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MEDIA RELEASE

Children's Advocate Final Annual Report Shines Light on Lesser Known Areas of Government Care

MANITOBA – Manitoba's children's advocate, Darlene MacDonald, released her 2015-2016 annual report today. In addition to an overview of the office's initiatives and activities, the report's theme, *Stepping into the Light*, highlights concerns in areas of public services to children and youth which many Manitobans may not be aware even exist.

"With so many young Manitobans dependent on public services like child welfare and youth justice every day, it is vitally important that those systems constantly strive to evaluate and improve their effectiveness," said MacDonald, "When the circumstances of a youth's life brings them to the attention of these systems, strong and positive outcomes can seem out of reach. Vulnerable young people need to be able to count on all of us to rally and support them in the most effective and meaningful ways."

Three key themes the advocate's report focuses on include:

- the challenge of balancing confidentiality and transparency in child welfare matters and why governments can sometimes be accused of hiding from accountability,
- children in care sitting in uncertain states of limbo when disputes about placements arise, and
- concerns about youth in the justice system being subjected to pepper spray and isolation.

As MacDonald concludes her second and final term as Manitoba's advocate for children and youth in April 2017, today's report also provides a retrospective look at key accomplishments over her tenure and areas where the work of the office will continue to evolve under its next leader. MacDonald highlights the significant internal restructuring which has occurred during her two terms as children's advocate which has led to a stronger voice for children and youth throughout Manitoba and across Canada. She highlights the year over year increases of the numbers of youth contacting the office requesting support, the public release of a number of significant special reports, and accomplishments such as solid provincial and national partnerships which elevate the ability of the office to educate the public on the experiences of young people. MacDonald notes that a stronger public presence has also led to a strengthened position from which to advocate for improved services for children and youth across the province.

"More than anything, I am grateful to the many young people who have shared their stories with us and who have told us what they feel they need to succeed in their lives," said MacDonald, "Many of those

stories and ideas have inspired projects and special reports by my office, which in turn help amplify the voices of other youth as we challenge the systems to change for the better.”

The advocate’s report comes as the provincial government has indicated it will soon be introducing a bill in the legislature which will create stand-alone legislation to strengthen and expand the mandate of the Office of the Children’s Advocate, a long-awaited evolution that will allow the OCA to provide support and advocacy to many more young Manitobans.

To view the full report visit: <http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/OCA-2016-Annual-Report.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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