



**Manitoba Advocate
for Children and Youth**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**THE MANITOBA ADVOCATE'S STATEMENT OF CONCERN ON THE IMPACT OF WILDFIRES ON
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

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**OCTOBER 15, 2025 – TREATY 1 TERRITORY AND NATIONAL HOMELAND OF THE RED RIVER
MÉTIS, Winnipeg, Man.**

The Manitoba Advocate is deeply concerned about the growing impact of wildfires on the health, safety, and well-being of young people. I am calling for urgent action to ensure the rights and needs of all young people in our province are prioritized in wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery.

Wildfires across Manitoba disproportionately affect children and youth, posing an urgent threat to their rights and well-being. Yet, despite bearing the brunt of a climate crisis they did not create, children and their unique needs and rights are too often overlooked in emergency responses and climate policies. **The office of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) is calling on the Government of Manitoba to urgently adopt child-sensitive climate policies and wildfire emergency responses that prioritize the rights, well-being, and future of Manitoba's children, youth, and young adults.**

Wildfires in Manitoba are no longer rare or seasonal – they have become relentless and more intense, stretching from early spring to late fall. This year's wildfire season was unprecedented, with more than 32,400 people from over 12,400 households evacuated by late August, most from remote and Indigenous communities.¹ Some families were forced out not once, but multiple times. As of early September, 429 fires consumed over two million hectares of land,² leaving behind a trail of scorched ecosystems, destroyed homes and businesses, damaged infrastructure, and lingering uncertainty about if and when evacuees will be able to return home.

¹ Canadian Red Cross. (2025, August 22). *Media Information Update: Manitoba and Saskatchewan Wildfires: Registration numbers* [News Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.redcross.ca/about-us/media-news/news-releases/media-information-update-manitoba-and-saskatchewan-wildfires-august-22-2025>

² Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre Inc. (2025, September 22). *Current fires summary*. CIFFC. <https://www.ciffc.ca/fire-information/current-situation-report>

Beyond the visible destruction of landscapes and communities, the fire is also inflicting less immediately apparent but deeply consequential harm on children and youth. The impact on children's rights and well-being has been severe, and could be long-lasting.

With immediate and long-term effects on the physical and mental health of children and youth, wildfires pose an especially urgent threat to their right to an adequate standard of health (Article 24, UNCRC). Children's developing bodies and organs, for example, are much more susceptible to the harmful effects of wildfire smoke, which contains dangerous pollutants known as particulate matter. Studies have shown that particulate matter produced by wildfires is 10 times more harmful to children's respiratory health than from any other source, including traffic emissions or industrial pollution.³ Children and youth also tend to be more physically active and spend more time outdoors, increasing their exposure to air pollution. Studies have also shown that children and youth exposed to wildfires are more likely to experience adverse mental health effects than adults.⁴

Importantly, children's right to health is closely tied to the government's obligation to provide a healthy environment. The Government of Manitoba has a duty to secure the conditions necessary for children to live and thrive, which includes preserving and protecting the natural environment on which their well-being depends. Failing to take timely action to protect the land, therefore, is not acceptable.

The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth acknowledges the Government of Manitoba's announcement on October 1, of the 2025 Wildfire Disaster Financial Assistance program, intended to support municipalities in recovery and long-term wildfire mitigation. While this commitment is welcome, it is essential that children and youth are explicitly included in the design and delivery of all recovery and rebuilding efforts. Financial assistance must not only repair infrastructure and support municipalities, but also ensure that displaced children and youth have access to safe housing, education, mental health supports, and culturally-responsive services. A child-centred approach is necessary if

³ UNICEF Canada. (n.d.). *Protecting children against the risk of wildfires: Impact of wildfires on children virtual roundtable*. UNICEF Canada. Retrieved [Sept 16, 2025], from <https://www.unicef.ca/en/impact-of-wildfires-on-children-virtual-roundtable>

⁴ Adu, M. K., Agyapong, B., & Agyapong, V. I. O. (2024, August 27). Exploring the impact of wildfires on children's psychological well-being: A comprehensive review of recent literature. *European Psychiatry*, 67(Suppl 1), S460. <https://doi.org/10.1192/j.eurpsy.2024.953>

recovery is to address the profound and lasting impacts wildfires have had on Manitoba's youngest citizens.

