



Unit 100 - 346 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba CANADA R3C 0C3
(204) 988-7440 • 1-800-263-7146 • Fax: (204) 988-7472
www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca

MEDIA ADVISORY

July 16, 2015

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Subject: Children's Advocate says CFS must think beyond short-term crisis to meet needs of vulnerable youth, urges top-level government response in new report out today

WINNIPEG- The Manitoba child welfare system is not meeting the needs of youth in care who have complex needs, concludes *Safe For Today*, a report released this morning by the Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA). The detailed report is a follow-up to the OCA's 2012 study that also examined youth in care with complex needs and the ability of the Manitoba child welfare system to provide support and services for this highly vulnerable in-care population.

As described in today's report, of the 10,293 children and youth who were in care in Manitoba in 2014, more than 3,000 are estimated to have complex needs. Many of those youth are not being adequately supported by available resources in the system. Instead of creating environments that support these youth and encourage their development, provincial systems remain in a chronic state of emergency, focused on keep youth safe only for today, with little attention to long-term success.

Complex needs are the significant behavioural and mental health consequences of childhood trauma. These experiences of trauma can include physical and sexual abuse, living in families with addictions, mental health issues or domestic violence, attachment disruption, and more. When children experience these conditions (also known as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs) as they are growing and developing, the trauma can become deeply rooted and later emerge predictably as complex needs. The youth might display violence and aggression, suicidal or self-harming behaviours, severe risk-taking such as fire-setting, and vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Youth with complex needs may require intensive supervision to ensure their safety and the safety of others.

"These are highly traumatized children," explained Darlene MacDonald, Manitoba's Children's Advocate. "They have lived through significant adverse events and are trying, to the best of their abilities, to find their places in the community."

The child welfare system is often left to manage the array of specialized needs on its own. However, caring for youth with complex needs can be a costly endeavor and often requires coordinated services across a number of sectors, services mainly beyond the control of the child welfare system. Many youth with complex needs come into care not because of traditional child protection issues such as abuse and neglect, but instead because their families can no longer manage on their own. The problems that require specialized intervention include mental health issues, cognitive and physical disabilities,

behavioural issues, addictions, involvement in the youth criminal justice system, attachment disorder, and other unresolved trauma. In some cases, and in far too many communities outside of larger urban centres, the necessary specialized services are not available at all.

“As a province, we need to reimagine the child welfare system for this group of unique youth,” urged MacDonald, “and demand creative solutions from our public systems which can achieve long-term successes.”

Specialized placements, such as treatment foster homes, group home, and other residential treatment facilities, are often required to safely care for many children and youth with complex needs. However, the development of specialized placements has not kept pace with the number of children and youth in care with complex needs.

In general, the child welfare system has struggled to develop enough placements for the growing number of children in care. Consequently, children and youth with complex needs are often left waiting for an appropriate placement and specialized supports. However, their challenging needs often strain the capacities of their current caregivers, resulting in placement breakdowns, admission to crisis facilities, and placement in emergency shelters, and in the recent past, hotels. Increasingly, with limited capacity to access or develop the appropriate specialized resource, child welfare agencies are forced to make decisions that reduce child welfare practice to short-term, crisis-bound decision-making, rather than proactive and developmental planning that assesses, anticipates, and responds to a child's needs.

In the OCA's 2012 report, ten recommendations were made to the province including the development of a multi-year plan to create trauma-responsive services, early assessment and intervention resources, a wider range of placement options, and a unified vision across sectors (such as mental health, addictions, youth criminal justice, education, and others) to address the issues of service fragmentation and poor coordination. To date, little substantive action has occurred on the 2012 recommendations.

Today's report reiterates those themes and adds more targeted recommendations including a summit of child-serving sectors, better access by caregivers to specialized support services, quicker assessment strategies so wait times for appropriate services can be reduced, a commitment to increase specialized placements available in the system, and an expectation for the government to report publicly on its progress.

“The child welfare system in Manitoba is large and complex,” noted MacDonald, “and success for these vulnerable youth will require a clear and cohesive commitment by all child-serving sectors to create public systems that ensure long-term success is a priority goal.”

For the full report: <http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/Safe-for-Today-FINAL.pdf>

The Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA) is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. The OCA advocates directly with and on behalf of children and youth in the province who are receiving, or entitled to be receiving, child welfare or adoption services. The OCA promotes the rights and best interests of children and youth within public services to ensure decisions impacting young people reflect their best interests.

For more information, contact Ainsley Krone, Manager, Communications, Research, & Public Education at (204) 988-7475, or akrone@childrensadvocate.mb.ca.