



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 13, 2018

In Need of Protection: Angel's Story
Speaking Notes for the Advocate

Good morning. Thank you to each of you for joining me today to talk about this special report I am releasing.

To begin, I acknowledge that the mandate of our office extends throughout the province of Manitoba and we therefore travel and work on a number of treaty areas. Our offices in Southern Manitoba are on Treaty 1 land, which is the traditional territory of Anishnaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Ojibwe and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Metis nation.

Additionally, our soon-to-be-opening Northern office is on Treaty 5 land, and the services we provide to children, youth, young adults, and their families extend throughout the province and throughout Treaty areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10.

Today, I'm going to tell you about a girl who was well loved by her family and friends, but her name is not one that you might have heard before today. However, her story, when you read it, is one that stands as a shocking reminder that too many children and youth in our communities are subjected to immense trauma and are taken too soon.

After 30 years of working in child-serving public systems, I have worked with many families who faced tragedy and struggles, and I can tell you that the report I am releasing today is one of the most disturbing stories I have known.

Today, I'm going to tell you about a girl named Angel.

Angel was 17 years old when she died from an accidental drug overdose, but Angel's story began many years prior to the event of her death. It is hard to read a story like Angel's and not feel incredible

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sadness for what she experienced and endured. From the time she was an infant, Angel was exposed to persistent abuse, neglect, and violence.

At the same time, she witnessed those around her attempt to manage addictions and mental health challenges.

Over the course of many years, multiple services were involved in, or held legal responsibility in Angel's life for her care, protection, or service delivery. And yet, despite extreme and unwavering signs that her family was in crisis, Angel never received the support and protection to which she was entitled and which she desperately needed.

The report I am releasing today is called, *In Need of Protection: Angel's Story*. We chose this title because throughout her life, Angel was frequently placed in, or left in dangerous situations, and was never provided with the supports she needed to be safe or to feel safe.

Angel was sexually assaulted multiple times by adult men, beginning when she was 21 months old. Some of these assaults were known and reported and resulted in criminal charges. However, Angel suffered many additional assaults where no one was held accountable.

However, more than criminal accountability, what Angel desperately needed in her life was therapeutic mental health supports. Her early years were marked by multiple apprehensions from her family home because of her mother's own struggles. By the time Angel was 12 years old, she had been apprehended 14 times, always being returned to her mother. Meanwhile, the agency conducted no meaningful assessments as to whether Angel's mother was ready or able to take care of Angel.

And so, inevitably, Angel would be left in risky situations until the risk was deemed severe enough to re-apprehend her and bring her into care of the CFS system.

When she was in care, CFS did not complete any long-term planning and did not demonstrate an understanding of their legal mandate to protect and provide for Angel. She was moved through 46 different placements while in care, in addition to the times she was returned home to her parent and then subsequently re-apprehended.

Angel asked for help when she was 8 years old, telling professionals in her life that she was unable to cope with what was going on at home and that she needed support.

At eight years old she bravely asked for help, but none came.

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Over the course of her 17 years, professionals in multiple systems: from CFS, to Health, to Education, to addictions, identified that Angel required intensive mental health therapy to address the trauma she had endured, but no sustained supports were ever offered to her. She was forced to endure and shoulder the weight of her trauma alone.

My team was able to count that recommendations were made at least 24 times over the years that mental health supports should be arranged for Angel. However, apart from a couple of sporadic appointments, we were unable to confirm that any proper mental health support was ever provided to her.

In our review of the files and other evidence we collected, it was clear that Angel was likely being sexually exploited by adults by the time she was 11. Our investigation confirmed that by age 11, Angel was displaying 14 of the 15 known indicators for sexual exploitation. These abuses were never identified by the professionals in her life, even though some of her workers were documenting the symptoms and indicators in their own files.

Angel was 11 years old when she attempted suicide for the first time.

Predictably, over the years, Angel's attempts to cope on her own with the ongoing trauma began to emerge. These coping strategies manifested outwardly as behaviours that were challenging for service providers to manage. Angel was labelled as disruptive and disrespectful and workers noted that she threw tantrums when disappointed or upset.

As advocates for children and youth in Manitoba, it is hard for my team to look at the scope of Angel's life and not feel exasperated at the lack of compassion and the absence of proper service provision to her family as a whole, and to Angel in particular.

While it might be easier to blame a mother who struggled with her own challenges, it is important to understand that all parents love their children and do their best with what they have. When parents are unable to safely care for their children, publicly-funded systems have a role to intervene. These interventions must come from a place of understanding, skill, and compassion. Ultimately, services should support the family in ways where parents can be healthy again and able to reclaim their young ones.

When public systems are involved in the life of a family, we rightly expect that the services are fulfilling their responsibilities.

