

# 2023

A N N U A L R E P O R T



SASKATCHEWAN  
**advocate**  
FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH



## LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

April 2024

The Honourable Randy Weekes  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly  
Legislative Building  
2405 Legislative Drive  
Regina, SK. S4S 0B3

Dear Mr. Speaker:

In accordance with section 39 of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*, it is my duty and privilege to submit to you and members of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan this Annual Report from the Advocate for Children and Youth for the year 2023.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa Broda".

Lisa Broda, PhD  
Advocate for Children and Youth

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# Message from **the Advocate**



**H**aving served as the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth for the past four years, there is no question that children and youth need our office more than ever.

The work of the Advocate's office is to promote better outcomes for children, make recommendations for system improvements, support government to implement our recommendations and hold government and entities that serve children accountable for the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth.

Systemically, we continue to see issues with the quality of care provided in group homes, youth who are struggling with transitioning to adulthood, extreme vulnerability, and various forms of violence that young people experience. All of this, including a lack of opportunities and support for children and youth can contribute to young people facing anxiety, depression or worse.

Most pressing for children and youth are the increasing issues related to mental health and addictions and the ongoing difficulty in obtaining services for getting help.

The sheer volume of the investigation files we assessed this past year confirms that children and youth continue to suffer with unaddressed mental health issues resulting in a concerning increase in suicide attempts and ongoing suicidal ideation. Our office receives only a small sample of the reality within the broader population of young people. These children and youth need immediate and sustainable services which are not always readily available. This puts pressure on other resources and systems because of the lack of long-term intervention and prevention.

What is clear from all of this, is that young people continue to experience adverse outcomes to their well-being due to a variety of systemic factors, all of which ought to be the highest priority of government in all facets of service provision.

Our advocacy is a critical function of our office in terms of ensuring children receive the immediate and long-term services to which they are entitled to safeguard their well-being. Working together for better system outcomes will help all children live to their full potential as is their right. Our office exists for this very reason.

This past year our office completed three major systemic reports related to social services and educational programs, making a total of 46 recommendations to address broader change for better services on issues that significantly impact children. In all of this work we continued to collaborate and support the ministries or entities involved in achieving best outcomes for children.

Saskatchewan has a long history of committing to frameworks supporting children and youth, such as the Action Plan for Children, the Saskatchewan Child and Youth Agenda, the government's 2009 commitment to the Children and Youth First Principles and more recently Saskatchewan's Children and Youth Strategy, which is a direct result of our recommendation from our *Desperately Waiting* report. A provincial strategy is integral to address the multitude of issues children face that lead to poor health outcomes for children.

I am encouraged by this new strategy and applaud the commitment of the government in their interministerial work, however, our hope is to see tangible results. Without clear and measurable targets within this strategy, it will be difficult to know what is working the best and most effectively for young people in meeting their service needs. Our office will continue to monitor the strategy and work to support and collaborate with all sectors involved to achieve the full and robust systemic outcomes required to address the issues Saskatchewan children face.

Fundamental to the complex and multifaceted challenges facing children and youth in Saskatchewan is the critical need for the government and other entities to ensure that vulnerable children and youth are at the centre of the services provided. The rights of children ought not be forgotten. It is for this reason that everyone must work together to uphold all rights that children are entitled to for their sake and for the sake of future generations.

We wish to thank all of those who work tirelessly to serve the children and youth of this province. We know this is difficult and extremely challenging. Your dedication and commitment to this work is acknowledged and appreciated.

I also wish to extend my gratitude for the work of our staff in serving the children and youth of this province. Their passion, knowledge, and commitment is commendable. It has been a distinct privilege to work alongside this team during my tenure thus far.

Respectfully Submitted,

**Lisa Broda, PhD**

*Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth*



# Legislated Mandate of the Advocate's Work

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an Independent Office of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. Our mandate is defined by *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*.

## We do:

### ADVOCACY

on behalf of children and youth receiving services from a provincial ministry, agency of the government, or publicly-funded health entity.

### PUBLIC EDUCATION

to raise awareness of the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth.

### INVESTIGATIONS

into any matter concerning, or services provided to, children and youth by a provincial ministry, agency of the government, or publicly-funded health entity.

### RESEARCH AND ADVISE

on any matter relating to the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth.

These functions are all interconnected and support the overarching goal to influence systems to improve the lives of the young people in Saskatchewan.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2020-2024

### CHILDREN AND YOUTH VOICE

- Support self advocacy
- Include, represent, and advance child and youth perspective
- Create and support opportunities that enhance growth and development

### RECONCILIATION

- Strengthen relationships with First Nations and Métis communities
- Seek and include Elder guidance and cultural knowledge
- Influence systems to embrace reconciliation for better outcomes for Indigenous children

### PREVENTION

- Research and report on evidence-informed prevention models
- Promote and support service delivery from a preventative framework

### PUBLIC AWARENESS

- Engage with young people, families, communities, agencies, and governments to build networks and raise awareness of our services
- Promote best practices in service delivery
- Educate others about children's rights and current issues

See our complete Strategic Plan 2020-2024 at [saskadvocate.ca](https://saskadvocate.ca).

# Elder and Youth Advisory Councils

Throughout 2023, members of the Elder and Youth Advisory Councils consulted on various key topics and emerging issues. We acknowledge their ongoing commitment and dedication to our mandate and express our sincere gratitude as we look forward to our continued relationship. We thank all Council members for their insightful guidance and for helping us elevate our advocacy around the interests and well-being of children and youth in Saskatchewan.

We offer our gratitude to the Elder Advisory Council for their ongoing wisdom, teachings, and guidance in our work and for their support to our office, to our communities and, most importantly, to Indigenous children and youth.

We also offer a special acknowledgement to those Youth Advisory Council (YAC) members who shared their thoughts, lived experiences, and wisdom with the Advocate on all topic areas including their insights on the potential impacts of the Ministry of Education's policy on the *Use of Preferred First Name and Pronouns by Students* (discussed later in this report). Their information was incorporated into our review of this policy and influenced our final report and recommendations.

As our current YAC members complete their terms on the Council, we wish them all the best in their future endeavours. Recruitment for the next cohort of YAC members is ongoing and we encourage any young people who are interested to contact our office, either on their own or through their supporters, to discuss opportunities for involvement.



*We were saddened to learn of Elder Darlene Speidel's passing in December of 2023. Elder Darlene offered her gracious support to the Advocate and our staff over the past four years and will be deeply missed. She was an exceptional role model for her family, community, and all Indigenous youth, in addition to being a strong advocate for their rights. Her knowledge, wisdom, and guidance were invaluable, and the Advocate is grateful for the time Elder Darlene spent on the Elder Advisory Council.*

*The Advocate and staff offer our sincere condolences to Elder Darlene's family.*



# A Foundation of Rights



Our work is guided by the following principles:

## UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (UNCRC)

All people have human rights. Children and youth (under 18 years of age) require special protections because many decisions are made on their behalf by adults. In 1991, Canada ratified the UNCRC, a legally-binding international human rights instrument that guarantees these special protections.

The UNCRC has 54 articles protecting children's rights by setting standards in health care, education, and legal, civil, and social services.

### The UNCRC has three categories of rights:

- **Protection:** Protecting children from all forms of harm and exploitation.
- **Provision:** Providing children with the resources needed for healthy development and survival.
- **Participation:** Allowing children to be an active participant.

### The core principles of the UNCRC are:

- *Non-discrimination:* The rights of each child are to be respected without discrimination of any kind. It does not matter if children are rich or poor, what their sex, gender, religion, ethnicity, or language is, or whether they have special needs. All children have rights.
- *Best interests of the child:* When decisions are made that affect the lives of children, it is very important to think about what is best for the child.
- *Right to life, survival, and development:* Governments should do their best to protect children from harm, and to help children live and grow to be the best they can be.
- *Respect for the views of the child:* Children and youth have the right to give their opinions in all matters that affect them and to have their voices heard. The views of young people should always be taken seriously.

## UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ACT (UNDRIP)

UNDRIP is an international human rights instrument, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2007. It sets minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous peoples throughout the world. In 2021, Canada passed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, which provides direction for the Government of Canada to implement the Declaration in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples.

UNDRIP references 46 articles that speak about rights to:

- Land
- Culture and language
- Self-determination
- Non-discriminatory or oppressive practices
- Protection of elders, women, and children
- Survive and develop
- Liberty and freedom
- Participate in any decision that affects Indigenous peoples

Articles 21 and 22 specifically reference that attention shall be paid to the continuing improvement of the social and economic conditions as they pertain to the special needs of elders, women, youth, and children. It also references that the 'State', in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take measures to ensure Indigenous women and children are afforded special protections.



## SASKATCHEWAN'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH FIRST PRINCIPLES

Our office simplified the 54 articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into eight principles most applicable to Saskatchewan children and youth. In 2009 the Government of Saskatchewan adopted the Saskatchewan's Children and Youth First Principles, which state:

All children and youth in Saskatchewan are entitled to:

- Those rights defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Participate and be heard before any decision affecting them is made.
- Have their 'best interests' given paramount consideration in any action or decision involving them.
- An equal standard of care, protection, and services.
- The highest standard of health and education possible to reach their fullest potential.
- Safety and protection from all forms of physical, emotional, and sexual harm, while in the care of parents, governments, legal guardians, or any person.
- Be treated as the primary client, and at the centre of all child-serving systems.
- Have consideration given to the importance of their unique life history and spiritual traditions and practices, in accordance with their stated views and preferences.

## TOUCHSTONES OF HOPE FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

The Touchstones of Hope, as created by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, is a guide to reconciliation in a variety of sectors in which children are served.

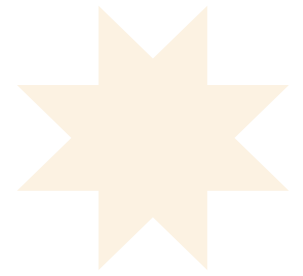
The Touchstones of Hope promote relating, restoring, truth telling, and acknowledging.

