



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 7, 2020

Review of 22 suicide deaths shows persistent gaps in youth mental health and addiction services, need for change

Advocate worries about COVID-19 effects on ‘overburdened and underfunded’ systems

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, TREATY ONE TERRITORY – To mark national Youth Mental Health Day, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth released her latest special report on Thursday while urging Manitobans to not forget that while many of us are focused on news of the current pandemic, many children and youth were already struggling with mental health and addictions prior to COVID-19.

Streaming her report release live as public health orders limit gatherings, Daphne Penrose detailed the seven recommendations she is making to the government to immediately improve the youth mental health and addiction system. Penrose noted that when the government acts on the report’s recommendations, the lives and wellbeing of Manitoba children and youth will improve.

“Stop Giving Me a Number and Start Giving Me a Person”: How 22 Girls Illuminate the Cracks in the Manitoba Youth Mental Health and Addiction System dives into lessons learned from the suicide deaths of 22 Manitoba girls. The girls, ages 11-17, were primarily from rural and northern Manitoba communities and died between 2013 and 2019.

“These girls did not have appropriate access to mental health and addictions services where they lived. And as we know from past reports, like *The Slow Disappearance of Matthew*, demand for these provincial services in Winnipeg already outpaces supply,” Penrose said.

All of the girls in this report also experienced early childhood traumas, but only three were offered some type of professional trauma-related interventions in their early and middle years.

“We need to recognize and respond to trauma much earlier in children’s lives so they do not slowly disappear in adolescence. We also need to collectively and proactively protect children and youth from harm.”

In her February 2020 report, *The Slow Disappearance of Matthew: A Family’s Fight for Youth Mental Health Care in the Wake of Bullying and Mental Illness*, the Advocate discussed a lack of cohesion among mental health services in Winnipeg. The same problem persists outside the perimeter, except fewer services are available in rural and northern areas. Many children and youth continue to be flown to Winnipeg for emergency assessments; trips that can cost tens of thousands of dollars per flight.

In spring 2018, the provincial government received and released the Virgo Report, a long-awaited plan to improve public mental health and addictions services. Two years later, very little progress has been made on the report's recommendations when it comes to child- and youth-focused services.

Meanwhile, the province's youth suicide rates are more than double the national average and over the last five years, suicide has become the leading manner of death for Manitoba youth between the ages of 10-17.

"If we've learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic response, it's that governments are capable of moving quickly on pressing issues. The province must recognize the urgency for addressing the mental health and addiction needs for kids in this province. Children cannot wait any longer to become the priority of the government," Penrose said.

"We know the province will face economic hardship related to the pandemic, but the emotional toll of COVID-19 piled on top of an already challenging service landscape could make things much worse," she continued.

"It's up to governments to prepare for the ripple effects this virus may have on the mental health and addictions systems – systems that have already been overburdened and underfunded for years."

In her special report, Penrose makes seven recommendations for service improvements, two of which repeat advice made in the Virgo report. Her recommendations are:

1. **Conduct a gap analysis** – The province must see what services are available in youth mental health and addictions and release a public framework and its strategic plan for system overhaul.
2. **Demonstrate equitable access to services** – The province must spread youth mental health and addictions services throughout Manitoba in any future frameworks or strategic plans.
3. **Train workers on trauma and its effects** – The province must provide early childhood trauma education to all government service providers working with children and youth.
4. **Help families learn where the right resources are** – The province must conduct and publicize an annual inventory of what therapeutic trauma interventions are available to children and youth in Manitoba, describing whether services require referrals and what their eligibility criteria are.
5. **Create more youth hubs** – In keeping with recommendation 4.8 of the Virgo Report, the province must establish more youth hubs outside of Winnipeg, providing access to community-based services like counselling, tutoring and extracurricular activities.
6. **Create "focal points" outside of Winnipeg** – In keeping with recommendation 2.11 of the Virgo Report, the province must develop "focal points" outside Winnipeg, so that all Manitobans can have access to urgent and acute mental health and addictions clinicians and other professionals and services closer to their homes.
7. **Create long-term treatment for youth with the highest needs** – The province must develop an inpatient or community-based long-term treatment facility that offers stabilization, assessment, treatment and aftercare for youth at the top tier of mental health and addiction service needs.

To read the Advocate's entire special report, along with all special reports previously released, visit: <https://manitobaadvocate.ca/adult/reports-publications/public-reports/>

The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) continues to track all recommendations laid out in special reports. Progress reports and analysis are updated online every six months after a report's release:

<https://manitobaadvocate.ca/recommendation-tracking/>

About MACY: The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. It represents the rights, interests and viewpoints of children, youth and young adults throughout Manitoba who are receiving or entitled to public services, including child and family, adoption, disability, mental health, addictions, education, victim supports and youth justice. The office does this by advocating directly with children and youth, or on their behalf with caregivers and other stakeholders. Advocacy also involves reviewing public services after the death of any young person when that young person or their family was involved with a reviewable service as defined in *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act* (the ACYA). Additionally, the Manitoba Advocate is empowered to make recommendations to government, conduct child-centred research, disseminate findings, and educate the public on children's rights and any other matter under the ACYA.

Media contact:

Jessica Botelho-Urbanski, Manager of Public Education

Phone: 204-451-6111

Email: jbotelho@manitobaadvocate.ca

-30-