

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## THE MANITOBA ADVOCATE'S STATEMENT OF CONCERN ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

**TREATY 1 TERRITORY AND HOME OF THE RED RIVER MÉTIS, Winnipeg, Man., March 14, 2023** — In recognition of Stop Child Sexual Exploitation Awareness Week, taking place March 13 to 17, 2023, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, Sherry Gott, would like to call attention to the ongoing violence perpetuated against children and youth through sexual exploitation, and the work which remains to be done to address these harms in this province.

“The sexual exploitation of children and youth continues to be a significant problem in Manitoba, with young people being victimized daily,” said Manitoba Advocate Sherry Gott. “While the scope of this issue is difficult to accurately measure given its hidden and underground nature, our office continues to be made aware of young people who are at immense risk of harm or death on a daily basis, and who are without sufficient supports and protections to mitigate these risks.”

Prevention is crucial to addressing the complex issue of child sexual exploitation, which has increasingly become more internet-based, and intersects with many other systemic issues in this province. These co-occurring systemic issues include: the ongoing mental health and addiction crises, high rates of apprehension and child welfare system involvement, high rates of missing children and youth, and high rates of incarceration and justice system involvement. As acknowledged and documented by the Manitoba government in its 2019 report titled *Collaboration and Best Practices to End Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking in Manitoba*, the sexual exploitation of children and youth continues to be a significant problem in Manitoba. Estimates suggest every year approximately 400 children and youth fall victim to the visible sex trade in Manitoba, which represents only 10 percent of child sexual exploitation in the province.

All children have the right to live free from harm, and it is the duty of adults to nurture and protect them. For too many children in Manitoba, this is not their experience, as they live with this form of child abuse and its ongoing impacts. This propels the work of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, mandated by *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act* and guided by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to protect and promote the rights of children so that they may be safe from harm and supported to grow to their fullest potential. In this matter, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* is also particularly relevant as the rights of Indigenous women and girls have been and continue to be significantly violated. The sexual exploitation of children and youth is a grave violation of children's rights, undermining the safety and well-being of our most vulnerable citizens, which threatens our collective future.

To mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Tracia's Trust*, Canada's first provincial strategy to end sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, the Manitoba Advocate released a statement in December 2022 to acknowledge the lives lost as a result of sexual exploitation and violence against women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, calling for immediate enhanced action on this strategy.

“While we are aware of an evaluation of StreetReach, one initiative under the strategy, *Tracia’s Trust* as a whole is overdue for evaluation, updating, and additional resources to reflect current best practices in addressing sexual exploitation and sex trafficking,” said Gott. “This includes resources to better address mental health and substance use among youth in this province, prioritizing specialized placements for youth who are not able to remain in their family homes, and enhanced supports for young people at risk of sexual exploitation who are aging out of publicly-funded services, including the child welfare system.”

A central responsibility of the Manitoba Advocate is to educate the public, especially young people, on children’s rights. It is also the responsibility of the Manitoba Advocate office to ensure that the provincial government acts in ways which are compliant with these rights, as is its legal obligation. The Manitoba Advocate will continue to be vocal on these issues by publicly urging a stronger commitment from the provincial government; one which is informed by evidence and best practices to end child sexual exploitation in Manitoba.

The Manitoba Advocate calls on the provincial government to evaluate and update the *Tracia’s Trust* strategy to end sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. The strategy needs to reflect current realities and include more robust prevention and intervention initiatives in Manitoba. Our children and youth deserve this.

Read the full extended statement of concern [here](#).

To learn more about the Manitoba Advocate’s reports, including recommendations and the government’s response, please visit: <https://manitobaadvocate.ca/adult/reports-publications/>

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**About Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth:**

The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (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. MACY 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* (ACYA). Additionally, MACY is empowered under provincial law 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 ACYA.

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