

Times-Colonist Op-Ed column

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By Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond

"Don't Blame Government for Infant Deaths", Feb. 4, is a welcome part of the public debate that always follows release of my reports. These discussions are vital in moving ahead towards identifying services and integrated supports that will make the lives of B.C. children safer and healthier.

I'd like to clarify, however, that my report, *"Fragile Lives, Fragmented Systems"*, in no way lays blame on individual social workers working with the families of the 21 B.C. infants who died.

The key finding is that the patchwork of services and limited supports to vulnerable infants and their families in B.C. is the core of the problem. Add serious poverty and severely inadequate housing to the situation -- both of which are directly correlated to compromised outcomes for children -- and the risks are immediately multiplied.

The report calls upon all service providers to act together, not just the Ministry of Children and Family Development, but the ministries responsible for housing and health as well.

The Hughes Review, in mandating that my office undertake these aggregate reviews of children's injuries and deaths, said they were essential in terms of public accountability. "The purpose is not to assign blame to individuals but to learn from mistakes and understand what went wrong and what went right."

In this spirit, my report does not look to assign fault to social workers or other people providing help to the families, but rather to understand the system of services and supports that were involved in the lives of the infants, and to make recommendations to improve support to vulnerable families.

Both the B.C. Association of Social Workers and the B.C. Government and Services Employees' Union, which represent many of the individuals who carry out child welfare work, have issued new releases supportive of this report. On behalf of those they represent, they encourage government to accept and put into action its recommendations for change.

The BCASW notes that "it is very easy to endorse the recommendations in the report. The research, the stories and the analysis are stark and compelling ... We have the power, the right and the responsibility to insist on and support action on Mary Ellen's recommendations."

And the BCGEU states that "Turpel-Lafond's report clearly identifies concerns over the lack of a central monitoring of these cases. We have told the Ministry there is a need for improved and consistent standards across the province. Government and the agencies involved in providing care must take the steps so that children do not die because of a lack of attention from their families or government. We must be partners in solving these problems."

The report also notes that the life circumstances of the Aboriginal infants and their families in this review were particularly challenging, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs news release on this report quotes Grand Chief Stewart Phillip as applauding the report "for setting out solid and feasible next steps for the Government of BC to help vulnerable children... surely they can put together a task force to address the unnecessary suffering and preventable deaths of vulnerable children."

The writer of the Times-Colonist opinion column, who left government long before my office was created, states that with this report I have "thrown down the gauntlet." On that we can agree -- as an independent officer of the legislature mandated to speak out on issues affecting children every day in this province, I have indeed thrown down the gauntlet, in calling for government to act on a real plan to address child poverty, and to mend the patchwork system in B.C. which allows so many vulnerable children and their families to fall through huge cracks in the system.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth. The report, "Fragile Lives, Fragmented Systems", can be read at www.rcybc.ca.