The process is based on five principles:

- Self-determination
- Respect for culture and language
- Importance of structural intervention
- Non-discrimination
- Holistic approach



# Working Toward Reconciliation



In Saskatchewan, there are approximately 59,183 Indigenous children under the age of 15<sup>1</sup> and a total of approximately 91,312 Indigenous young people under the age of 25.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Indigenous children and youth continue to be overrepresented in the child protection and justice systems and experience poorer outcomes in education and health.

As a result of these inequities, a significant part of our work involves advocating for the protection of the rights, interests, and well-being of Indigenous children and youth within the public services under our mandate. Advancing reconciliation has been one of the Advocate's long-standing strategic priorities.

As outlined in our **2020-2024 Strategic Plan** under the priority of reconciliation, the Advocate continues to endeavour to:

- strengthen relationships with First Nations and Métis communities;
- seek and include Elder guidance and cultural knowledge; and,
- influence systems to embrace reconciliation for better outcomes for Indigenous children.

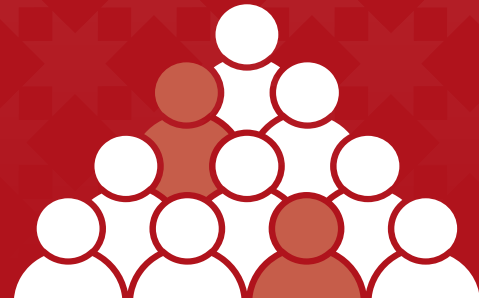
Reconciliation begins with learning and understanding the history of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and the legacy left by historical injustices.

Previously, we highlighted the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* and the *Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* as two of our office's foundational documents pertaining to reconciliation.

## Child Protection System

**At least 81% of children in care in Saskatchewan are Indigenous.**

([www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first](http://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first))



## Youth Justice System

**Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan are approximately 30 times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Indigenous youth.**

([www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/yj-jj/yj2-jj2/p3.html#:~:text=The%20largest%20difference%20between%20the,compared%20to%20non%2DAboriginal%20youth](http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/yj-jj/yj2-jj2/p3.html#:~:text=The%20largest%20difference%20between%20the,compared%20to%20non%2DAboriginal%20youth))

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022). Saskatchewan - 2021 Census Profile: Indigenous peoples and Housing. [Infographic]

<sup>2</sup> Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Indigenous Peoples of Saskatchewan - 2021 Census of Canada.

The Touchstones of Hope was developed in the context of child welfare as an effort to educate those working with Indigenous children and families on the impact of colonization, residential schools and the resulting intergenerational trauma that has plagued Indigenous peoples since that time. It is imperative to ensure that workers in systems serving Indigenous children know the truth about Canada's history of colonization and know how to work better with Indigenous families, children, and communities.

Our office adopted the Touchstones of Hope in 2011 and all staff are trained and certified in this education. The Advocate at that time recognized the critical importance of ensuring our office had the same education and understanding as what was being trained in the child welfare system. The Advocate also ensures that our office is trauma-informed and has substantive educational opportunities to learn, and apply this knowledge and truth in the work we do. We also encourage all child-serving systems to take this training and promote the importance of educating people on this historical past.

#### First Nations Child & Family Caring Society

*"The Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement encourages grassroots approaches to caring for Indigenous children [...], respectful collaboration and work with Indigenous peoples [...] and young people participating in reconciliation initiatives [...]. The movement allows for respectful and meaningful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to occur."*

([fncaringsociety.com/touchstones-hope](https://fncaringsociety.com/touchstones-hope))

Our commitment to reconciliation includes advocating for the implementation of the **principles of reconciliation** and the **Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)**, as well as the **Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)** that impact public services falling within our mandate.

In its first principle of reconciliation, the TRC asserts that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the Declaration) "is the framework for reconciliation at all levels and across all sectors of Canadian society."<sup>3</sup>



As part of our goal to influence systems to embrace reconciliation through public education, we speak about both the Touchstones of Hope and the Declaration in our presentations. Additionally, in 2023, our office developed a resource on the **Declaration** which we have made accessible on our website and as a booklet that our office can distribute to stakeholders. As highlighted in our **2022 Annual Report**, our office also made the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child more accessible to Indigenous young people by translating a youth-friendly version into three Indigenous languages - **Dene, Cree, and Michif**.

<sup>3</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation. Winnipeg, MB: Author. p. 3 (Available at: [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2015/trc/IR4-6-2015-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/trc/IR4-6-2015-eng.pdf))



To strengthen relationships with First Nations and Métis communities, our office prioritizes public education engagements with First Nations communities and participates in events and initiatives involving Indigenous children and youth. Through these connections, we ensure Indigenous children, youth, and their representatives are aware of our office and our mandate to advocate for their interests and well-being within provincial public services, in addition to striving to understand the issues facing young people in each community, from their own perspective.

To ensure we are moving forward in a good way, we seek guidance and cultural knowledge by consulting with the Elder Advisory Council and Indigenous stakeholders when necessary. The Advocate maintains regular communication with the Elders to keep them informed of our work and to hear from them on issues of importance for Indigenous children,

such as our April 2023 report on the Person of Sufficient Interest (PSI) program. For this investigative review, we also consulted with First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies and incorporated their feedback and concerns regarding the program into our findings and recommendations.

We also influence systems to embrace reconciliation through regularly advocating for cultural, community and family connections within individual case planning for Indigenous children and youth involved with child welfare, justice, education, and health.

Systemically, we incorporate advocacy for the TRC Calls to Action, MMIWG Calls for Justice, and *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth, and families* within our consultations on policy and legislation, and through formal recommendations arising from our case-specific and systemic investigations.



**Ranch Ehrlo Pow Wow – August 2023**  
**The Honourable Russ Mirasty, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan**



To this end, in 2023, we continued to monitor and advocate for the implementation of our recommendation to the health system made in *Desperately Waiting*, for the expansion and enhancement of culturally appropriate mental health and addictions services for Indigenous children and youth.

In our 2023 special investigation report, titled *Making the Grade: Moving Forward in Independent Education*, our office also advocated for advancing reconciliation within the education system. Pursuant to our findings that some independent schools may not be fully adhering to the principles of reconciliation, the Advocate recommended the Ministry of Education ensure the full implementation of TRC Calls to Action 62 through 64 by ensuring all categories of registered independent schools follow provincial mandates to incorporate treaty education outcomes and First Nations and Métis content and perspectives into instruction in all subjects at all grade levels.

On a broader scale, this year our office also advocated that the provincial government incorporate all provincially focused recommendations within the Concluding Observations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child into Saskatchewan's Children and Youth Strategy. This includes the Committee's call to urgently "put an end to structural discrimination against children belonging to indigenous groups [...] and address disparities in access to services by all children

including those in marginalized and disadvantaged situations, such as indigenous children [...]."<sup>4</sup>

The government has advised that it continues to review the Concluding Observations. As discussed elsewhere in this report, the Government of Saskatchewan will be co-chairing the upcoming 2025 conference of the Continuing Committee of Officials on Human Rights (CCOHR) and Senior Officials Committee Responsible for Human Rights (SOCHR). That conference will present an important opportunity for Saskatchewan to show progress on reconciliation and, in particular, whether steps taken have resulted in better outcomes for Indigenous children and youth.

<sup>4</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2022). Concluding Observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Canada. CRC/C/CAN/CO/5-6. Geneva, CH: United Nations. paras. 4 & 18 (Available at: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fCAN%2fCO%2f5-6&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fCAN%2fCO%2f5-6&Lang=en))



**Child Sensory and Health Facilities Grand Opening  
Montreal Lake – August 2023**

# Public Awareness and Education

## COMMUNITIES REACHED IN 2023

In 2023 our office travelled extensively to provide education and awareness to children, youth and the key stakeholders who work with them. We also provided virtual presentations and educational and promotional materials to stakeholders in various communities across the province. Our mandate to provide public education on the interests and well-being of children and youth is a critical component in ensuring young people, their caregivers, child-serving professionals, and senior officials know about our work, children's rights, and how to reach us.





## NATIONAL CHILD DAY

In 2023, the Advocate, along with some of our staff and Youth Advisory Council members, created a video message for National Child Day that provided information on this important day (held on November 20<sup>th</sup> each year) and children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This video can be accessed at:

[www.saskadvocate.ca/public-education/national-child-day/](http://www.saskadvocate.ca/public-education/national-child-day/)

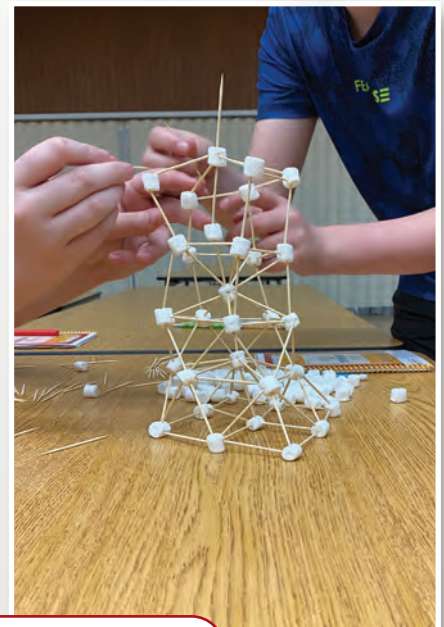
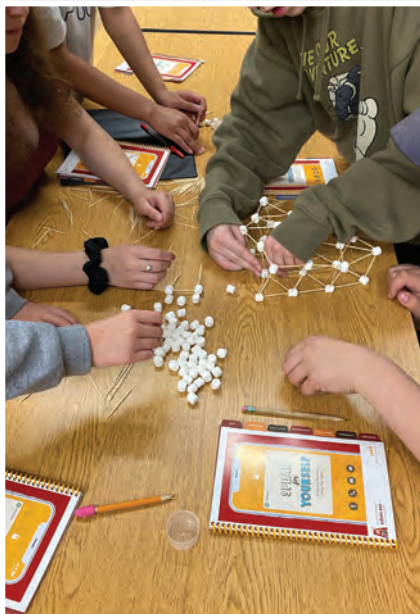
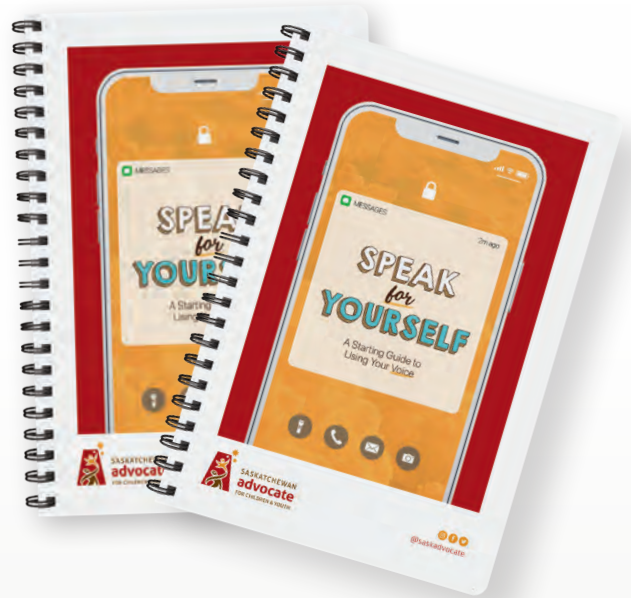


