



Statement

Jan. 14, 2021

For Immediate Release

The Representative for Children and Youth's Office has on multiple occasions in the past spoken out against the practice of issuing of birth alerts, and we were pleased when the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) announced it was ending the practice in September 2019.

Birth alerts – the notification to hospitals about newborns that child welfare workers believe may require protection – disproportionately impacted Indigenous mothers and, at times, led to irreparable harm to families. In some cases, these alerts contributed to separating babies from mothers and families at what are critical bonding times. Ending birth alerts was one of the Calls for Justice in the final report of the federal inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls and RCY supported that call.

This week, important new information has come to light about this issue in B.C. – specifically, that the Ministry of Attorney General had formally advised MCFD several months prior to the discontinuation of birth alerts in 2019 that the practice was, in its opinion, unlawful.

This information, revealed by journalists at IndigiNews, has serious implications and must be carefully examined. Our Office has already been in discussions with MCFD and the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and we plan to reach out to the Ministry of Health. We will continue to gather and assess information to determine our best course of action as an oversight body.

The issue of potential redress for families who were the subjects of birth alerts in the past is a complex one. However, we believe that these families are due a public apology from the provincial government, which should acknowledge how wrong and harmful this practice was. We also believe that, if information regarding previous birth alerts remains on the current personal health records of any women, such information should be removed.

Any other measures to put this right will require a detailed, case-by-case examination of the unique circumstances of families who were the subjects of birth alerts. We encourage government to undertake this work in good faith and to the best of its abilities.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth