



News Release

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RISKS TO CHILDREN IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SITUATIONS MAKE SPECIAL INITIATIVES URGENT, SAYS REPRESENTATIVE

VICTORIA – In the weeks and days leading up to the murders of Christian Lee and his mother, a coordinated system linking criminal law, child welfare and family justice information could have made a difference in the tragic outcome, says B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth.

“If the many professionals involved in Christian's life had the benefit of all available information, a clear picture would have emerged that this boy and his mother were in grave danger without an adequate safety plan,” said Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond.

The tremendous risk of harm to Christian was not fully appreciated by those in positions of authority because the necessary components to do the work of assessing and protecting were not in place. Today throughout B.C., she said, many children's lives are affected by domestic violence, and they urgently need the protection of specialized, coordinated response teams which provide critical early intervention and support to victims.

“There are three separate silos – child welfare, criminal justice and family justice systems – and far too often in domestic violence cases, as in Christian's life, they are not working together,” said Turpel-Lafond. “In our province today, it can be confusing even to professionals working in the field. How can victims in dangerous and potentially lethal situations find their way through such a system?”

In September 2007, six-year-old Christian Lee was murdered by his father, who also killed Christian's mother and grandparents before stabbing himself to death in their home in Oak Bay, near Victoria, B.C.

Christian was repeatedly exposed to domestic violence over his short life. But had he been in a safer environment based on a full risk assessment using all available information and matched to the degree of threat presented by his father – as occurs in other Canadian provinces with high-risk case coordination -- his death may well have been prevented, said Turpel-Lafond.

The Representative's in-depth investigation into Christian's life and death resulted in the report released today, “Honouring Christian Lee – *No Private Matter: Protecting Children Living With Domestic Violence*”. This case is a disturbing example of B.C.'s lack of coordination and communications in domestic violence cases, she said. In the six weeks prior to the deaths of this child and his family, their lives were touched by many public service providers, including two municipal police departments, an RCMP detachment, Ministry of Children and Family Development social workers and staff, medical staff, Crown Counsel, two therapists, and a variety of lawyers.

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“These individuals were not working in a coordinated model, and no one was leading or coordinating,” said Turpel-Lafond. For example, the troubling and frightening behavior of Christian’s father concerned police and the bail supervisor, who recognized that risk was clearly escalating, but MCFD staff remained unaware of their degree of concern, said the Representative. An open channel for timely access to this information is essential in domestic violence cases.

A lead agency with authority, accountability and understanding is required, said Turpel-Lafond. In her report recommendations, she is calling for the Solicitor General to head up a special initiative focusing on safety of children and youth in domestic violence situations, with a coordinated, responsive system in Greater Victoria and throughout British Columbia.

The Representative is also asking B.C.’s Attorney General to establish domestic violence courts throughout the province to improve the administration of justice in such cases.

Judge Heino Lilles, a leader and expert in promoting innovative and effective responses to domestic violence, supports this call. Lilles reviewed the case and advised on the report’s content, at the Representative’s request. “British Columbia is noticeably absent from the list of Canadian jurisdictions with specialized domestic violence courts,” he said. “Research and evaluations of courts currently operating in both Canada and the United States show that they are extremely effective. I echo the obvious need to establish specialized domestic violence courts in B.C.”

Domestic violence awareness must be raised amongst not only professionals but also with friends, neighbors and family, says Dr. Peter Jaffe, a domestic violence expert who also advised on the report. “An essential outcome of this case must be increased public and professional awareness about domestic violence and its impact on both abuse victims and their children. Beyond deaths, there are children who witness horrific incidents or lose one or both parents, and suffer lifelong trauma. The deaths are the tip of an enormous and tragic iceberg.”

Turpel-Lafond said that “although work must be done in law reform, policies and front-line service, the key ingredient for success is political will. It can be done, it has been done elsewhere and it must be done here immediately.

“Carrying out these recommendations will not necessarily mean greatly increased cost in this time of government belt-tightening but the very fact of tough economic times also means more stress in families and communities, and increasing risks of domestic violence,” she said. “Change is critical, for the sake of B.C. children exposed to violence in their homes. And it’s essential we honour Christian Lee’s memory by improving the way we protect children living with domestic violence.”

Note: The full report, “Honouring Christian Lee - *No Private Matter: Protecting Children Living with Domestic Violence*”, is available on the Representative’s website (www.rcybc.ca)

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