*Honouring National Child Day  
November 2023*



## SELF-ADVOCACY WORKSHOP

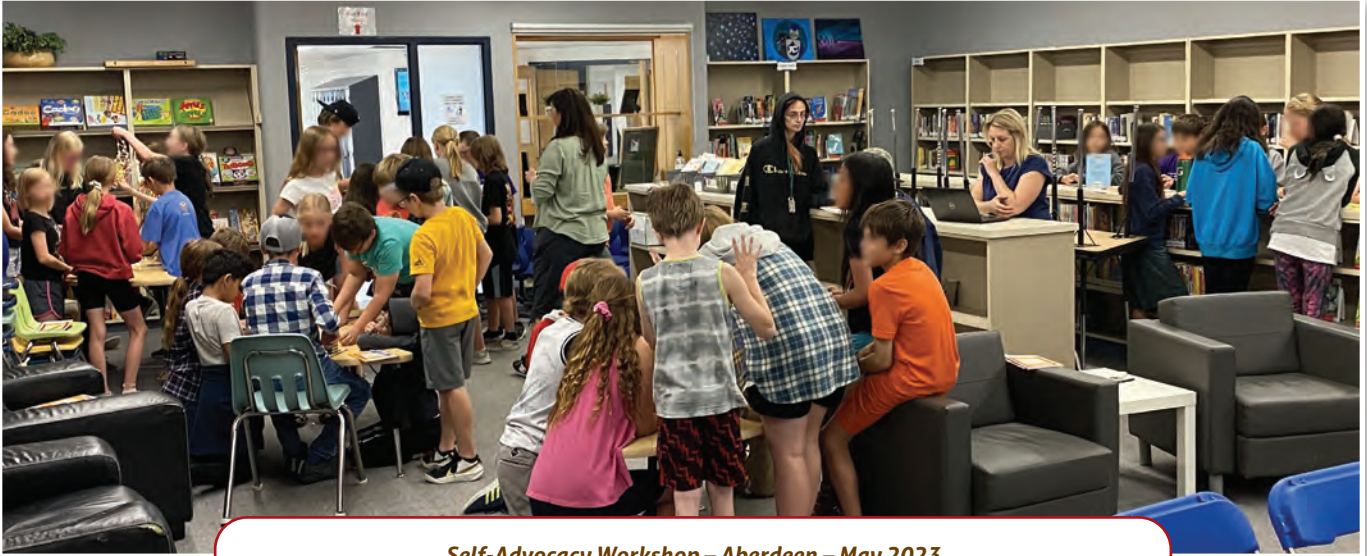
Our *Speak for Yourself* self-advocacy workshop has become one of the Advocate's top public education priorities in teaching young people about their rights, helping them develop or improve their self-advocacy skills and empowering them to be a voice for themselves. In 2023, we completed 116 *Speak for Yourself* workshops throughout the province, involving approximately 2701 participants. We expanded beyond schools and group homes by also facilitating sessions in youth addiction treatment centres, at conferences, and for youth groups, community associations, and recreational clubs.



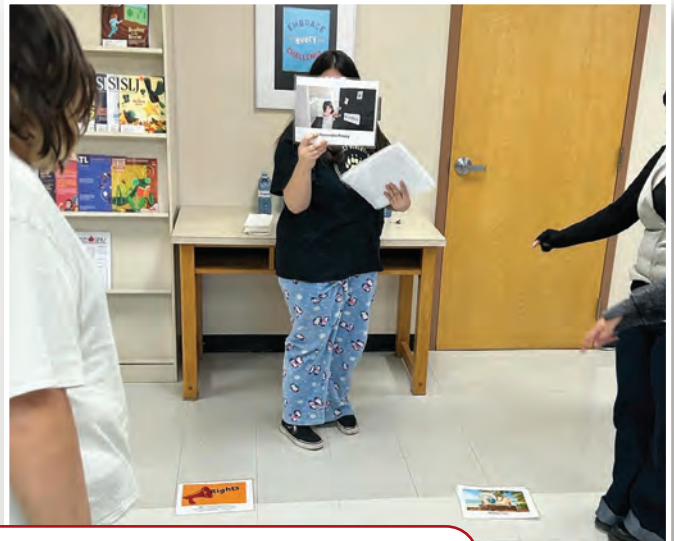
*Self-Advocacy Workshop – Nipawin LP Miller School – May 2023*







*Self-Advocacy Workshop – Aberdeen – May 2023*



*Self-Advocacy Workshop – Prince Albert Collegiate Institute – December 2023*

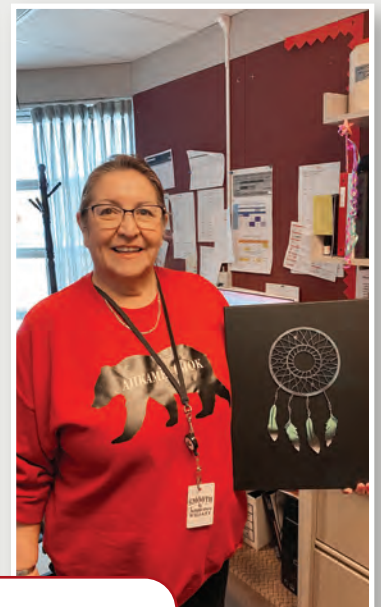
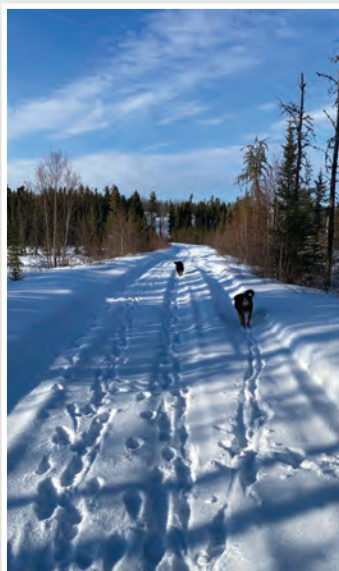




## CONFERENCES, EVENTS & OTHER ENGAGEMENTS



*Evermore Round Dance – November 2023*



*Canoe Lake Wellness Conference – March 2023*





*Canadian Mental Health Youth Summit Regina – March 2023*



*James Smith Cree Nation RCMP Ride – July 2023*



*James Smith Youth Culture Camp – August 2023*







*Grand Opening Child Sensory and Health Facilities Montreal Lake – August 2023*



*Prevention Institute Conference Advocate Keynote – October 2023*



*Ranch Ehrlo Pow Wow – August 2023*



*Ranch Ehrlo 3 Mile Run – May 2023*





**Ranch Ehrlo Southern Awards Night – Advocate’s Presentation of Award – June 2023**



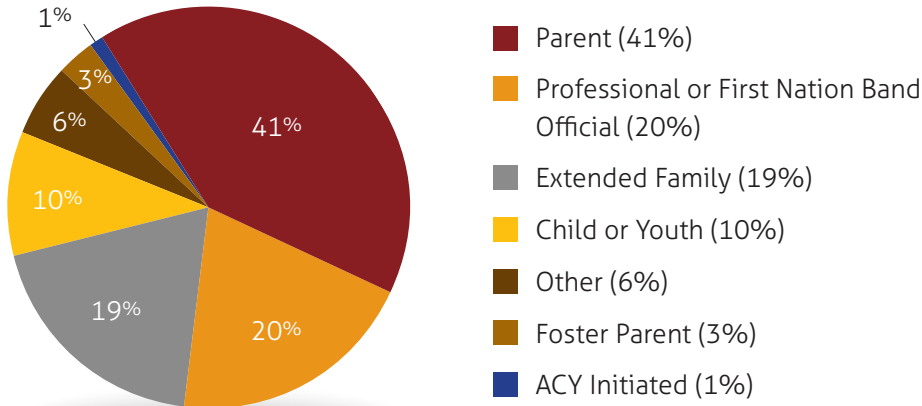
**Youth Matters Conference – October 2023**



**Indigenous Peoples Day Celebrations Saskatoon – June 2023**

# Intake Data

## WHO CONTACTED THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN 2023\*\*



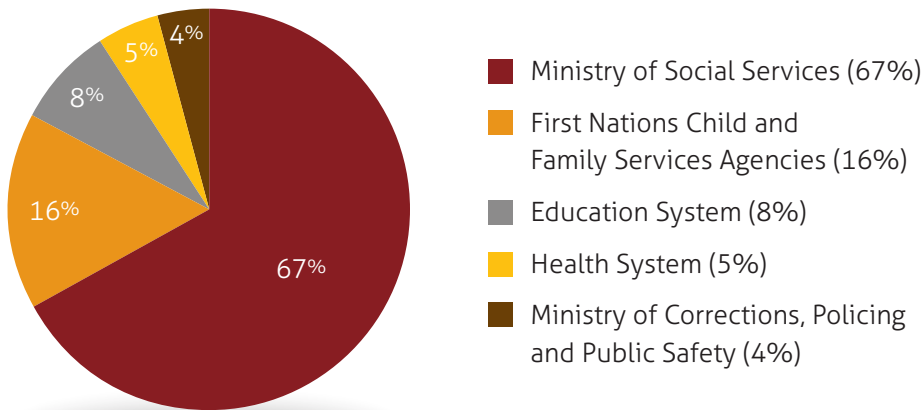
\* Advocacy files only.