Children's right to education (Article 28, UNCRC) has also been severely impacted, as hundreds of school-aged children have been pulled from classrooms, losing not just lessons, but safe, structured spaces to learn, socialize, and grow. As the new school year begins, hundreds of children in Manitoba are still far from home because of the wildfires. In response, schools, government agencies, and community partners have stepped up by providing temporary learning spaces, offering recreational programs, and opening classrooms in Winnipeg and Brandon to welcome children from evacuated communities. These efforts matter, but they are not enough. Even students whose families were not evacuated by the fires have felt the impact, as libraries, music rooms, and other shared spaces in their schools have been necessarily converted into makeshift classrooms to accommodate shifting enrollments. Further, we have learned that many evacuated families remain hesitant to enroll their children in unfamiliar cities because for some, "school" does not feel like school when it is not in their own community – it is a strange environment and a strange system.⁵ Caregivers worry not just about the learning, but about their children's safety, well-being, and belonging.⁶

Children's ability to enjoy their right to rest, play, and leisure (Article 31, UNCRC) has also been profoundly impacted. Play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. All summer across the province, wildfires have kept children indoors and led to the cancellation of many leisure activities, such as sporting events and field trips, resulting in children being deprived of their routine, and losing opportunities to grow, connect, and thrive.

What should be a time of learning, playing, and feeling safe has, for children and youth dislocated by wildfires, turned into weeks, months, and sometimes years of living in temporary shelters including evacuation centres and hotel rooms. While evacuation centres are essential, they can be crowded, noisy, and chaotic, creating a stressful and

⁵ Kemp, C. (2025, September 16). *Wildfire evacuees head back to school in Brandon while waiting for return home: Southern Manitoba school divisions make space for students to experience some normalcy of school year.* CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/brandon-wildfire-evacuees-school-1.7322959>

⁶ Hempel, R. (2025, June 11). *Manitoba caregiver worried wildfire evacuation will have lasting impacts on children: Northern schools in a dozen communities closed due to wildfires, smoke.* CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-wildfires-children-evacuation-1.7208934>

unsafe environment which impacts their rights to freedom from harm and an adequate standard of living, including safe housing (Articles 19 and 27, UNCRC). Sleep is disrupted, stress levels spike, and the risk of infectious disease is heightened.⁷ More troubling, some youth in evacuation centres have reportedly been targeted by individuals attempting to sell drugs, and some community leaders have raised concerns about vulnerable youth being lured into exploitative situations.⁸

Wildfires and climate change affect some children more than others, including Indigenous children. Indigenous communities are disproportionately exposed to and affected by wildfires in Manitoba and across Canada because of their proximity to forested regions, reliance on the land for culture and livelihood, limited access to emergency services, and pre-existing social and infrastructure inequities. Inadequate emergency responses due to a lack of consultation with Indigenous Peoples and unsafe conditions during evacuations and while sheltering, further deepen the marginalization, trauma, and pre-existing vulnerabilities they experience.⁹ It goes without saying that displacement of Indigenous children can sever their ties to land, language, culture, and tradition, threatening their right to cultural identity and continuity (Article 31, UNCRC). There is also evidence of increased child apprehensions during and after evacuations.¹⁰

The implications for children's rights are serious. Indeed, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognized climate change as one of the greatest threats to these rights and underscored states' obligations to take action.¹¹ **Their safety, well-being, and future should be at the heart of every plan, and affected families, communities, and especially children must be part of shaping those decisions.**