In Angel's case, the public systems that should have protected her did not.

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The report I am releasing today details Angel's 17 years of life and I make six formal recommendations to address the massive deficiencies that were clearly evident in Angel's life. The gaps for Angel are also the gaps other youth are experiencing today and the government must act.

What I speak to in the findings, analysis and recommendation section of the report focus on four specific themes. These include:

- The unaddressed trauma crisis in our province and the impact it is having on children and youth
- The sexual exploitation of children and youth in Manitoba and the persistent abuses perpetrated by some adult men across Manitoba
- The pressing need for improved minimum standards and quality control within the child and family services system, and
- The continued lack of a youth mental health and addiction strategy and the need for a continuum of care for youth, which includes safe and secure addiction treatment facilities.

Angel's family was never provided with an opportunity to succeed.

And yet, under the weight of this heart-breaking story, we see rays of hope. We are encouraged by some recent discussions our office has hosted as we prepared for the release of this report. Reflecting our commitments to a child's true story and with our focus on solutions, we have established a multi-step practice for how we finalize reports and prepare for a public release.

Some of those steps are described in more detail in the *Methodology* section of this report. As the Advocate for all children and youth in Manitoba, I acknowledge Indigenous political governance structures and I reach out with offers to meet to discuss pending reports, including details of the investigation, and the recommendations I intend to make. In my office's commitment to walking the path of Reconciliation, I make those offers to meet with Grand Chiefs, Chiefs of relevant communities, and their staffs. I do this in respect of their inherent rights where my investigations are looking into the public services that have been provided to Indigenous children.

Additionally, we invite any organization or department whose files were reviewed during the course of an investigation to come together to discuss my team's findings and recommendations. It is at these meetings that government departments are invited to provide my office with any additional information. This is done to ensure the report reflects an accurate current context.

It is relevant to share some of my team's reflections from our most recent series of meetings with provincial government departments.

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In those meetings, there was common agreement that the ways in which public services interacted with Angel did not properly identify or address her needs or those of her family. In addition, in one meeting, which included senior representatives from the provincial departments of Health, Education, Families, Justice, addictions, and law enforcement, there was a palpable and collective desire to address the gaps that existed for Angel and to make sure services are better for other children and youth. Departments spoke up at that meeting and have contacted us since then to provide important information to our office so that this report and its formal recommendations for systemic changes can be achieved.

It is not an easy position to be reviewed by an accountability body like the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth. Our office is rarely called in when things are going well for children.

The advocacy calls we get, like the death notifications, can follow times where there have been significant breakdowns in the system for a young person, or when a child or youth has died too young. To all who may read Angel's story, we hope that by the time you turn its final page that you can see achievable solutions are described on these pages and in our final recommendations.

Change and growth are not always easy for public systems, which is why these stories of children and youth are so vital. The ability of my office to release these public reports can help move our public systems forward because we are able to identify tangible solutions through the eyes of a child who has experienced the gaps that exist.

We acknowledge these reports are difficult to write and difficult to read, however, none of our own fortitude compares when viewed in the shadow of the bravery shown by a mother who gives us permission to use her child's name and photos. This single act once again lays a mother bare to the prying eyes of strangers. We acknowledge and honour Angel's mother for allowing us to share this story and we ask all members of the media and the public to respect the privacy of Angel's family. Do not try to find them or name them. Angel's family and friends have experienced enough heartache from her passing and even still, have given once again so that the rest of us can learn from the life of their child.

This report is dedicated to all of the young people and adults who have been harmed by sexual exploitation. We honour the memory of those who have lost their lives, and we recognize the strength and resilience of all those who have been forced to endure this type of abuse. Children, youth, and adults do not choose to be exploited. It is our hope that in telling Angel's story, we can call on all peoples to remember that children's lives matter and we cannot continue to look the other way when they are being harmed. Sexual exploitation is an egregious human rights violation that impacts many children and youth in Manitoba and we each have a responsibility to protect all children from this harm.

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There are many names of girls and women known throughout the public whose deaths are linked to systemic failures. When spoken, those names are ways we can call on others to never forget their memories of these daughters, sisters, aunts, and mothers. In speaking their names and remembering their legacies, each of us encounter opportunities to do our part to acknowledge the ways in which some people in our communities are systemically disadvantaged.

When we remember the girls and women we have lost to trauma-based addiction, violence, and from the other abuses levelled against them, we can acknowledge that as a society we still have a long way to go before we will reach a place of equity and equal opportunity, where everyone can experience a full and fulfilled life.

We share Angel's story with you today and hope she can also be remembered and can inspire the changes that are desperately needed.

And to you, Angel, your story has been told and your voice is being heard. Rest well.

Thank you for your time and attention.

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