Parent includes parents, stepparents, non-custodial parents, legal guardians, caregivers, alternate caregivers, and persons of sufficient interest.

Other includes interested third parties such as babysitters, neighbours, or anonymous callers.

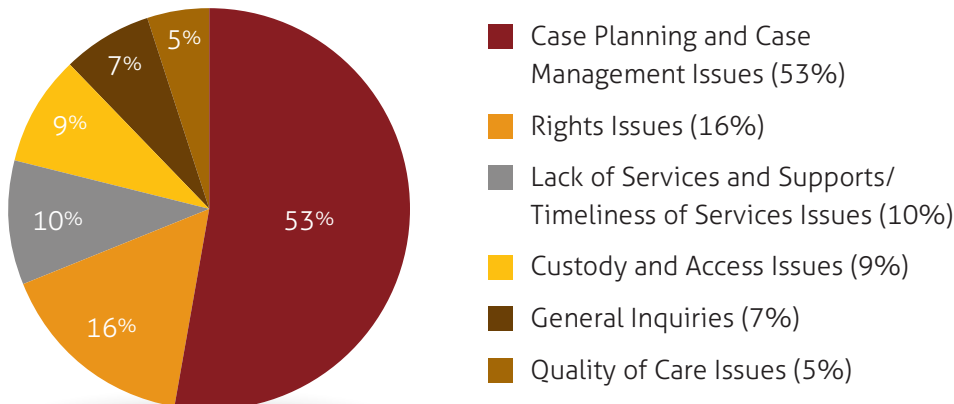
ACY Initiated is when our office initiates advocacy after becoming aware of a situation through means such as the media.

## MINISTRIES OR AGENCIES THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH RECEIVED CALLS ABOUT IN 2023\*\*



\* Advocacy files for ministries and agencies within our jurisdiction.

## MOST COMMON ISSUES FOR THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN 2023



General Inquiries represents issues that require a referral to another resource or agency.

Custody and Access Issues are beyond the mandate of our office. They also require referral to other resources or agencies.



Our office continued to see an upward trend in our file intake for 2023. We attribute this, in part, to our increased public education. Raising awareness about children's rights and the services our office provides has a direct correlation to increases in requests for advocacy to ensure children receive the services to which they are entitled.

Parents called us for assistance most frequently. However, our office also notes an increase in calls from professionals and First Nation band officials. Due to the complexity of cases and compounding issues facing families, professionals call to seek our expertise and advice pertaining to services and/or how to obtain supports for children when case planning.

While the majority of our files continue to involve the Ministry of Social Services and First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies, there were slight increases in the number of files involving the health system and the Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety.

More than half of our files in 2023 involved issues and/or disagreements with case planning and case management. Timeliness and/or lack of services and supports being provided to children and their families continued as a persistent issue. Notably, issues related to obtaining mental health and addiction services more than doubled over the preceding year. Further, issues regarding the lack of financial support or program denial/termination for young people over the age of 16 who are under the care of the Ministry of Social Services and/or First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies are highlighted.

There was also an increase in calls regarding quality-of-care issues. Within this was an increase in general concerns with residential placements for children in out-of-home care and increases in allegations of abuse and of caregivers being unable to meet the needs of children in their care.

Our office strives to find resolution for all concerns brought to our attention. For concerns that are not within our mandate, our office provides resources, research, and/or referrals to other agencies or organizations that can assist.



# Regional Advocacy



Over the years, and more notable since the COVID-19 pandemic, the concerns our office receives have become progressively more critical and complex. Many who contacted our office made reports about children and youth who were in crisis and expressed desperation for service. Often, there were inadequate or insufficient resources to meet the needs of the young people and families involved.

Throughout 2023, we were informed about:

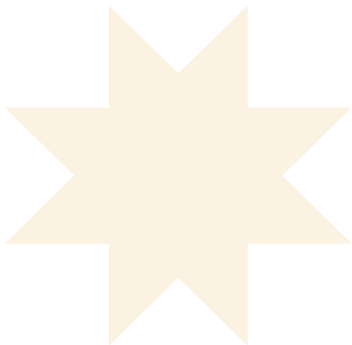
- families or caregivers struggling to provide for a child's basic needs due to the increased cost of living;
- families experiencing difficulties securing adequate housing;
- young people facing mental health challenges including suicide ideation, attempts and completions;
- addiction and drug overdoses for young people and their families;
- aggression or disruptive behaviours within classrooms and group homes;
- violence within family homes;
- children and youth being assaulted (physically and sexually); and,
- lack of residential placements for children and youth needing out-of-home care.

As previously highlighted in our 2022 Annual Report, our office once again found exceptionally high rates of staffing shortages in 2023, creating further barriers to accessing needed services. We are aware of the different initiatives that the ministries and community-based organizations are taking to actively recruit and retain staff and continue to monitor the situation. However, our office remains concerned about how the high volume of position vacancies is impacting the planning and services for children, youth, and their families.

Finding resolution to meet the immediate and acute service needs of children is the goal of regional advocacy. In many cases, the services and supports that the young person or the family required did not exist, forcing our office to creatively support the professionals involved to find alternate and, sometimes, less-than-ideal options.

We commend the efforts of the many case workers and service providers involved as the Advocate acknowledges the difficult circumstances and conditions these workers face in addressing the needs of the young people and families they serve. This work is difficult and includes barriers and significant challenges that are also systemic in nature.

As our office works to address the immediate service needs and demands of those we serve, we also continue to monitor and assess the chronic systemic issues and barriers that we encounter. In doing so, we hold government and child-serving systems accountable by highlighting gaps, suggesting potential solutions, and making recommendations that will result in the best possible outcomes for children and youth in Saskatchewan.



# Systemic Reviews, Investigations, and Advocacy

## WARRANT COMPLIANCE ACT AND REGULATIONS

In early 2023, the Advocate consulted with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety, and the Ministry of Social Services on *An Act respecting Warrant Enforcement* and its Regulations due to questions about the potential impact on children and youth. This Act authorizes the suspension of government benefits to, and increased powers to collect information on, prolific violent offenders with active warrants. Benefit administrators have the authority to exercise discretion if the termination of benefits would cause “significant hardship.”

At the outset of the legislative process, the government publicly stated that it recognized the importance of ensuring children and families would not be unfairly impacted by the suspension or termination of government benefits pursuant to this legislation. The Advocate was encouraged by the forethought given to mitigating any potential unintended consequences to children.

*[...] our office identified opportunities to strengthen assurances that the best interests of children would be a primary consideration in the legislative process [...]*

Nonetheless, our office identified opportunities to strengthen assurances that the best interests of children would be a primary consideration in the legislative process. These included the need to

explicitly identify potential impacts on children and youth as a mandatory factor to be considered when applying discretion to continue benefits, and to ensure that the benefits impacted would not include benefits to young people under *The Child and Family Services Act*. While this feedback was considered and reflected in the Regulations, the need to embed an appeal mechanism that could be engaged by children or families who are negatively impacted by decisions under this legislation was not included.

## SASKATCHEWAN CHILD ABUSE PROTOCOL

The Saskatchewan Child Abuse Protocol (Protocol)<sup>5</sup> provides education and guidance on steps all Saskatchewan citizens must take regarding suspicions of child abuse. While it is a signed commitment involving the Government of Saskatchewan, police, and various professionals and organizations, the Ministry of Social Services maintains and coordinates the Protocol.

In 2023 stakeholder engagements were conducted to review and update the Protocol. Our office provided a submission, with many of our suggested amendments incorporated. Of significance are the inclusion of a foundation of children’s rights as well as guidance regarding disclosures of historical abuse.

While other suggestions were not included in the update, such as a more robust focus on child abuse prevention, the Ministry of Social Services has advised this will be considered during the next review of the Protocol. Our office will continue to monitor and provide submissions during all future reviews.

<sup>5</sup> <https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/12574>





## SERIOUS OCCURRENCE REPORTING AND REVIEW POLICY

The Advocate continued to consult on the Ministry of Social Services' proposed amendments to its Serious Occurrence Reporting and Review Policy throughout 2023. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input and are encouraged by indications that the criteria for including sexual assaults among the injuries reviewed by the Ministry, and reported to our office, will be expanded. The Advocate is hopeful that this will sufficiently capture serious assaults that can cause significant harm to young people — whether physically, emotionally, or both.

(Refer to the Child Death and Injury Analysis section of this report for additional content specific to this policy.)

## PERSON OF SUFFICIENT INTEREST PROGRAM INVESTIGATION

In April 2023, the Advocate released a special investigation report entitled, *In Their Sufficient Interest?* which examined the Ministry of Social Services' Person of Sufficient Interest program. Pursuant to sections 23 and 37 of *The Child and Family Services Act*, an individual with a close connection to a child in care can be designated by the court as a person of sufficient interest (PSI) and be granted custody of the child. In these cases, the Ministry continues to financially support the PSI guardian to maintain the child's placement but has less involvement as the Ministry is no longer considered the legal parent. Year over year, there are more than 2,000 children and youth in the care of a person of sufficient interest in Saskatchewan.<sup>6</sup>

Although we support the intent of the program to offer young people long-term, stable placements with extended family or others with whom they have a close connection, our office has registered long-standing concerns with the Ministry regarding the

operation of this program. Our review confirmed and further identified issues with assessment and case management processes, challenges in addressing quality-of-care concerns, lack of contact with the child's biological family, loss of necessary services for older youth when a placement breaks down or they turn 18 years of age, and a lack of clarity in legislative provisions. These issues have significant implications for the fulfilment of the rights of children and youth.



