



News Release

For Immediate Release

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ALTERNATIVES TO REMOVING CHILDREN NOT FULLY CONSIDERED WHEN HOUSING IS A KEY ISSUE, REPRESENTATIVE FINDS

VICTORIA – A struggling young family needed short-term housing assistance so their baby could be safe, but instead the child was taken into government care. A Representative for Children and Youth investigation into a First Nations baby's critical injury finds that many of the systemic factors that played a major role in the infant's removal from his parents still exist today.

A lack of flexibility and of real communication between government support workers resulted in this child being taken into care when other less intrusive options were open, said Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond.

"Immediate income assistance support, a short-term housing grant and positive supports would have been a sensible and appropriate approach," she said. "Poverty and lack of affordable housing played a major role in this tragic situation. The system was not responsive in addressing the practical issue of short-term money for housing that would have allowed his parents to create a safe home for him. As a result, this baby was separated from his parents, his community and his culture, and his future drastically changed."

The infant, who is not being identified, was assessed as a healthy baby when taken into government care in 2006. Three months later, he was critically injured. Today, at the age of three, he has cerebral palsy, is blind in one eye, doesn't walk yet and will need life-long supports.

The baby was placed in three different foster homes, not connected to his culture or his community, in the first three months after being taken into care. After the injury, he was placed in a fourth foster home.

Turpel-Lafond said the system of supports and services failed this baby, and fell below the prescribed standards. "But this was not only the result of practice issues. It was also an overall failure to look at the big picture of the issues in a young family's life and offer help that would provide an appropriate and even common sense response to those issues.

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“Our research, combined with recent discussions with front-line workers and organizations, show us this is not an unusual situation today – that the removal of children through the child welfare system continues to be a default approach that kicks in when alternatives like emergency housing or transitional funds for families on the move are not in place or are difficult to access.” Turpel-Lafond emphasized that the cost to society for child protection and foster home placements exceeds the cost of temporary housing.

The Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth asked the Representative to investigate the circumstances of this child’s life and the government services preceding his critical injury.

“The child welfare system entered into this child’s life in response to child protection reports from the community, but its ongoing impact on the child’s life related to his parent’s poverty and inability to afford housing that met ministry standards,” she said.

Recommendations from the report, “Housing, Help and Hope: *A Better Path for Struggling Families*”, include developing proactive and explicit policy for front-line staff serving families whose children are at risk of being removed by MCFD due to housing-related issues, a call for an aggressive strategy throughout B.C. to recruit, retain and monitor Aboriginal foster homes, and an action plan to reduce Aboriginal child and family poverty in B.C. by March 2010.

In an investigation report, recommendations move from the specifics of one child’s critical injury or death to a bigger-picture examination of present day practices. Knowledge from the investigation is combined with lessons learned from past Representative reports, additional research, and from about 3,000 advocacy cases the Representative’s office has taken on to date.

“How can we help prevent this from happening again? That is the core question guiding any of our investigations,” said Turpel-Lafond. “First we must acknowledge a profound sense of sadness for the family, their community, and most deeply for the child who now faces a future of disability and immense challenges. It is essential that from this sadness a renewed and powerful commitment emerges to learn all that we can from this, and make the necessary changes.”

Note: In this report, care has been taken to avoid identifying the boy and his family by name or location. This is out of respect for the child now and in his future, and for the ordeal his parents have been through. The Representative requests that others also respect their privacy, to avoid imposing even more hardship on a young family that faces many challenges in the coming years, as they do their best to meet the trials of disability and to overcome a difficult history.

Note: The full report, “Housing, Help and Hope: *A Better Path for Struggling Families*”, is available on the Representative’s website (www.rcybc.ca)

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