



## News Release

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### **'Children and Youth First' ...the Right Focus.**

*Regina...* Saskatchewan Children's Advocate, Marvin Bernstein, tabled his second Annual Report to the Saskatchewan Legislature today addressing the need for government to place the safety, protection, best interests and well-being of children and youth at the centre of its policies, practices and legislation.

Entitled, '*Children and Youth First*'...the Right Focus, the 2006 Annual Report presents an overview of the operations and services managed by the Children's Advocate Office (CAO) and presents, for the first time, a set of 'Children and Youth First' Principles. The Principles, based on the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of a Child*, were developed by the CAO as a bench mark for all programs, services and practices that the Office engages in relative to its advocacy and investigation services pertaining to Saskatchewan children and youth.

"Over the past year, our Office has continued to receive and review circumstances and incidents where children and youth were placed at risk while in the care of, or receiving services from, government. The findings and recommendations set out in the Oyate Safe House Investigation and Systemic Issues Reports of September 2006 are but a 'wake up call' to the serious issues that children and youth in this province face on a daily basis. The Oyate situation has demonstrated that government cannot continue to place other agendas and interests ahead of the needs and best interests of children and it cannot lower the bar for child-serving accountability or the children will ultimately suffer," Bernstein stated.

Due to escalating demands from concerned youth, family members, professionals, officials and members of the public for the CAO to conduct various forms of investigations and to report publicly on those investigations, the CAO reorganized its operations in late 2006. The re-organization established two specialized units, advocacy and investigations, with a greater view to achieving improved efficiency and incrementally increasing the range of investigations. This should ultimately include: 1) Expanded investigations of child deaths; 2) Investigations of critical injuries; 3) Investigations into matters of fairness; 4) Investigations into program and service performance; and 5) Mandatory investigations subsequent to referral by a Committee of the Legislature or the Lieutenant-Governor in Council.

With a renewed philosophical direction for CAO operations and services, anchored by an enhanced 'Children and Youth First' focus in 2006, the CAO team developed the 'Children and Youth First' Principles. Intended to define the CAO core beliefs in relation to the services it provides children and youth, the Principles will also be advanced and promoted, in the coming year, to all government and delegated child-serving systems.

"It is time for action. I am calling upon the government to lead the change necessary to put 'children and youth first' and make this the paramount consideration and focus in all child -serving legislation, policy and practice. In this regard, I will be formally asking the provincial government to commit to an action plan that raises the standard of services for children and youth and places their needs and interests ahead of all other considerations," Bernstein concluded.

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The Saskatchewan Children's Advocate Office was established in 1995 as an independent Office under *The Ombudsman and Children's Advocate Act*.

## ***Advocacy Issues and Themes***

The consistency of these themes continues to cause concern. As such, the CAO recognized that there was a need for the Office to evaluate the direction and focus of service providers in relation to a much-needed '*children and youth first*' focus. These themes were given considerable consideration by the Office when determining the development and scope of the '*Children and Youth First*' Principles. In 2006, the following issues continued to be identified within a significant number<sup>1</sup> of the cases managed by the CAO advocates, requiring their assistance and/or intervention:

- Children and youth in care of child welfare have had their interests ignored or minimized in the development of case plans. The focus instead has been directed towards reintegration or reunification with family, which in many cases placed their safety, stability and interests secondary to other interests.
- Children and youth have been left in the family home in high-risk situations for unacceptably long periods of time, where they remained in possible risk situations of abuse or neglect, in an attempt to maintain the family unit. In addition, the lack of availability of child care resources is seen as creating situations where children remain at risk in the family home due to the fact that no placement was made available to them.
- Conversely, children and youth still experienced placements in overcrowded foster homes and other inadequate residential settings, which exposed them to several risk factors, such as safety, neglect,

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<sup>1</sup> This list of themes and issues ought not to detract from the fact that there are many instances of effective service delivery and positive child welfare outcomes achieved for children and youth.

supervision and stability. Some foster homes were cited as having up to 17 children, or more, residing in one home.

- Children and youth have been subjected to multiple changes in child welfare placements, as they are moved from one resource to the other, adding to their instability and lack of security and capacity to form meaningful attachments with caregivers. This often results in a lack of permanent case-planning for children and youth, who have extended involvement with the child welfare system.
- Children and youth continued to reside in group homes, stabilization and treatment centers for extended periods (far beyond the intent and service mandate of the program), due to the lack of residential placements, undermining their entitlement to permanency.
- Children and youth have been discouraged or prevented from accessing the services of the CAO by a variety of service providers.
- Children and youth have been denied access to alternative medications prescribed by licensed physicians due to budgetary decisions.
- Child welfare practice concerns have occurred, specifically in regard to non-compliance with best practice standards, as outlined in policy regarding appropriate assessment and intervention measures.

### ***Issues and Themes – Child Deaths since 2005***

- An emerging issue found in investigations into Child Deaths and in advocacy files, relate to the needs of children born to substance abusing mothers. These children often have significant long-term health issues and are medically fragile.
- Non-compliance with policy continues – compliance ensures that children and their families receive the services to which they are entitled.
- Children continue to die at the hands of their caregivers and live in homes marked by family violence.
- Assessment and intervention issues, and in particular, the inadequate assessment of health, safety and the well-being of children continues to leave children at risk.
- Provincial infant mortality rate remains second highest in Canada, among all provinces.