As a result of our findings, the Advocate made eight recommendations to the Ministry of Social Services, including:

- incorporating an assessment of a child's best interests into permanency planning;
- improving staff competence in caregiver assessment;
- ensuring potential PSI guardians have a complete understanding of their roles and responsibilities;
- ensuring the child's voice is sought and heard;
- developing policy around legal representation for children in PSI court proceedings;
- preventing overcrowding in caregiver homes;
- completing a comprehensive, qualitative review of the PSI program; and,
- raising the age of support to young people in PSI care to 21.

The Ministry accepted all but the last recommendation. Nonetheless, the Ministry has made progress on several of the other recommendations.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Social Services. Child Welfare Statistics. (Available at: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first> accessed 29 January 2024)

The Advocate is encouraged that several policies have been developed or updated to enhance clarity and services within the PSI program. These include direction to assess that a PSI placement would meet the child's needs for safety, stability, and connection prior to recommending it to the court, enhancing resources and agreements for potential and existing PSI caregivers so that they may better understand their roles and responsibilities, and clarifying expectations that there will be an in-person meeting with both the caregiver and child at each annual review.

Our office has reviewed and provided feedback on these policies with additional suggestions to further strengthen certain areas or embed confirmation of assessments into documentation, such as those regarding the best interests of the child, the child's voice, and cultural planning for non-Indigenous children. We continue to assess whether the Ministry's actions to date will satisfy our recommendations.

Most notably, the Ministry launched a comprehensive review of the PSI program and has committed significant resources to this initiative. The Advocate acknowledges and appreciates the Ministry's invitation to consult and provide feedback on the scope and terms of reference of this review. We are encouraged that the scope of the Ministry's review has the potential to address most of the elements identified as necessary in our report.

However, our feedback identified some areas where the scope of the review could be strengthened to satisfy our recommendation, such as consideration of support for family connection even in circumstances where reunification is not the goal, of how the legal implications of PSI guardianship could be a barrier to implementation of *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, and of training, support and mechanisms for non-compliance for PSI guardians. The Ministry advised that it has taken our feedback into consideration, and the Advocate looks forward to the conclusions of its review.

We also look forward to further updates regarding the Ministry's progress on the remaining recommendations, for which it has committed to further exploration, but has yet to advise of tangible steps taken toward implementation. These include the determination of how conditions for family contact can be established as part of a PSI court order, reviewing policy on the overcrowding of foster homes when a foster parent becomes a PSI caregiver, ensuring staff competency in assessing extended family caregivers, and developing policy to consistently determine the readiness of biological families to be reunited with their children in PSI care.

The Advocate is discouraged that the Ministry has not accepted our eighth recommendation to extend services to children in PSI care from age 18 to age 21. Rather, the Ministry has advised that it may be considered as part of future amendments to *The Child and Family Services Act*. Our office continues to assert the critical importance of this recommendation and advocate for this change to be made as soon as possible. Declining this recommendation prevents the substantive numbers of young people in PSI care from receiving the supports and services they require to transition to adulthood. In contrast, long-term and permanent wards — who may also be in the care of extended family through Alternative Caregiver arrangements — continue to receive financial and other support from the Ministry until the age of 21, including funding for post-secondary education. Ceasing support for youth in PSI care at age 18 results in unfairness for both the young person and their caregiver. As indicated in our report, this lack of support is a primary reason that First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies do not support the PSI program, despite the fact that at least 87% of children in PSI care are Indigenous.<sup>7</sup> It is time that this disparity be rectified.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Social Services. Child Welfare Statistics. (Available at: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/putting-children-first> accessed 29 January 2024)

## USE OF PREFERRED FIRST NAME AND PRONOUNS BY STUDENTS POLICY

In 2023, the Advocate reviewed the provincial education policy, entitled *Use of Preferred First Name and Pronouns by Students*, which required schools to obtain parental/guardian consent for students under age 16 to use a preferred first name or pronouns that differed from those assigned at birth. This consent requirement applied only to changes related to the expression of a student's gender identity and did not apply to changes for any other purpose, such as the use of a nickname.

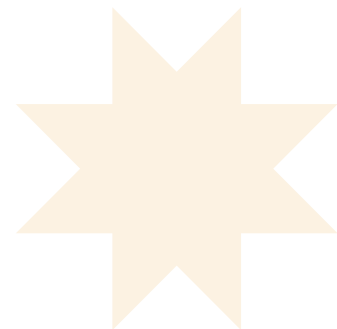
The scope of the Advocate's review included compelling the necessary information from the Ministry of Education as to the impetus for the policy's implementation, its process of development, with whom it consulted and whether it assessed the impact of the consent requirements on the rights of young people. The Advocate also engaged its own Child Rights Impact Assessment, reviewed the report and findings of the New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate on a similar policy in that province, and consulted our office's Youth Advisory Council.

Our report highlighted that children have a fundamental right to parental support and guidance, but that strict rules around consent could result in a violation of a young person's other rights under provincial, constitutional, and international human rights laws including, but not limited to, the right to non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and age.

On this basis, the Advocate made two broad recommendations. The first called for the policy to be amended to respect the preferred name and pronouns of students on the basis of demonstrated capacity to make personal decisions, rather than on age. The second recommendation was for the Ministry of Education to develop and implement a concrete plan to increase the professional supports available in schools to facilitate parental inclusion when in the best interests of the child.

Subsequent to the release of the Advocate's review, the government passed *The Education (Parents' Bill of Rights) Amendment Act, 2023* which embedded the consent requirement into law. To do so, the government invoked notwithstanding clauses in both *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code, 2018*. The government then rescinded the policy, stating that it was no longer necessary given the new law. Consequently, the government did not accept our first recommendation related to consent requirements and on this basis, the Advocate will be closing this recommendation. However, our office has encouraged the Ministry of Education to ensure school divisions and schools across the province are aware of their continuing legal obligations to respect the right of students aged 16 and over to non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity, which has not been extinguished by the amendments to *The Education Act, 1995*.

Our office sought clarity from the Ministry of Education on the status of our second recommendation related to student supports, however, had not yet received a response at the time of this report release. The Advocate will continue to engage with government on the importance of respecting the rights of children and youth within education, and the need to increase supports in schools to meet the social and emotional needs of students.









## INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INVESTIGATION

In December 2023, the Advocate released a special investigative report into provincial oversight of Saskatchewan's independent schools, titled *Making the Grade: Moving Forward in Independent Education*. The overarching focus of our review was on how the Ministry of Education assesses and ensures the protection of the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth within independent education.

Independent schools are an important part of the educational landscape in Saskatchewan and provide opportunities to access education in alignment with one's religious beliefs or educational philosophy. There is significant diversity among the various independent schools in Saskatchewan, and they do not all operate the same. Pursuant to *The Education Act, 1995*, *The Registered Independent Schools Regulations*, and *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code, 2018*, the Ministry of Education is responsible for ensuring that the independent education system in Saskatchewan offers its students a quality education that is comparable with that of the provincial system, and that respects their full range of human rights.

Subsequent to historical allegations of abuse within some independent schools coming to light in 2022, the Ministry of Education made several changes to regulations, policies, and practices. In *Making the Grade: Moving Forward in Independent Education*, the Advocate acknowledged the work undertaken by the Ministry to strengthen its oversight of all registered independent schools in the province. However, our report identified several issues regarding oversight and quality of service that require further improvement.

Based on the findings of this review, the Advocate issued 36 recommendations to the Government of Saskatchewan and the Ministry of Education. If fully implemented, these will:

- result in a continued improvement in oversight and accountability;

- better enable students to have a voice and raise serious concerns;
- ensure policy and practice are aligned with regulatory obligations;
- lead to improved monitoring of learning output; and,
- offer clarity on how the rights and interests of young people can be further supported in independent education, while balancing the rights and freedoms of the schools and respecting the need for choice in education.

In accordance with the Advocate's legislation, the Ministry of Education had an opportunity to review the report prior to its release and make representations on the facts presented. In its response, the Ministry indicated that it accepted the report, but required more time to review and contemplate the recommendations. The Advocate will continue to collaborate with the Ministry to highlight the importance of making these necessary changes.

### *Making the Grade: Moving Forward in Independent Education*

#### **Recommendation Themes:**

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#### **Inspection and Supervision**

#### **External Accountability and Participation Rights of Young People**

#### **Quality of Education**

- Learning Environment
- Teacher Qualifications
- Goals of Education
- Curriculum and Programming
- Data on Learning Output

#### **Non-Discrimination**

## UNCRC ARTICLE 29

### 1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.



## BULLYING AND PHYSICAL RESTRAINTS RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE

As reported in our 2022 Annual Report, the Advocate made recommendations to the Ministry of Education to include definitions of, and standardized safeguards for, bullying and the use of physical restraints within *The Education Act, 1995*. The Ministry of Education accepted these recommendations but advised that it intended to address these issues through policy rather than legislation. Although it is not pursuing legislative or regulatory change at this time, the Ministry indicated this may be a consideration in the future.

In 2023, the Ministry provided the Advocate with its action plan and timeline for exploring and implementing policy solutions to address our recommendations.

With respect to both bullying and the use of physical restraints, the Ministry advised that it would:

- review school division administrative procedures;
- seek feedback from school divisions and sector partners;
- finalize and distribute the policy and guidelines;
- have school divisions develop and implement administrative procedures aligned with the provincial guidelines; and,
- monitor implementation of the guidelines with regular follow up with school divisions and sector partners to determine progress and any necessary changes.

Although the Ministry intended to complete this work by September 2023, our office has not yet received an update on its progress.

Our office will continue to monitor the steps taken in this regard. However, the Advocate continues to assert that legislated safeguards for protection against bullying and the improper use of physical restraints are necessary to ensure policy compliance and consistent practices in all schools and school divisions. Especially in the use of restraints on a child, this step is critical for ensuring accountability and preventing potential abuses of rights that could occur if these safeguards are not in place.

## RESIDENTIAL GROUP HOME CARE – UPDATE

As outlined in our 2022 Annual Report, and in response to the recommendations rendered from our investigation into group homes and subsequent report entitled *Someone to Watch Over Us* released in 2021, the Ministry of Social Services continues to make significant improvements to the oversight of, and service provision by, group homes. Unfortunately, in 2023, our office continued to receive reports of concerns regarding the quality-of-care children in group homes are receiving.

