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May 26, 2016

THE CHANGING FACE OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN MANITOBA AND THE NARROW WINDOW FOR INTERVENTION: MANITOBA CHILDREN'S ADVOCATE RELEASES PHASE TWO REPORT

MANITOBA – The majority of children and youth involved with child welfare in Manitoba are exhibiting known risk factors for suicide, according to a new report released today by Darlene MacDonald, Manitoba's Children's Advocate. However, it is important to look more deeply at what their behaviours reveal in order to better protect them from harm.

"Children and youth come to the attention of child welfare for many different reasons," explained MacDonald, "and what we are seeing is that youth who are at highest risk for suicide are experiencing known risk factors for suicide more frequently, with more intensity, and for longer durations than their peers who are not dying."

Today's release, meant to be a brief update on the multi-year youth suicide research study underway at the Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA), summarizes the data from Phase Two of the study. Phase Two compared 50 youth who died by suicide in Manitoba between 2009 and 2013 with a randomized control group of 100 youth who were also involved with child welfare during that time period. In Phase One, the OCA completed detailed examinations of the histories of the 50 youth who died.¹ In Phase Two, the child welfare histories of the 100 randomly-selected control group youth were examined for the presence of 17 known risk factors for suicide such as: exposure to domestic violence, drug or alcohol addiction, a history of suicide attempts, poor school attendance, self-harm behaviours, and others. In the control group, as in the group of youth who died by suicide, witnessing domestic violence, substance misuse, and exposure to suicidality were major themes linking the many youth examined. The stark contrast between data from Phases One and Two is in the frequency and prevalence of the risk factors – youth who died by suicide talked about dying more often, more of them struggled with addiction, they had more hospitalizations for suspicious injuries, and more family members who had previously died from suicide.

Data reveal that nearly all of the youth in both groups exhibited some risk factors for suicide, but in many categories the youth who died were experiencing higher levels of risk. For example, with respect

¹http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/The-Changing-Face-of-Youth-Suicide-in-Manitoba_FINAL_web.pdf

to addiction issues, 74% of the youth who died by suicide were known to be experiencing addiction to drugs or alcohol as compared to 41% of youth in the control group. In the area of criminal justice, 68% of youth who died by suicide were involved with justice as compared to 33% of youth in the control group. And while 26% of youth in the control group expressed a desire to die, 64% of youth who eventually died had previously talked about it to child welfare professionals.

Armed with two phases of Manitoba-specific data, the ending of Phase Two activities signals the start of Phase Three. Over the next year, the OCA will continue to analyze the collected data as multi-media resources are developed and tailored for multiple audiences. One key finding in the study thus far has been that youth who are at highest risk for suicide may also struggle to maintain consistency in school attendance. Given the current reliance on schools to deliver the bulk of suicide prevention information, it may be true that youth who most need prevention information are not receiving it. To that end, the OCA is also examining multiple methods of dissemination so as to reach the widest possible audiences with the goal of helping communities create environments that educate on relevant issues, encourage a common language of awareness, and support efforts to instill and nurture hope in the lives of youth.

The full Phase Two report can be accessed on the OCA's website:

http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/The-Changing-Face-of-Youth-Suicide_P2_web.pdf

For more information or for media enquiries, please contact Ainsley Krone, Manager, Communications, Research, & Public Education, (204) 988-7475, or akrone@childrensadvocate.mb.ca

The Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA) is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. The OCA represents the rights, interests and viewpoints of children and youth throughout Manitoba who are receiving, or who should be receiving, services under The Child and Family Services Act and The Adoption Act. This includes advocating directly with children and youth and by reviewing services after the death of any young person who received child welfare services in the year preceding his or her death. The OCA also regularly publishes information and resources for the public on its work with Manitoba's children and youth.