In a news article published on August 8, 2025, leaders from four remote First Nations communities called for an end to what they described as a "cycle of failure" in wildfire

⁷ Associated Press. (2025, August 9). *Thousands flee wildfires in Manitoba as smoke spreads across Canada and into the U.S.* AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/b1a37dac81acd22d549a9c8e331e0291>

⁸ Lasuik, S. (2025, July 9). *Alleged drug dealers target Winnipeg wildfire evacuation site, police claim.* CityNews Winnipeg. <https://winnipeg.citynews.ca/2025/07/09/drug-dealers-winnipeg-wildfire-evacuation-sites/>

⁹ Preparing Our Home. (2025, September 14). *Evacuations of Indigenous communities during wildfires must prioritize keeping families together.* The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/evacuations-of-indigenous-communities-during-wildfires-must-prioritize-keeping-families-together-263780>

¹⁰ Yumagulova, L. (2022, July 15). *Preparing our home for climate change crises: Submission to the National Adaptation Strategy public consultation.* Preparing Our Home Program. <http://preparingourhome.ca/>

¹¹ General Comment No. 26 (2021).

management.¹² They argued that much of the crisis could have been avoided with earlier action and proper preparedness. Some leaders had even warned authorities days before the fires reached their communities, but without trained personnel or the right equipment, they were unable to stop the destruction.

This pattern of reacting instead of preventing and preparing is not only dangerous, it's expensive. Emergency responses rely heavily on costly evacuations, including military airlifts, when proactive measures could save both money and lives. A report from Canada's Auditor General revealed that between 2018 and 2022, Indigenous Services Canada spent 3.5 times more on emergency response and recovery than on prevention and preparedness — far more than it would have cost to build all-weather roads that could reduce the need for evacuation flights in the first place.¹³

The smoke will eventually clear, but what it leaves behind in our young people will not.

Manitoba can no longer treat wildfires as one-time emergencies – they are now a constant part of our changing climate. We need to act now: not just to put out fires, but to prevent them, prepare for them, respond better, and put children and youth at the heart of every decision. Their future depends on the choices we make today. Every wildfire season that passes without real change deepens the harm, risking generations of children growing up with physical and mental health concerns, lasting trauma, fractured education and recreational opportunities, displacement and disconnection from culture and community, and fading trust in the very systems meant to protect them.

Mental health, education, and child protection supports must be at the heart of emergency planning, including accessible psychosocial services, temporary learning spaces, tutoring, culturally-appropriate curricula, and strengthened safeguards against exploitation, neglect, or abuse during displacement and recovery. For Indigenous children, responses must also ensure cultural continuity, preserving connections to land, language, and tradition even in times of crisis. Clear, timely, and accessible communication is essential, with consistent information for families and age-appropriate messaging for children. Infrastructure recovery must prioritize schools, childcare facilities, and community centres to provide safe spaces

¹² Kitching, C. (2025, August 8). *Remote reserves demand end to wildfire 'cycle of failure'*. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/08/08/first-nations-demand-end-to-wildfire-cycle-of-failure>

¹³ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. (2022, November). *Report 8—Emergency management in First Nations communities—Indigenous Services Canada*. 2022 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada to the Parliament of Canada. https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_202211_08_e_44154.html

for learning, play, and healing, with investments put towards resilient infrastructure such as all-weather roads and reliable evacuation routes. Finally, a true commitment from government to respect and protect the land must be prioritized to fulfill children's rights to live in a healthy environment.

At the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, we call on the government to urgently conduct a comprehensive assessment of wildfires' full impact on children, youth, families, and communities, particularly in remote and Indigenous communities, to document lessons learned and identify gaps in prevention, preparedness, responses, infrastructure, and communication. These findings should drive proactive policies and operational plans that anticipate, rather than merely react to, the needs of vulnerable populations.

Children cannot keep waiting. The time to act is long overdue.

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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.