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MEDIA RELEASE

Children's Advocate Reacts to New Office Powers Proposed Today

MANITOBA –Today, the government introduced new proposed legislation that would expand services of the Children's Advocate into additional areas of the public service. While we are pleased with the government's introduction of this new bill, this is only the first of several steps to expand our office. Until these changes are passed by the legislature, our ability to work with additional children and youth who request our help does not change and there are still thousands of young people in the province who need support but who are unable to access the services of the Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA).

It has been nearly two full years since the Manitoba government released the final report of the Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry where Commissioner Hughes formally recommended the mandate of the OCA be broadly expanded and strengthened. His recommendations reinforced what we have been urging the government to do for many years: to extend our ability to provide advocacy to all young people who receive any publicly-funded services and who need help. Children and youth are in particular need of advocates. They have a voice but virtually no legal power to make anyone listen to them. Our experiences speaking with children and youth reveal that they sometimes feel they have no say in what happens to them.

The changes proposed today are a step toward the strong recommendations which have been made, but they do not fulfill what the Commission urged the government to do, which was to expand the advocacy of our office to include all publicly-funded services to children and youth.

This new proposed legislation does expand our services into justice, which is an important development as we already frequently work with youth in care involved in the justice system. Being able to work more broadly in that public system with additional youth will be an important expansion of our advocacy.

The proposed legislation also includes serious injuries, which may provide us with an ability to examine areas of risk to which children and youth are exposed, although our mandate to examine these injuries would only extend to those that fall within the list of reviewable services.

We remain hopeful. At the OCA, we are guided by the best interests of children and youth and we know we share this fundamental lens with the citizens of this province. We are pleased that the proposed legislation extends service to young adults to the age of 21 and when passed, the legislation will support

our desire to provide more information to the public about the experiences of children and youth. This is an important change our office has long called for. We know that public systems can be improved when citizens understand the impact on the most vulnerable.

Strengthening the Children's Advocate as an independent voice for Manitoba's children and youth is an important process. The proposed legislation takes a positive step in the right direction and we hope it is viewed as one of many necessary steps to come, since the ways in which the youngest and most vulnerable are supported reveal much about our values as a society.

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.

For more information please contact:

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