This resulted in our office making an additional formal recommendation to the Ministry of Social Services. We also conducted policy reviews of multiple organizations currently providing residential group home care for children throughout the province. While, overall, there are adequate policies in place, lack of compliance with policy guidelines posed significant concern and resulted in children being placed at risk. Ensuring adherence to policy is especially important as the group home care model continues to be expanded in Saskatchewan. While it is encouraging that significant investment is being made by the Ministry to increase residential resources to meet the needs of the young people in care, staff training, monitoring, and oversight must continue to be an area of focus to ensure staff providing the care are actually following the policies that are in place.

### Recommendation made in 2023:

***That the Ministry of Social Services amend the Residential Services Manual, Section 4.0, Personal Care to include a requirement that all group homes develop and implement policy and procedural guidelines for caring for and responding to medically ill children, including guidelines for informing parents/family members.***

The Ministry also recognizes and acknowledges this, and it continues to be an area of focus for the Ministry's Operational Oversight Unit which offers support and direction to those providing the front-line group home care. In 2023, the Ministry invested additional human resources in this unit, in addition to other areas of the Ministry that support the overarching Group Home Governance initiative.

The Ministry also committed to reviewing their residential services policies for opportunities to strengthen the requirements for those providing group home care. In November 2022, our office met with Ministry officials specifically to consult on a quality-of-care definition and implementation of policy and practices to measure outcomes that meet the definition. This work continues.



Additional correspondence and meetings with the Ministry occurred throughout 2023 in relation to other matters impacting children in group home care, such as the use of window/door chimes in group homes to address younger children who may run from their group homes and increased contact and monitoring to meet the unique needs of medically fragile children who are non-verbal and/or non-ambulatory. The Ministry acknowledges the concerns raised and has committed to further review to determine ways to improve the safety of and mitigate the risk to those especially vulnerable children residing in group home care. Thus, the Advocate has reserved making formal recommendations on these matters at this time.

As their work continues, our office commends the Ministry for the work that has been completed to date and looks forward to continued collaboration until the spirit of both the informal and formal recommendations are fully achieved.





## DESPERATELY WAITING RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE

Throughout 2023, we continued to monitor the implementation of the 14 recommendations made in our 2022 report on the mental health and addictions system for children and youth, titled *Desperately Waiting*. As discussed in last year's Annual Report, the Government of Saskatchewan and both health authorities have accepted all 14 recommendations.

One of the major themes identified by stakeholders and participants in the process of our data gathering for this report was the need for systems to work together to ensure the most holistic and best outcomes for young people. As a result, our recommendations bridged the primary child-serving provincial systems, including health, education, child protection, and justice.

The Advocate is encouraged that, in 2023, the Government of Saskatchewan assembled a high-level, inter-ministerial oversight team consisting mainly of Assistant Deputy Ministers, as well as associated working groups, to coordinate responses to and implementation of the recommendations from *Desperately Waiting*. This work is chaired by the Special Advisor to Saskatchewan's Children and Youth Strategy.

A timeline has been developed within which the working groups will begin their consideration of and/or work on each recommendation. The government considers the work on eight out of 14 recommendations to be "active." Work on the remaining six recommendations is reportedly scheduled to begin in 2024, 2025, or as late as 2026. Although the Advocate acknowledges that system change takes time, many of the issues identified in our report have persisted for decades and have been identified by other reports prior to *Desperately Waiting*. While the Advocate is encouraged by the work that is occurring to address the recommendations, the title of *Desperately Waiting* was meant to reflect the reality that young people have waited long enough for change and that the time to act is now. To this end, our office is

committed to continuing to consult with government and health authority officials to break down any barriers to implementation and make progress as soon as possible.

Over the course of 2023 and into January 2024, our office continued meeting with the oversight team to monitor progress on the active recommendations, and we are pleased that significant action has occurred in several areas.

Most notably, in response to our recommendation on the need for middle-tier care, the government announced the development of three new residential homes to support youth with significant mental health or addictions needs. These homes are intended to fill the service gap identified in *Desperately Waiting* that existed for young people who do not meet the criteria for acute psychiatric inpatient treatment, or who are being discharged, but whose needs are too great to be managed at home. The first of these homes, named Garden of Hope, opened in Saskatoon in December 2023 in partnership with the Government of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Health Authority, and EGADZ. As we continue to assess whether the development of these resources will satisfy our recommendation, the Advocate is optimistic about the positive impact that could result for youth and families in need of this service.

### *Desperately Waiting* Recommendation #8

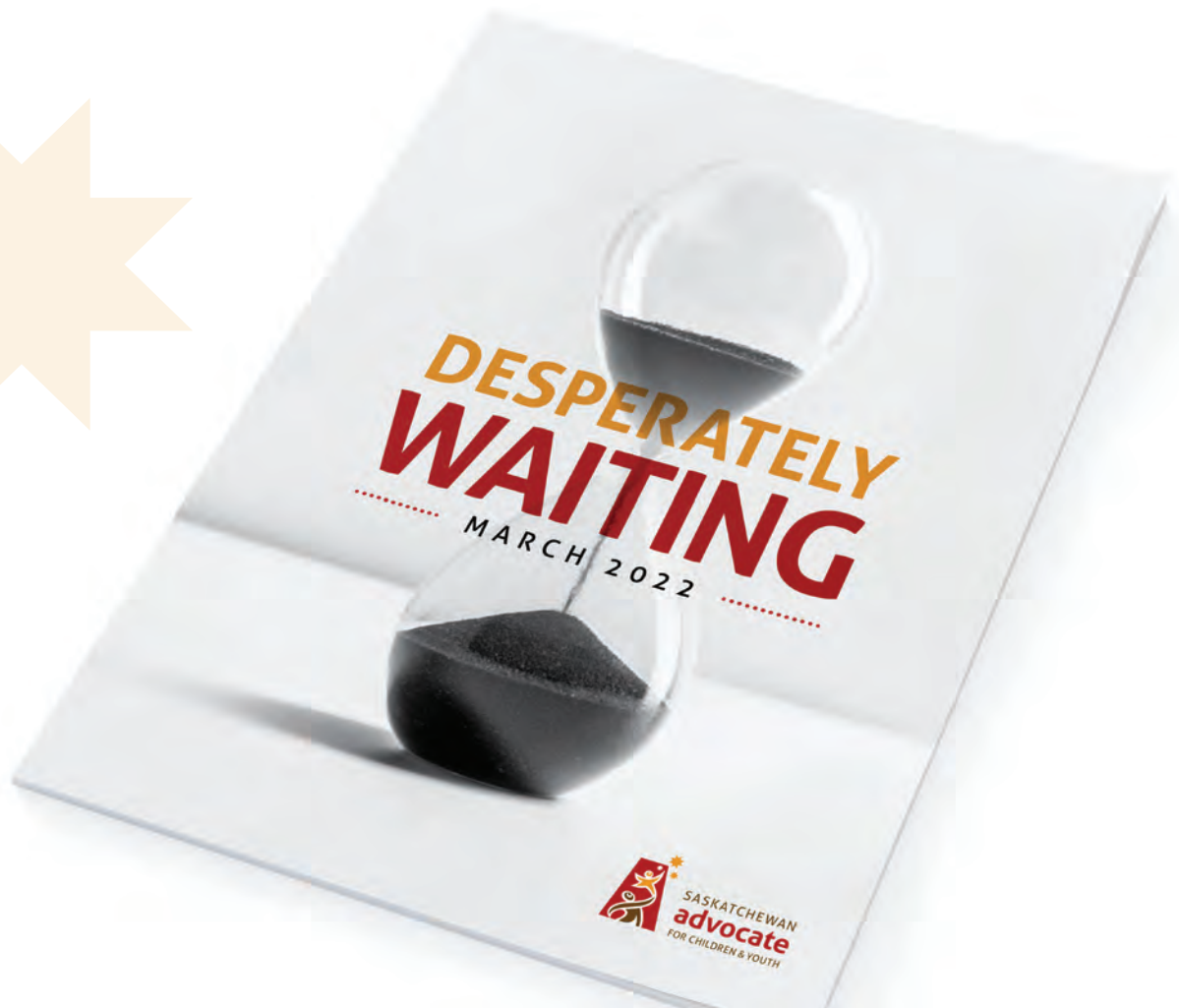
*The Ministry of Health and both Health Authorities develop a 'middle-tier' care option to provide therapeutic residential placements for youth with mental health needs that are greater than can be managed in their home and/or with outpatient services, but who do not meet the criteria for acute psychiatric inpatient treatment.*

Although wait times for community mental health counselling in urban areas and specialty services such as child psychiatry and child psychology remain a challenge and continue to be impacted by human resource shortages, we note that the government is actively endeavouring to recruit specialists to our province. Additionally, significant investments in the expansion of Rapid Access Counselling, as coordinated by Family Services Saskatchewan, to children and youth in 17 communities across Saskatchewan will help meet the immediate needs of young people by providing single-session counselling while they await access to ongoing services. However, we continue to have deep concerns about young people not receiving services as well as the importance of ongoing counselling with a consistent counsellor as was emphasized by the young people who participated in *Desperately Waiting*. Accordingly, we continue to advocate for the government to continue to prioritize decreasing wait times for these services.

### ***Desperately Waiting Recommendation #2***

***The Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority satisfy, without further delay, the Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan 'Recommendation #2' which states:***

***'Decrease wait times for mental health and addictions treatments, services and supports to meet or exceed public expectations, with early focus on counselling and psychiatry supports for children and youth.'***



Another area in which progress has been encouraging is with respect to our recommendation to expand the Mental Health Capacity Building (MHCB) program across the province. The MHCB program offers mental health promotion and the development of mental health literacy among students and school staff, as well as supports student connection with community resources and supports. Since the release of *Desperately Waiting*, MHCB has expanded to an additional five schools, which brings the total number of participating schools to ten across nine school divisions. The government oversight team has reported plans to expand the program to another five schools over the next year, with further expansion into the future.

