



## Executive Summary

### **Bridging the Gaps**

Achieving Substantive Equality for Children with Disabilities in Manitoba

**A SPECIAL REPORT BY THE MANITOBA ADVOCATE  
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH, 2021**

# Why we started

Children with disabilities have the right to substantive equality, which means equality in outcomes. This special report is guided by the rights of children with disabilities and motivated by the death of a child with disabilities we call Emma.

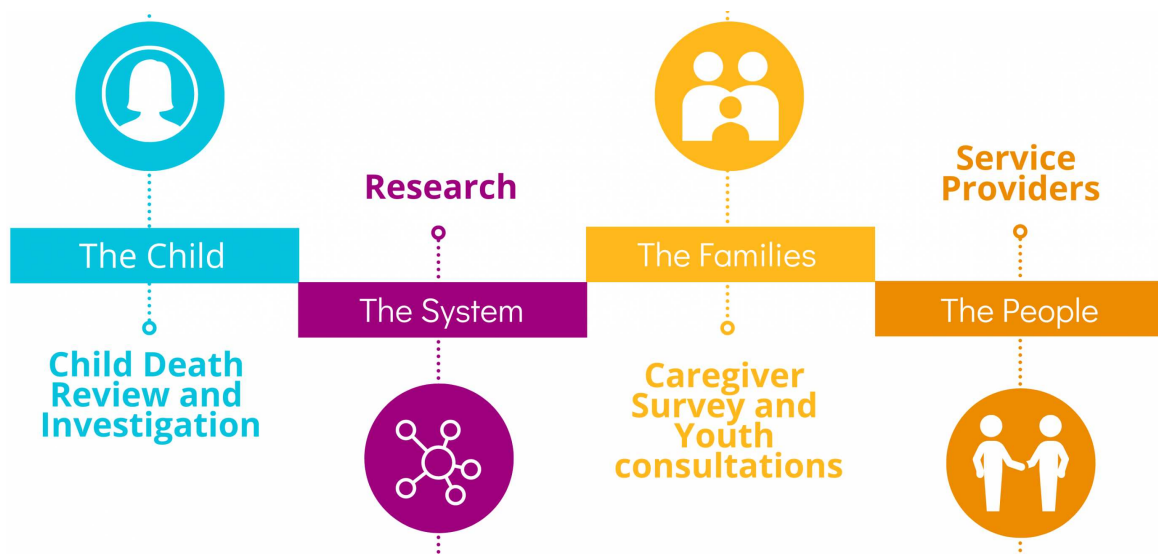
This is the first time the children's disability services system of Manitoba has been systemically and independently reviewed by the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, empowered by *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*.



# What we did

"Bridging the gaps" combines investigative and research activities. The report began with a child death investigation that uncovered key themes which required further examination. In order to understand the scope of issues and trends associated with case management and respite, data from 2015-16 to 2019-20 was requested from government and analyzed. Data were linked to the information management system for child welfare and analyzed to understand the overlap of services. A review of policies and best practices followed.

A survey with caregivers was launched, gathering responses from October 2020 until November 2020 in English and French. A total of 334 caregivers responded from across Manitoba. Children and youth with disabilities were recruited through the survey and social media and five in-depth interviews took place. Service providers were consulted through 21 in-depth interviews. Lastly, four roundtables were organized with MACY's Elders Council, senior government representatives, First Nations and Metis governments, and caregivers to present preliminary findings. **Over 400 people participated in this report**, many of them caregivers.



# What we found



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## Wait times for diagnostic assessment

Receiving a diagnosis is the first step to accessing services. Wait-times for diagnosis are 12-14 months on average but can be much longer. Wait times sometimes jeopardizing access to early interventions for children with disabilities.



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## Under resourced case management

Children disABILITY Services (CdS) provides family centered case management services and respite. However, wait times for case manager assignment can be up to two years. Caseloads are 133 children on average, which may translate to less contact with families and less proactive case planning. Children and youth with disabilities, as well as caregivers, expressed that they need more time with case managers to build relationships and understanding.



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## Underfunded respite services

Respite services provide essential reprieve to the caregivers of children with disabilities. Over the last five years, the number and proportion of families receiving respite has decreased. Caregivers reported that self-managed respite, government's preferred method, has created more work for some families who must find and hire supports in communities. Families that can afford it pay out of pocket for respite supports.



## Families in crisis

As children age and their needs increase, respite supports and case management services reach their limit. Families without natural supports or resources to supplement services struggle more. Many families look to access alternative care outside their home for their child on a full-time or part-time basis.



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## Gaps in alternative care options

Alternative care options provide part-time or full-time out-of-home care. These options are limited, if available at all in Manitoba. For crisis stabilization, placements and turnover are low. Wait times for accessing alternative care options can be up to two years.



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## Child welfare involvement

If a family crisis cannot be relieved through respite or existing alternative care options, CdS may invite child and family services (CFS) to plan for the family because it is able to license specialized placements for children. Contact with CFS is common among children living with disabilities in Manitoba. In some cases, children enter the care of child welfare to receive disability-related supports even when there are no child protection concerns.



# What we recommend



**Enact a new law to provide a continuum of supports and services for children with disabilities and their families that is in line with their rights**



**Develop a protocol with child welfare to coordinate services, when needed**



**Fund a plan to reduce wait-times for diagnostic assessments**



**Develop systems navigation supports for families while on wait-lists**



**Review and address case management caseloads**



**Improve accuracy of data about First Nation, Metis, and Inuit children**



**Gather regular feedback from children and families on services**



**Make a policies and procedures manual available to the public**



**Establish a full continuum of respite supports for families**