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MEDIA RELEASE

Children's Advocate Calls on Government to Address Needs of Permanent Wards in CFS

MANITOBA – Manitoba's children's advocate, Darlene MacDonald, today called on the provincial government to address the long-term needs of the thousands of children and youth who are in care as permanent wards. In a newly released special report, *Permanency Beyond Foster Care*, The Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA) specifically examined what happens after a child becomes a permanent ward in Manitoba.

"Young people enter the child welfare system for many reasons," explained MacDonald. "Many children come into care for a brief period of time before being reunited with their families of origin. However, there are many other children who remain in care as a permanent ward and end up having to rely on the system to meet their care needs until they turn 18."

Children and youth come into care for a variety of reasons, which can include a child's complex medical issues, a parent's illness, or for protection concerns. If the issues that brought a child into care are not resolved after a time, a court judge may make a legal order where the child becomes a permanent ward of the government and the government is then responsible for the child's care until they turn 18 years old. In 2014, there were 10, 293 children in care in Manitoba, and of those, 5, 848 (57%) were in care as permanent wards.

According to *The Child and Family Services Act* (CFSA), children have a right to grow up in a continuous family environment in which they can flourish. When it is not possible to return children to their immediate family, the government must fulfill its obligations to work in a child's best interest and actively build solutions that provide loving family environments to children in care. Developing extended family and community or kin placements must be made a priority for how the child welfare system operates. The legacy of separating children from family and community has had devastating effects and if children can find family through extended networks of care, these must be supported and developed as basic practice in child welfare.

In today's report, the OCA calls on the government to invest in subsidies that support permanency planning. The report also calls on the government to support custom adoptions that reflect indigenous values of the extended circle of care which surrounds each child. The report makes three formal

recommendations – one to the minister of family services to review the outdated regulations on adoption-related financial assistance, one to the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet to develop Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) tools and resources to be used across government where decisions made are impacting citizens under 18. The OCA also recommends that the Department of Family Services ensure any proposed new legislation, regulations, policies, and provincially funded programs are assessed regarding their impact on two specific groups of stakeholders: children – as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and on indigenous people – as described in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and as recommended in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

“If we want the child welfare system to operate in the best interests of children, youth, and families, leaving a child or youth to languish in care as a permanent ward cannot be acceptable,” says MacDonald. “We need to see the system get more creative and more assertively seek out extended family and community members who can provide stable, loving, long term options. Involving family and community is the only way in which the long term needs of children will be met. The government is not an adequate parent.”

To view the full report visit: <http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/Permanency-Beyond-Foster-Care-web.pdf>

About the OCA

The Office of the Children’s Advocate is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. It represents the rights, interests, and viewpoints of children and youth throughout Manitoba who are receiving, or entitled to be receiving, services under *The Child and Family Services Act (CFSA)* and *The Adoption Act*. The office does this by advocating directly with children and youth, or on their behalf with caregivers and other stakeholders. Advocacy also involves reviewing services after the death of any young person where that young person or their family was involved with child welfare services in the year preceding the death of the child.

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