### *Desperately Waiting* Recommendation #3

*The Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and the Saskatchewan Health Authority expand the Mental Health Capacity Building initiative across the province.*

The overarching recommendation rendered from the findings in *Desperately Waiting* was a provincial Children's Strategy that could bring sectors together to address and improve social and environmental factors negatively impacting the well-being of young people. As discussed in our 2022 Annual Report, the government released *Saskatchewan's Children and Youth Strategy: Strong Families. Strong Communities. A Better Quality of Life* and appointed a Special Advisor to oversee its implementation. The Advocate has been optimistic that this Strategy was a good first step in that it collated a helpful list of resources across the province. However, the strategy lacks the incorporation of structural elements to provide both benchmark targets for moving forward and accountability measures to show progress. In January 2023, the Advocate brought together Deputy Ministers, the Saskatchewan Health Authority CEO and its officials, and other senior officials to discuss the Strategy and highlight ways that it could be strengthened to show results. The comprehensive and high-level representation at this meeting was encouraging.

Updates on progress under *Saskatchewan's Children and Youth Strategy* were provided to the Advocate and officials by the oversight team in January 2024. The Advocate heard about important programs and initiatives falling under the five theme areas outlined in the Strategy. However, still lacking are the structural components required to provide a cohesive direction tying these programs together, including:

- clearly identified priorities and targets (immediate, medium, and long-term);
- specific key actions to be taken to achieve priorities and targets;
- benchmark data regarding child and youth well-being in priority areas; and,
- indicators to measure progress against initial benchmarks to reveal outcomes and actual impacts of any actions taken under the Strategy on the lives of children and youth.





The Advocate is discouraged that, although the oversight team has taken note of this feedback, no additional information could be provided.

Despite these omissions, Saskatchewan is one of the few jurisdictions across the country to commit to a formalized strategy for children and youth. However, a comprehensive strategy must include the necessary quantifiable outcome measurements to ensure the priorities set out are doing what is intended. Our office is still optimistic that the government's commitment will build upon this momentum to move toward the most robust and action-oriented strategy possible. We look forward to opportunities to support and monitor this important work.

***Desperately Waiting***  
**Recommendation #14**

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***The Government of Saskatchewan develop a 'Children's Strategy' to address and improve prevention related to the social and environmental factors that negatively impact the well-being of children and youth. This strategy must include the participation of all child-serving ministries and a designated official to lead the process.***



## SYSTEMIC ADVOCACY WITH THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCATES

The Advocate continued to serve as President of the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA) throughout 2023.<sup>8</sup> Members of the CCCYA work together to identify areas of mutual concern and address issues impacting the interests and well-being of children and youth across the country. This systemic advocacy at the national level increases awareness of issues impacting young people in Saskatchewan and elevates our efforts to achieve system improvements for better outcomes for children and youth.

In 2023, the CCCYA continued to monitor the Children's Health Study conducted by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. As reported in our 2022 Annual Report, the CCCYA's submission to the Standing Committee emphasized the importance of applying child rights principles when conducting its work and incorporating them within its recommendations. Although originally expected to complete its work in 2023, the Standing Committee is still in the process of considering a draft report.

In her role as CCCYA President, the Advocate continued to engage with Canada's reporting cycle under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with participation in a meeting with the Forum of Ministers on Human Rights (FMHR). The FMHR meets every two years and is made up of federal, provincial, and territorial Ministers. Its mandate is to share information and discuss human rights at the ministerial level, as well as provide direction to other levels of government, including the Senior Officials Committee Responsible for Human Rights (SOCHR), which is made up of Assistant Deputy Ministers and was discussed in detail in our 2022 Annual Report.

The CCCYA's participation in this year's FMHR meeting was important as the agenda included discussion of the UNCRC and implementation of the 2022 Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Advocate focused on the need for better collaboration between all levels of government in implementing the measures recommended in the Concluding Observations, including the advancement of accountability mechanisms, such as a National Children's Strategy.

The Advocate followed up this meeting with a **letter to the Prime Minister** and Minister officials<sup>9</sup> on behalf of the CCCYA, marking the one-year anniversary of the 2022 Concluding Observations and calling upon the Government of Canada to develop and make public a detailed Action Plan to effectively implement its many obligations under the UNCRC. The Advocate also wrote to the Government of Saskatchewan, calling upon our provincial government to do the same with respect to the recommendations of the Committee that relate to matters under provincial jurisdiction.

In December 2023, the Government of Saskatchewan was selected to co-chair, alongside the federal government, the Continuing Committee of Officials on Human Rights (CCOHR) and Senior Officials Committee Responsible for Human Rights (SOCHR) conference in 2025.<sup>10</sup> This conference will include discussion of any progress made — or lack thereof — in implementing government's human rights obligations. The Advocate emphasizes the importance of and need for Saskatchewan, as co-chair, to demonstrate commitment to the rights of children under the UNCRC by coming to the table with evidence of progress in implementing the Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>8</sup> The Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates is an association of independent, appointed Children's Advocates, Representatives, and Ombudsman in the provinces and territories who hold explicit legislated mandates to protect the rights of children and youth in Canada through systemic advocacy. (cccy.ca)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cccya.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CCCYA-Letter-to-the-Right-Honourable-Justin-Trudeau-re-UNCRC-2022-Concluding-Observations.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Government of Saskatchewan. Media Release (11 December 2023). Human Rights Day: Saskatchewan Named Co-Chair of Federal-Provincial-Territorial Human Rights Conference. (<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2023/december/11/saskatchewan-named-co-chair-on-federal-provincial-territorial-committees>)



Through 2023, on behalf of the CCCYA, the Advocate also continued to engage with the Office of Senator Rosemary Moodie in the development of a National Children's Strategy. Building on the 2022 roundtable discussions and submissions made by stakeholders, including the CCCYA, Senator Moodie drafted **Bill S-282 An Act respecting a national strategy for children and youth**.<sup>11</sup> The CCCYA was invited to provide feedback on the draft bill. Bill S-282 was introduced in the Senate and went through its first reading in November 2023.

Positively, the bill reflects elements put forward by the CCCYA throughout the engagement process, such as including the full implementation of the UNCRC into the strategy, as well as identifying outcomes and quantifiable indicators, resources required for implementation, and mechanisms of monitoring. It also includes a requirement to consult with children and youth, Indigenous organizations, and

other levels of government in the development of the strategy. The CCCYA is also encouraged that its feedback on the importance of including reference to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* — and Canada's commitment to the Act — was incorporated into the bill.

Bill S-282 did not integrate all input put forth by the CCCYA, such as the need to more clearly articulate and encourage provinces and territories to adopt their own plans and strategies as recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 2022 Concluding Observations. Nonetheless, this bill represents an important step in safeguarding sustainability in the protection of children's rights at the federal level and providing direction in addressing the issues and service gaps that children face across Canada. The CCCYA will continue to monitor its progress and contribute to the process as the opportunity arises.

<sup>11</sup><https://www.parl.ca/LegisInfo/en/bills?keywords=bill%20s-282>



# Child Death and Injury Analysis



The Advocate is formally notified by both the Ministry of Social Services and the Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety when a child or youth is critically injured or passes away while in receipt of (or having recently received) services under their mandates. In 2023 our office was notified of 40 deaths and 49 critical injuries/incidents.

Our office typically receives more notifications out of the child welfare system than the justice system, as the Ministry of Social Services supports a significantly larger number of children and youth. The nature of notifications received in 2023 indicates that struggles with mental health, problematic substance use, and violence continue to be persistent challenges faced by young people in both systems.

*[...] struggles with mental health, problematic substance use, and violence continue to be persistent challenges faced by young people [...]*

In particular, suicide attempts and deaths by suicide accounted for the majority of notifications received and addressed by our office in 2023 (43%). Risk of suicide has been a priority issue for our office for several years. However, tragically, 2023 saw a marked increase in suicide attempts, with more than three times as many being reported as critical injuries than in previous years — primarily among youth involved with the justice system. Several of these young people experienced multiple attempts within the year, demonstrating the complexity of

the issues they face and the significant effort and resources required by all child-serving systems to meet their needs.

Since 2022, at our request, our office continued to receive additional notifications from the Ministry of Social Services of suicide attempts and sexual assaults that would not otherwise be reported as 'critical injuries' due to the criteria defined by the Ministry (as per their Serious Occurrence Reporting and Review Policy mentioned earlier in this report). This resulted in our office being notified of an additional 48 attempted suicides and 39 sexual assaults experienced by children and youth in care. (Note: Sexual assaults ranged across a spectrum of severity, and some were historical disclosures, having been experienced prior to the young person coming into care.)

The rationale for our request for these notifications was two-fold. First, we wanted to assess the service provisions and supports these young people received post-incident and advocate for any services required to mitigate future harm. Second, as these incidences are not comprehensively reviewed by the Ministry's Quality Assurance Unit, we sought to determine whether systemic issues exist that require addressing to improve prevention efforts. (See our 2022 Annual Report for further context.)

## ADDITIONAL NOTIFICATIONS FROM THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL SERVICES 2022-2023

Year	Suicide Attempts	Sexual Assaults
2022	52	49
2023	48	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>88</b>



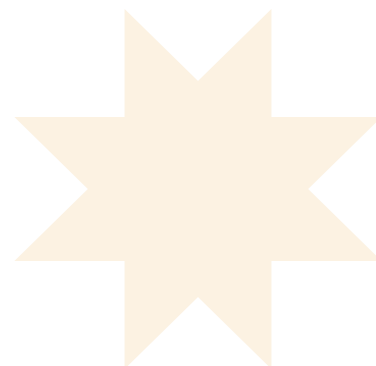
As is the practice with every notification received, our office responds to each of these additional cases to determine if the acute needs were being met in services provided and/or whether advocacy services were required. As reported last year, in the majority of cases, our advocacy follow-up confirmed that Ministry caseworkers were responding appropriately in the aftermath of these injuries to provide the young person with the supports and planning they required to recover. The primary gaps identified by our advocacy team related to caseworkers and health professionals collectively struggling to find appropriate services and/or resources in the community to support young people with significant mental health challenges and/or suicidal ideation.

