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MEDIA RELEASE

Children's Advocate Annual Report Highlights Vulnerability of Children 10 and Under

Manitoba – Manitoba's children's advocate, Darlene MacDonald, released her 2014-2015 annual report today. In addition to an overview of the office's initiatives and activities, the report's theme reinforces the importance of understanding and responding quickly to the needs of young children.

"The experiences children have between birth and 10 years have a significant impact on the rest of their lives," states MacDonald. "Our office regularly sees the significant costs to our community when we don't respond to and adequately support this age group."

Amanda came to the attention of the Manitoba child welfare system when she was five. She spent her early years with her mother, but by the time of her first contact with the child welfare system, she had already lived through significant trauma. From age five to ten, ongoing safety concerns in her family home resulted in Amanda repeatedly moving in and out care. Those years were characterized by abuse, neglect, uncertainty, and ongoing instability. By the time Amanda reached her teenage years, she had lived in more than 60 different placements and had spent time in mental health facilities and secure custody. The repeated traumatic events Amanda experienced paved a predictable pathway to internalized anger and an inability to feel much hope for the future. It was at this point that she contacted The Office of the Children's Advocate to find support.*

The Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA) received a total of 2,418 requests for advocacy services in 2014-2015, and completed 56 child death reviews as part of its special investigations review program.

As in previous years, top concerns that come to the OCA include issues involving case planning, the quality of the care children in care receive, and upholding the rights of children. Case management, risk assessment, and service delivery were the focus of recommendations made by the OCA's child death review program.

The report outlines three general themes based on the trends the OCA sees emerging in the cases that come to its attention:

* Name changed

Adverse Childhood Experiences: Almost all children who enter care have experienced trauma. Research shows a strong link between the number of adverse childhood experiences and future health and well-being. These links include risk-taking behaviour, psychological issues, and serious illness. There has been promising research in the areas of prevention as well as a reduction in the effects of these negative experiences. The OCA urges robust investment in these approaches, which involve family and community-based interventions as well as economic and social policy.

Water Safety: Since 2008, when the OCA received the mandate for child death reviews, 31 children have died by drowning in Manitoba. Twenty-one of those children were six or younger. Of the 14 drowning deaths that met the legislative criteria for a special investigation review, nine were age six or younger. Recommendations in those cases related to caregiver water safety training and water safety planning for young children. The OCA continues to support the call for further research into the most practical strategies for addressing and reducing the risk of drowning for all children in our province.

Ensuring Quality of Care: Careful case planning is important for young people of all ages in the child welfare system. For young children, the stakes are particularly high because of their stage of development and level of dependency. A keen understanding of risk factors related to attachment and developmental growth is critically important. When young children are pre-verbal, they may communicate their distress in ways that are not as easy for adults to interpret.

All children and youth depend on adults for special care and protection. For young children and especially those who are impacted by child welfare concerns, the need for specialized support is even greater. While stories like Amanda's are featured in the report, her experience is all-too-common for the many young people in Manitoba whose early trauma leads to long-term struggle. The report illustrates both the gaps in service that exist for young people as well as the opportunities for action with a goal of continuing to improve outcomes for all children in the province.

"We all have an important role," comments MacDonald, "in speaking up on behalf of young people and urging government to increase early prevention services so children can grow up in a safe and healthy family environment in which they can flourish."

To view the full report visit: <http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014-2015-Annual-Report-En-web.pdf>

About the OCA

The Office of the Children's Advocate is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. It represents the rights, interests, and viewpoints of children and youth throughout Manitoba who are receiving, or entitled to be receiving, services under *The Child and Family Services Act (CFSA)* and *The Adoption Act*. The office does this by advocating directly with children and youth, or on their behalf with caregivers and other stakeholders. Advocacy also involves reviewing services after the death of any young person where that young person or their family was involved with child welfare services in the year preceding the death of the child.

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