



Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE MANITOBA ADVOCATE'S STATEMENT OF CONCERN ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Manitoba Advocate Sherry Gott distressed by Manitoba's alarming demand for sex with children in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection, or other necessities.

MARCH 19, 2025 – TREATY 1 TERRITORY AND NATIONAL HOMELAND OF THE RED RIVER MÉTIS, Winnipeg, Man.

The office of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) is urging the Government of Manitoba to take action against those who coerce, lure, or exploit children for sexual acts, the sex trade, and child sexual abuse material. MACY is calling for an end to the province's alarming demand for sex with children in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection, or other necessities.

Sexual exploitation of an individual under the age of 18 is illegal and clearly defined and interpreted as child abuse and sexual assault. Children have a right to protection from harm – including abuse, exploitation, and from being bought and sold (as articulated in Articles 34 and 35 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*). **Yet, today, and every day in Manitoba, children as young as eight years old are bought for sex despite the Government of Manitoba's legal obligation to protect these children from harm.**

"Each year, more than 400 children in Manitoba are exploited in the visible sex trade, which represents only 10 per cent of cases due to the hidden and underground nature of child sexual abuse," said Manitoba Advocate Sherry Gott. "Behind closed doors and online, thousands of children are exploited in Manitoba's invisible sex trade each year."

Across the province, the epidemic demand for sex with children continually evolved in the decades since Manitoba released *Tracia's Trust: Manitoba's Strategy to Prevent Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking* in 2002. However, the strategy's prevention and intervention initiatives remain stuck in the past, failing to protect children from current realities. Each day Manitoba continues to operate within the outdated, uninformed, under-resourced, and uncoordinated parameters of *Tracia's Trust*, young people who are at immense risk of harm or death are left without sufficient support and protections to mitigate these risks.

Across Manitoba, child sexual exploitation intersects with many other systemic issues in the province. These co-occurring systemic issues include:

- the ongoing mental health and addiction crises;
- high rates of apprehension and child welfare system involvement;

- high rates of missing children and youth;
- high rates of incarceration and youth justice system involvement;
- as well as Manitoba having the highest rate of child and family poverty among the provinces.

"It's crucial to youth who are sexually exploited or at risk of being exploited that a full continuum of culturally-appropriate mental health and addiction resources are available, that specialized placements for youth who are not able to remain in their family homes exist within Manitoba, and that enhanced supports for young people aging out of publicly-funded services, including the child welfare system, are available," said Gott. "Children and youth don't just deserve to have these needs addressed – they have an inherent right to it under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*."

Despite several attempts made by MACY to ensure governments act in ways that comply with children's rights, as is their legal obligation, gaps in Manitoba's strategy to end child sexual exploitation continue to remain static. Investments in child sexual exploitation prevention, early detection, and intervention remain unchanged. **This is unacceptable. As such, MACY, again, reiterates its call to Manitoba to update *Tracia's Trust* strategy to end sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in our province.**

That said, ending child sexual exploitation requires action by all of Manitoba – including service providers. **Identifying trends in child sexual exploitation is essential to combat this epidemic, and this is a key responsibility of MACY's Serious Injury Reviews and Investigations Program; however, to undertake this important work, MACY requires proper reporting by youth-serving organizations across the province.** Effective July 2023, anyone who provides a reviewable service (child and family services, youth justice, mental health, and addictions services) must report serious injuries, including sexual assaults (which often take the form of sexual exploitation), sustained by children, youth, and young adults to the Manitoba Advocate office as mandated by the Serious Injury Reporting Regulation, alongside section 21 of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*. This reporting permits the identification of current issues afflicting young people, including those at risk or who are sexually exploited, enabling MACY to make evidence-informed recommendations to improve public services interacting with children and youth.

In the first 18 months of the Serious Injury Reviews and Investigations Program, a total of 140 serious injury assessments and reviews were completed by MACY. **Sexual assaults were the most common injury form brought to our office's attention, and comprised 41% (58 reviews/assessments) of all cases reviewed in the first year and a half of the Serious Injury Reviews and Investigations Program. Of the 58 reviewed sexual assault cases, 36% (21 assessments/reviews) centred on sexual assaults which were known to have occurred in the context of sexual exploitation.** Further, of the 140 assessments/reviews completed, there were 37 cases where there was documented evidence to indicate the young person had been sexually exploited at some point in their lifetime prior to being seriously injured. As will be addressed in MACY's next anticipated special report detailing the Serious Injury Reviews and Investigations Program, due to unrepresentative reporting across various

organizations in Manitoba, we are certain these numbers are gross underestimates of the true degree of sexual exploitation in this province.

"Manitoba's complicit in thousands of cases occurring each year – including in your community – where updates to *Tracia's Trust* could have stopped an offender from coercing, luring, and exploiting children into sexual acts, the sex trade, and child sexual abuse material in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection, or other necessities," said Gott. "Manitoba needs to stop letting kids get exploited by closing the gaps in *Tracia's Trust*, which is a quarter century old at this point, that make it easier for predators to abuse children throughout the province every day."

If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available.

- Manitoba Suicide Prevention and Support Line (toll free): 1-877-435-7170
- Kids Help Phone (toll free): 1-800-668-6868
- 24-hour Youth Crisis Services in Winnipeg: 204-949-4777
- 24-hour Youth Crisis Services outside Winnipeg: 1-888-383-2776
- Residential School Survivor Support Line: 1-866-925-4419

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Media Contact:

Lindsay Ridgley, Manager of Public Education
(204) 451-6111
lridgley@manitobaadvocate.ca

About the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth:

The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) is an independent, non-partisan office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. The office represents the rights, interests, and viewpoints of children, youth, and young adults throughout Manitoba who are receiving, or should be receiving, provincial public services. MACY does this by providing direct advocacy support to young people and their families, by reviewing public service delivery after the death or serious injury of a child, and by conducting child-centred research regarding the effectiveness of public services in Manitoba. The Manitoba Advocate is empowered by legislation to make recommendations to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of services provided to children, youth, and young adults. MACY is mandated through *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*, guided by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and acts according to the best interests of children and youth.