As part of our monitoring of these notifications, our office continued to assess the circumstances present in these additional notifications received throughout 2022 and 2023 to determine whether there are further systemic themes to be identified and/or lessons to be learned to inform prevention efforts. Initial themes that were identified within the data last year appear to remain consistent, including risks related to age, excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs, cognitive challenges, residence within a group home, and previous victimization.

Continued collaboration will occur with the Ministry of Social Services to determine how to best meet both the immediate and long-term needs of these very vulnerable young people.

## 2023 CHILD DEATH DATA

Ethnicity	Deaths	Total: 40
First Nations and Métis <sup>12</sup>	32	
Non-First Nations or Métis	5	
Unknown	3	
Age	Deaths	Total: 40
0 to 5	18	
6 to 10	5	
11 to 15	5	
16 to 18	10	
19+	2	
Type of Service at Time of Death <sup>13,14</sup>	Deaths	
CFS – In Care	7	
CFS – Receiving Other Services	19	
CFS – Received Services Prior to Death (In Care or Other)	11	
Corrections – Custody (Open and Secure)	0	
Corrections – Community	6	
Corrections – Received Services Prior to Death (Custody or Community)	0	



<sup>12</sup> This category includes children and youth who are Métis, status, and non-status First Nations.

<sup>13</sup> The Advocate is notified of the death of a child or youth who is currently receiving, or has recently received, child and family services (CFS) from the Ministry of Social Services or by a provincially delegated First Nations Child and Family Services agency. CFS – “Other Services” may include active investigations into neglect and abuse, in-home support services, support services to older youth transitioning to independence, and children and youth living in the care of a “person having sufficient interest” pursuant to section 23 of *The Child and Family Services Act*. The Advocate is also notified of deaths of young people currently receiving, or who have recently received, services from the Ministry of Corrections, Policing & Public Safety (Corrections). These notifications include youth who are in custody (either sentenced or remanded) and those serving a community sentence.

<sup>14</sup> The numbers under this heading may total higher than the number of deaths, as some youth may be dually involved with both CFS and Corrections.

## 2023 CAUSES OF DEATH

Cause	Total: 40
Cause Not Available Yet <sup>15</sup>	16
Undetermined	1
Suicide	7
Medically Fragile <sup>16</sup>	4
Shooting/(Suspected Homicide)	1
Motor Vehicle Collision/Crash	0
Hit By Motor Vehicle	2
Fire	0
Illness	2
Drowning	1
Drug/Alcohol Toxicity (Accidental)	5
Other	1 <sup>17</sup>

### Update – 2022 Causes of Deaths

When our 2022 Annual Report was published, we did not have information on the cause of death for 12 of the 41 deaths we were notified of that year. We have now received confirmation on the cause of death in six of these cases.

The deaths of two additional infants in 2022 were categorized by the Saskatchewan Coroners Service to be of “Undetermined” cause. Although the Coroner could not definitively determine how or why these children died, sleep-associated risk factors were noted to be present at the time of death in both cases. Both infants were in parental care. One 11-year-old child in the care of a person of sufficient interest died by suicide. A 14-year-old died of pneumonia while residing in a group home. A four-year-old medically fragile child passed away while in parental care as a result of complications of their condition. An 18-year-old youth died by accidental drug toxicity. This youth was not receiving services at the time of their death.

We are still awaiting official information on the cause of six deaths that occurred in 2022.

<sup>15</sup> When available, information reported regarding the cause of death is determined from Coroner’s Reports, which are pending for a number of 2023 deaths. In the absence of a Coroner’s Report, cause of death may be obtained from information reported by the Ministry involved or other reliable sources. The category of “Cause Not Available Yet” is used when the Advocate has not yet received reliable information on the cause of death. This is to be distinguished from the category of “Undetermined”, which is used by the Coroner where the cause of death has been reviewed by the Coroner but cannot be determined.

<sup>16</sup> The term “medically fragile” is used by the Advocate to describe the death of a child or youth that was caused by a pre-existing condition or circumstances that were likely to lead to their death. This is different than the category of “illness”, which refers to a new or unexpected natural disease.

<sup>17</sup> This youth died as a result of a weather-related accident.

## 2023 CHILD CRITICAL INJURY/INCIDENT DATA

Ethnicity	Critical Injuries	
First Nations and Métis <sup>18</sup>	33 <sup>19</sup>	
Non-First Nations or Métis	1	
Unknown	0	
Age	Critical Injuries	Total: 49
0 to 5	1	
6 to 10	0	
11 to 15	12	
16 to 18	34	
19+	2	
Type of Service at Time of Injury <sup>20,21</sup>	Critical Injuries	
CFS – In Care	13 <sup>22</sup>	
CFS – Receiving Other Services	0	
CFS – Received Services Prior to Death (In Care or Other)	1	
Corrections – Custody (Open and Secure)	5 <sup>23</sup>	
Corrections – Community	37 <sup>24</sup>	
Corrections – Received Services Prior to Death (Custody or Community)	0	

## 2023 CAUSES OF CRITICAL INJURIES/INCIDENTS

Cause	Total: 49
Suicide Attempt	31 <sup>25</sup>
Self-Harm	0
Motor Vehicle Collision/Crash	0
Hit by Motor Vehicle	0
Drug/Alcohol Toxicity (Accidental)	0
Assault with a Knife or Blade	8
Shooting	3
Physical Assault - Other	2 <sup>26</sup>
Sexual Assault	1
Burn	1
Fall	0
Suspected Non-accidental and/or Child Abuse	0
Other Accident	0
Illness	1
Other	2 <sup>27</sup>



<sup>18</sup> This category includes children and youth who are Métis, Status and Non-Status First Nations.

<sup>19</sup> In 2023, there were 49 critical injuries involving 34 children and youth. 7 Indigenous youth (aged 11-15 & 16-18) experienced multiple injuries.

<sup>20</sup> The Advocate is notified of the death of a child or youth who is currently receiving, or has recently received, child and family services (CFS) from the Ministry of Social Services or by a provincially delegated First Nations Child and Family Services agency. CFS – “Other Services” may include active investigations into neglect and abuse, in-home support services, support services to older youth transitioning to independence, and children and youth living in the care of a “person having sufficient interest” pursuant to section 23 of The *Child and Family Services Act*. The Advocate is also notified of deaths of young people currently receiving, or who have recently received, services from the Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety (Corrections). These notifications include youth who are in custody (either sentenced or remanded) and those serving a community sentence.

<sup>21</sup> This total is 7 higher than the total number of injuries, as 7 youth involved in notifications received from Corrections were also in the care of the Ministry of Social Services.

<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Social Services notified our office of 7 injuries/incidents involving 6 youth in care that met its criteria for notification. Corrections also notified us of an additional 6 injuries involving 5 youth in care. 1 of these youth was also in custody with Corrections at the time of their injury. Therefore, this youth is also counted in that category.

<sup>23</sup> This number includes 3 youth, 1 of whom experienced 3 suicide attempts while in custody. This youth is also a ward with the Ministry of Social Services (i.e. “in care”). One of their injuries is also included within the number reflected for “CFS – in care”.

<sup>24</sup> This number includes 26 youth, some who experienced multiple critical injuries in 2023.

<sup>25</sup> This number involves 19 youth, some of whom attempted suicide multiple times.

<sup>26</sup> This includes one youth whose injury occurred at the end of 2022, but our office was notified by Corrections in early 2023.

<sup>27</sup> This includes one youth who experienced an injury as a result of jumping off a roof, and another youth who did not experience an injury, but was charged in the death of another individual.

# Looking Ahead

In 2023 our office dealt with unprecedented case complexities, facing the reality that services for children and youth too often fail to meet their needs. This is noted particularly in education, health, and social services. While investments have occurred, these have not been sufficient to meet the significant needs and challenges young people are facing. Without much-needed benchmarks, it is unnecessarily difficult to identify specific deficiencies and to pursue targeted improvements. It is the Advocate's hope that, in the coming year, our office can help promote and influence child-serving entities to invest adequate resources and develop benchmarks to measure and achieve better outcomes for the young people of our province.

This will include focusing on our outstanding recommendations and commitments made by government to improve services in mental health, addictions, child welfare (especially group home care) and various other areas impacting children and youth, such as bullying and restraints in schools. We look forward to continued collaboration with ministries involved to fully implement plans to meet the intent of our recommendations.

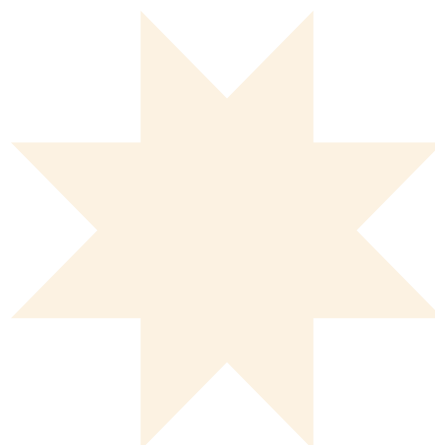




# Budget



Non-Statutory Expenditures	2022-23 Budget	2023-24 Budget
Personal Services	\$2,089,000	\$2,122,000
Contractual Services	\$474,380	\$490,705
Advertising, Printing and Publishing	\$39,040	\$52,580
Travel and Business	\$105,270	\$99,265
Supplies and Services	\$8,580	\$9,810
Capital Assets	\$22,730	\$12,640
Budgetary Total	\$2,739,000	\$2,787,000
Statutory Expenditures		
Personal Services	\$239,000	\$239,000
Statutory Total	\$239,000	\$239,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,978,000</b>	<b>\$3,026,000</b>





# Advocate and Staff

(at December 31, 2023)

## **Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth**

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Jacqueline Peters

## **Director, Investigations**

Connie Braun

## **Executive Administrative Assistant**

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## **Manager, Human Resources**

Wanda George

## **Manager, Finance and Administration**

Caroline Sookocheff

## **Director, Systemics and Research**

Marci Macomber

## **Director, Communications**

Karen Topolinski

## **Investigators**

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Virginia Lane

## **Regional Advocates**

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Sarah Hauser

Darren Hubick

Ashley Huysamen

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