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Manitoba Advocate unveils first major review of children’s disability services, finds system under-funded and under-staffed

Advocate makes 9 recommendations, releases video and Braille UNCRC

WINNIPEG, TREATY ONE TERRITORY, HOME OF THE METIS NATION – For the first time under her expanded legislative mandate, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) has released a special report today focused on disability services and the systemic barriers that stand in the way of fulfilling the rights of children with disabilities.

Bridging the Gaps: Achieving Substantive Equality for Children with Disabilities in Manitoba is a special report stemming from a child death investigation and broader systemic research. The Advocate was notified of the death of Emma¹ in 2017.

Emma’s family struggled to navigate disability services in Manitoba and ultimately wound up relying on Child and Family Services for support. Emma died accidentally in 2017, just days before an emergency systems meeting was scheduled to discuss an out-of-home placement for her.

Guided by Emma’s story and the obstacles her family experienced, MACY broadened its investigation to include a survey of caregivers of children and youth with disabilities (which received more than 300 responses from across Manitoba); interviews with academic experts, current and former service providers, families, and children and youth with disabilities; and data analysis of Children’s disABILITY Services (CdS) and Child and Family Services (CFS) records. Over 400 people were consulted in the making of this report.

“This is more than a MACY report – it is a report reflecting the voices and experiences of many individuals with knowledge and lived experience inside Manitoba’s disability services for children,” said Ainsley Krone, Acting Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth. “The passionate and detailed insight that was shared with our office is a signal of how much work there is to be done in the disability services area. Our advocacy and research will not end with this report.”

¹Name changed to protect the privacy of the family.

MACY focused on four areas of concern for today's report: case management, respite services, alternative care, and overlap with the child welfare system. The report found that:

- **Case management:** Families are waiting up to 12 to 14 months for diagnostic assessments, plus additional wait times of up to two years for CdS case manager assignments. The average caseload for a CdS case management worker in Manitoba is 133 and MACY found as many as 490 cases being managed by one worker.
- **Respite services:** MACY's survey found a lack of respite services was a top concern for caregivers and requiring families to organize and oversee respite services– the approach currently favoured by the provincial government – can cause more stress for some families.
- **Alternative care:** There is a lack of out-of-home care (alternative care) options in Manitoba. CdS does not have the legal authority to license new placements. Due to gaps in mandate and services, CFS is brought in to license placements for children with disabilities.
- **Child welfare involvement:** On average, MACY found 47% of children served by CdS between 2015 and 2020 had current or historical contact with CFS. Of them, 28% were a child in care at some point in their lives. Some children are entering CFS care to access disability-related supports and when there are no child protection concerns. Child welfare involvement can be prevented with the right supports.

“What we heard and saw time and again is that Children’s disABILITY Services in Manitoba is operating under a family-centred model and are doing the best they can with very stretched resources,” Krone said. “The people and programs available in Manitoba are excellent. The under-funding and under-staffing issues these programs are facing is affecting the care children and families receive. New investments as well as more efficient use of existing resources is needed in order to achieve substantive equality for children with disabilities in our province.”

In *Bridging the Gaps*, the A/Manitoba Advocate makes nine recommendations for system change within provincial departments and service streams. They are:

1. Enact a new legislative mandate for the Children’s disABILITY Services Program, similar to Alberta’s *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act*, that empowers and resources a broad continuum of supports for children living with disabilities and their families.
2. Develop a protocol to improve coordination between Children’s disABILITY Services and Child and Family Services.
3. Fund a plan to reduce wait-times for diagnostic assessment for children suspected of having a disability.
4. Ensure that families whose children are placed on waitlists for assessments and interventions for disabilities receive system navigation supports.
5. Review and address case management workloads to ensure case managers are able to deliver services that align with the department’s family-centered service model.

6. Consult with Indigenous experts in Manitoba to develop and implement a process for self-disclosure of First Nations (status and non-status), Metis, and Inuit ancestry, and use this information to improve and tailor culturally-responsive services.
7. Collect regular feedback from the children with disabilities and the families served to inform service improvements.
8. Complete a CdS program manual and make this publicly available.
9. Create and resource a strategy that reflects a full and flexible continuum of respite options from at-home respite to alternative care outside the home.

Along with today's report, MACY is also releasing three companion pieces – an executive summary and a six-minute animated video explaining the report's findings (both available on **ManitobaAdvocate.ca**); and a Braille version of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). Anyone interested in a Braille copy of the UNCRC should contact MACY directly.

With the proclamation of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act* in March 2018, MACY can now track progress on all of its recommendations to government and other public services and publicize child death investigations and systemic research through the Advocate's special reports.

To read MACY's past special reports and view our recommendation compliance tracking, visit our website: **ManitobaAdvocate.ca**.

About MACY: MACY is an independent, non-partisan 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, or 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 and other public bodies, conduct child-centred research, disseminate findings, and educate the public on children's rights and any other matter under the ACYA.

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