



A Voice for Youth

MEDIA RELEASE

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Children's Advocate Tables 2010 Annual Report: Growing for Saskatchewan

SASKATOON — Bob Pringle, Children's Advocate, tabled his first annual report in the Saskatchewan Legislature today. The *2010 Annual Report: Growing for Saskatchewan* provides a summary of the programs and services provided by the Office during the last year of Marvin Bernstein's five-year term, which concluded last fall.

In 2010, the total number of requests for service to the Children's Advocate Office was 1,841, a marginal decrease from the previous year. The vast majority of those requests were for advocacy services on behalf of individual or groups of children and youth. That total also includes notifications of 34 deaths from all causes and 43 critical injuries of children and youth who were in receipt of direct or delegated government services or had received those services within 12 months of his or her death.

"Responding to requests for advocacy services for children and youth in the care or custody of the Government of Saskatchewan continues to be the dominant function of our Office," said Bob Pringle, Children's Advocate. "The themes remain consistent with previous years, with case management and planning for children and youth in care of the Ministry of Social Services and delegated First Nations child and family services agencies the primary issue. We also continued to receive referrals concerning the safety and quality of some residential placements."

Issues related to child welfare services accounted for 66 per cent of all inquiries to the Children's Advocate Office in 2010. The Ministry of Corrections, Public Safety and Policing accounted for 10.9 per cent, while the Ministry of Justice and Attorney General—with non-jurisdictional custody and access issues constituting the majority of those calls—accounted for 2.6 per cent. The Ministry of Education related issues accounted for 2.0 per cent and the Ministry of Health accounted for 0.9 per cent in 2010.

A significant concern to emerge in 2010 was the inability of the Pro Bono Program, offered in partnership with the Children's Advocate Office and Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan, to accept the majority of referrals for independent legal representation for children and youth involved in child welfare proceedings. Created in 2007, this program was intended to be an interim measure until legislation, policy and programming could be implemented to meet the needs of children and youth in our province.

"It appears that the demand for this service has significantly outgrown the capacity of an unfunded, volunteer program," said Pringle. "As my predecessor Marvin Bernstein has advocated these past few years, implementing a solution to this issue must be fast tracked regardless of all other planned change for the child welfare system in Saskatchewan. It is time for the Government of Saskatchewan to address this issue by amending legislation and policy, and enacting a funded program of independent legal representation for children and youth in their own child welfare proceedings."

The final project completed under Bernstein's direction by the Children's Advocate Office was a detailed submission to the Saskatchewan Child Welfare Review Panel, of which Pringle served as Chair prior to his appointment as Children's Advocate in November 2010. That submission, *Change for Children and Youth*, is appended to the 2010 Annual Report as it is the result of a significant investment of the Office's time and resources in 2010.

"I have already reviewed the issues identified and recommendations made in the *Change for Children and Youth* report as part of all the submissions made to the Panel," said Pringle. "While we were not able to deal individually with each submission in the Panel's report, all of what we heard, including the oral and written submission from the Children's Advocate Office, informed our recommendations."

"In my new role as Children's Advocate, I look forward to reviewing and prioritizing the recommendations that require urgent advocacy for change," continued Pringle. "Ministry of Social Services' management has already committed to meetings with our Office to discuss this submission as part of consultations with stakeholders during the broader implementation in 2011-12 of the Child Welfare Review Panel's recommendations and action steps."

Pringle noted that one significant recommendation from the Office's submission—enhancing advocacy for children and youth through amendments to *The Ombudsman and Children's Advocate Act*—is already being addressed with the Government of Saskatchewan.

"The Ombudsman, our Office and the Government of Saskatchewan have begun the lengthy task of splitting and enhancing the legislation governing our work," said Pringle. "By the time this process is complete in spring 2012, we hope to have completed our program reviews and strategic planning to be strongly positioned for any expanded role or responsibilities granted in that new legislation. Additionally, we anticipate that the Government's response to the Child Welfare Review will have some evolutionary implications for our Office."

The initial response to the recommendations and action steps of the Child Welfare Review was first unveiled in the provincial government's 2011-12 budget in March of this year. That budget included funding of \$34 million for a new Saskatchewan Children and Youth Agenda, which Pringle views as laying the foundation for a long-term strategy to address the needs of vulnerable children and youth in their communities.

"Disparities are still significant in our province and there remains much to be done so that all children and youth can grow up to be healthy functioning adults," said Pringle. "Poverty related conditions, which drive so many families into contact with the child welfare system, remain to be addressed by the Government of Saskatchewan. Our Office is also hoping to see, in a more formal response to the Child Welfare Review expected in June of this year, attention and funding granted to expanding substance abuse and mental health services for children, youth and their families."

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For the full report please visit: www.saskcao.ca.

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The Saskatchewan Children's Advocate Office was established in 1994 as an independent office under *The Ombudsman and Children's Advocate Act*.