

## THE MANITOBA ADVOCATE'S STATEMENT OF CONCERN

### A Call to Action:

#### A Mental Health and Addictions System to Meet the Needs of Children and Youth

The mental health of youth in Manitoba is one of my top concerns and the statistics are staggering. In Manitoba, 10.8% of children aged 6-12 years have experienced a significant mental health or addictions issue; for youth aged 13-19 years this rate increases to 17% (*Data source: Manitoba Centre for Health Policy*). Given the prevalence of mental illness and addiction issues among our young people, this means there can be no one who is untouched by this crisis. All of us, as parents, grandparents, and community leaders, have a personal stake in doing better by our children and our youth.

In Manitoba, we also know that many children and youth are lost to suicide each year. Over the past ten years, 143 youth have died by suicide. This past August, eight young people died by suicide (*Data source: MACY*). In addition, accidental drug-related deaths, including meth-related overdoses are skyrocketing. The number of meth-related deaths in Manitoba have doubled in the past year, alone.

The connection between mental illness, including addiction issues, and suicide is well established. My office's own multi-year study on youth suicide tells us that youth lost to suicide often struggle with addictions and significant mental health problems. And yet, in the face of such tragedy, it is important to remember that suicide is preventable, and, with, timely early intervention supports, mental illness and addiction issues can be prevented or minimized.

What we need here in Manitoba is a continuum of youth mental health and addiction services and supports that are evidence-based, culturally-safe, trauma-informed, and accessible when they are needed. These services and supports must reach out and work with children and youth where they are at. What Manitobans may not know is that too many services funded by the public have restrictive admissions criteria that prevent our youth from getting the treatment and support they need. When youth are struggling with mental illness and addiction issues, we often only have a small window of time to make a difference in a young person's life. Barriers to treatment must be knocked down, including long wait lists for scarce programming.

As many Manitobans may be aware, the government hired a consultant group to review our province's mental health and addiction services. The final report, known often as the **Virgo report**, looked at mental health and addiction service delivery for children, youth, and adults in the province; that report was released to the public in March of this year. My office has reviewed the 279-page final report and it corroborates what Manitobans have long felt: these systems are under-funded, the resources are spread too thin, and prevention-focused efforts are often overshadowed by the ever-growing need for crisis interventions.

Of particular interest to my office, is, of course, the Virgo report's priority focus on the mental wellness of Manitoba's children and youth. I agree with the Virgo team's assessment that our youth mental health and addictions system is marked by inadequate funding for services; insufficient early intervention services; and the need for universal prevention resources and supports for all children and youth.

I am very disappointed however, that the voices of the 143 youth Manitoba has lost to suicide in the last 10 years were not included in the Virgo report. Because my office has the responsibility to investigate the deaths of children and youth, we have reviewed these and other deaths over this past decade and we have much to say about how mental health and addiction services are delivered in Manitoba. During the process of consultation, I made the offer to provide a decade of data and analysis from the investigations my office has conducted over the last 10 years. Sadly, they did not take me up on my offer and proceeded without the important lessons that have emerged from the voices of children and youth who have died in this province.

It was not surprising to see that many of the Virgo report's 125 recommendations echo those that have been made by my office. The changes needed are rooted in the trauma that some of our young people are carrying. So, while the face of it may look like a mental health and addiction crisis, what we are really seeing is a trauma crisis, and we have an urgent need for a full continuum of services here in our province. We need options for young people who are hurting and need early support, all the way to those youth who are at imminent risk; along that continuum is education, early intervention, and safe and secure healing and treatment centres. Evidence-informed harm reduction approaches - including clean needle exchanges and overdose prevention sites that support youth and young adults - are considered best practice by mental health experts across the country. While other provinces move forward in addressing Canada's opioid crisis with a decriminalized public health approaches to substance misuse, Manitoba lags behind, seemingly stuck in an ideological debate, at the grave expense of too many children and youth. For my office, the issue is clear and confirmed with every youth we hear from and work with who is struggling under the weight of their addiction and who is asking the adults in this province for real change and meaningful help.

These issues cannot be discussed without acknowledging that Indigenous communities and families experience the weight of the trauma and grief more acutely. Indigenous children and youth today are also carrying the burden of colonization and residential school effects. The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in today's social service systems must be understood for what it is: these are the legacies of a shameful history. It is our responsibility to walk in reconciliation and that means that the federal and provincial governments must pay special attention to ensuring that the services that the Indigenous government leaders require to treat and heal their children must be provided in a seamless and meaningful way.

The current crisis that is on our doorstep is not new. Community leaders in a multitude of domains have been raising the alarm and calling for action for more than a year. At my office, my team and I work with youth on a near daily basis who are at imminent risk due to drug-related harm. Earlier this week, I met with senior executive members of the Departments of Health and Families to share what my team is seeing on the frontlines and I asked the government what its immediate and longer-term plans are to help youth and young adults. I am disappointed to learn that six months after the Virgo report was released, the government still does not have a concrete plan of action for youth mental health and addiction. I also raised my concern about the recent announcement of the reduction of staff at the youth residential treatment program in Portage la Prairie. This needed facility has seen low occupancy rates, not because we don't have youth who need the beds, but because the admissions criteria are barriers to accessing service. The answer is not to reduce staff, but to figure out how to get the youth who need the treatment into the facility. The government needs to develop an immediate action plan in

these areas, especially at a time where youth are dying and many more are being harmed and exploited every day.

I am releasing this statement of concern to let the people of Manitoba know what is currently happening for children and youth with respect to Manitoba’s mental health and addiction supports. Today, I am also informing Manitobans that under my current legislative mandate, I am monitoring what the government plan is, and I have launched a series of Special Reports to be completed by my office, which will speak to Manitoba’s mental health and addictions services. These Special Reports include individual investigations into the services that were provided to children prior to their deaths, and an aggregate investigation into the separate suicide deaths of 16 female youth in Manitoba, where mental health and addictions were involved. Reflecting the principles of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, a cornerstone of my office’s work, a children’s rights lens will guide these reports.

We have to set aside our own comfort levels as adults and service providers and listen to the voices of young people. They don’t want to be dying from their addictions- they want our help. And although some of their voices are quieter, and sometimes their behaviours can mean that we have to listen harder to hear them, the voices and experiences of children and youth are critically important to hear.

It’s time to listen to the many experts in these systems, including young people, and we must act in bold ways that will make a difference and which can save the lives of children and youth.



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The Advocate is available for media Friday, September 21 in the afternoon. Requests or other enquiries may be directed to Ainsley Krone, Deputy Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth: [akrone@manitobaadvocate.ca](mailto:akrone@manitobaadvocate.ca) or (204) 451-3190 (call/text).