one of the challenges — is that we want to have a group of foster parents available that reflect the backgrounds of children that may be coming into care. Obviously, in a multicultural society, we have children from all different backgrounds that are coming into care, so we're always trying to broaden the range of foster parents that we have available.

Leslie: One of the groups, of course, aboriginal kids always overrepresented in kids in care and, I would take it, foster families as well. Where are we in terms of aboriginal families being adoptive parents?

Christensen: Well, certainly, we've seen the number of aboriginal foster parents increase, and the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents works hard to recruit additional families within the aboriginal community that may be prepared to foster. But you're right; it still remains a challenge in terms of the number of families available and particularly ensuring that there are families in different communities around the province so, as best we can, we can always avoid a child having to move from his or her community in the

event that they do need to come into care.

Leslie: In terms of the rates you pay foster parents.... I'm just looking at the information: \$780 to \$888 a month, depending on the age of the child, and there's more funding for special needs kids. Do those rates need to be adjusted at all to attract more people to this field? When was the last time they were actually raised?

Christensen: Well, we're actually just in the midst of a three-year increase. Two budgets ago we added \$33 million provincially to allow us over a three-year period to increase the rates being paid the foster parents. Certainly, we try to recognize the costs that foster parents are incurring to look after children, and we think that, certainly, those rates are now reasonable. And we do have, certainly, much more than that upper figure for children that have particular special needs and require very skilled individuals to be taking care of them.

Leslie: Tom, I wanted to talk to you about adoption, as well — sort of a different side of the story. I think as of the summer in B.C. there were 1,400 kids waiting to be adopted. There was a story a couple of months ago I wanted to chat to you about. Child and youth representative Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond says B.C. should post photos of these kids who are hoping to be adopted on line. Other provinces, including Alberta, do so. You were quoted a couple of months ago saying you had some privacy concerns around doing that. Can you elaborate on that?

Christensen: Well, certainly, you know, we believe that children, whether they're in care or not, have privacy rights, so we have some concerns about posting photos of children who may be waiting to be adopted on something that would be completely publicly accessible. What we do today on the ministry's Internet site is that we do profile children who are waiting to be adopted, and we use a pseudonym and do not include a picture, but we certainly have a description of the child and their history and some of their challenges and some of their unique attributes. You know, people who are interested in adopting children within the province can go to the ministry's website and read about different children that are available for adoption. We think that that's one thing that has potential, and we need to make sure that more of the public are aware that that information is available.

But what we've also done over the course of this last year is really try to think of what are some new things that we might try to encourage more adoptions, and we've entered into what I think are some pretty constructive discussions with some of the private adoption agencies, who are often assisting people to adopt overseas. We've had a number of sit-down meetings with those agencies to try and strengthen their link with the ministry. Just this month, in fact, we're having a matching event between the ministry and Choices Adoption Agency, which is a private agency in Victoria, where families that have already indicated an interest in adoption, who have already been screened as being appropriate for adoption, will actually have an opportunity to sit down with the ministry and get, you know, more fulsome profiles, including pictures, of children who are waiting to be adopted. Those types of very targeted matching events actually have the potential to make a real dent in increasing the number of children that are being adopted in the province.

Leslie: But in terms of a wholesale sort of government listing of photos of

all these kids up for adoption.... I'm just trying to pin down what the privacy concern is. Do you think that these kids would be against the idea of their pictures being posted on line and identified as orphans, essentially?

Christensen: Potentially that. As well, you know, certainly, our child protection legislation in the province goes to great lengths to protect the privacy of children who have had contact with the ministry, and obviously, posting their photos on the Internet would be contrary to that.

And quite frankly, Sean, you know, we've looked at the issue of photo listing in the past. We've done significant consultation around that, and there really is a division of viewpoints on whether or not it is successful in increasing adoptions and whether or not it's an appropriate way of trying to increase adoption. So while....

Leslie: Turpel-Lafond says it has been successful in raising adoption rates where it's been tried.

Christensen: And I'm certainly interested in that viewpoint. As I said previously, I haven't seen any concrete evidence of that. But you know, from my perspective, our goal is to increase the number of children who are successfully adopted in the province so that we need to look at all available options, and as I said, over the last year, we've been looking at some different things and trying some different approaches to increase adoptions, and we've actually seen over the last year the number of adoptions in the province increase quite considerably over the previous year. It's a trend that I certainly want to see continue.

Leslie: Tom, I just wanted to ask you. The Premier has talked about reining in government spending. Your ministry. Would you expect to see any kind of funding cuts next year?

Christensen: I think what the Premier has talked about is reining in unbudgeted spending. You know, that means that the budgets that are in place are intended to remain in place. You know, we're working with our current budget plan, and certainly, we're not anticipating having to make any changes in our current amount of spending. What we want to make sure is that the spending we are doing is making the greatest difference for children in our province.

Leslie: Tom, I'll let you go. Enjoy the game.

Christensen: Thanks, Sean.