

November 19, 2014

Federal government urged to reduce number of Aboriginal children in care

SASKATOON - The Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA) is urging the federal government and provincial/ territorial governments to take immediate action to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care in child welfare systems across Canada.

The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth is a member of this national organization.

“Aboriginal children in care often live in poverty and have poorer health status, lag in educational outcomes, and are too often the victims of sexual exploitation and violence,” said Irwin Elman, President of the CCCYA. “We see the devastation of intergenerational trauma in Canada’s Aboriginal peoples on a daily basis, and this is a national tragedy.”

Bob Pringle, Saskatchewan’s Advocate for Children and Youth, sees this issue as particularly critical for Saskatchewan, as most of the children in care are of Aboriginal ancestry. “Although there is still much work to do, the provincial government has made considerable strides to address issues in the child welfare system in Saskatchewan,” he said. “We need the federal government to take a greater role than it has to date in order to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care.”

This year marks the 25th Anniversary of the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Canada became a signatory to the UNCRC in May 1990 and ratified the document in 1991. The Convention enshrines a broad range of rights to health, safety, well-being and education for children. Aboriginal children and youth are one of the most vulnerable populations of children in Canada with significant gaps in outcomes between this population of children and other Canadian children and youth.

A particular area of concern is the vast overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and youth in the child welfare system. Concerted and dedicated action and special effort is required to consider and address the rights and well-being of this group of children and youth. This has been a long-standing focus of the Council’s attention.

In the absence of a national child and youth advocate, the CCCYA sees an opportunity for the Government of Canada and the Council of the Federation to use the 25th Anniversary of the UNCRC as a starting point to develop a comprehensive strategy that will lead to fewer Aboriginal children and youth in government care.

In August 2014, the CCCYA sent a letter to the chair of the Council of the Federation urging the premiers to reflect on the tragedy demonstrated in the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children in care and to help develop specific national solutions to this problem. The CCCYA is awaiting a response to this letter.

The CCCYA proposed four recommendations:

- A national initiative to measure and report on child welfare, education and health outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth. This will require creation and coordination of data, and clear assignment of roles and accountabilities
- Creation of a national Aboriginal children and youth participation initiative, with training on child and youth rights, leadership, voice, and civic participation, to fully implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and reduce vulnerability
- That a special conference of Federal/Provincial/Territorial First Ministers, with Aboriginal leaders, and child and youth delegates, be convened to receive a report on outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth. A national plan to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth would be a desired outcome of this process
- Creation of a statutory officer independent from the Parliament of Canada, but accountable to the Parliament, a National Children's Commissioner with particular emphasis on Aboriginal children and youth and the national dimension of the work on programs, evaluation and outcomes.¹

The CCCYA is an alliance of the eleven children's advocates from across Canada who have mandates to support the rights of children and youth and to promote youth voice.

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Attached Backgrounder: Information on Aboriginal Children in Care

To read the CCCYA letter to the Council of the Federation:

http://www.cccya.ca/Images/english/pdf/Council_of_Federation_Secretariat_Aug_2014-EN.pdf

¹ Quebec (La Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse du Québec) accepts the recommendation as long as the mandate of the national commissioner respects the constitutional distribution of legislative powers.

BACKGROUNDER

INFORMATION on ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN CARE

British Columbia – As of March 2014 of the 8,169 children and youth in care, about 52 per cent were Aboriginal. Aboriginal children are far more likely to come into contact with the child welfare system and are 7.6 times more likely to come into care than non-Aboriginal children. Of this number, 4,170 were under a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) or permanent guardianship of the province – of CCOs 2,696 or 65 per cent were Aboriginal and 1,474 or 35 per cent were non-Aboriginal.

Alberta – As of March 2014, there were 5,092 Aboriginal children and youth in care (out of a total of 7,431 children and youth in care overall). Aboriginal children and youth make up approximately 10 per cent of the general child population but make up 69 per cent of the children and youth in care.

Saskatchewan – As of March 31, 2014, there were 5,650 children in out of home care in the province. Of this total 2,844 were in the care of the Ministry (wards), 1,674 were in the custody of a caregiver (non wards) and 1,132 were children in care of a First Nations Agency (both wards and non wards). It is estimated that of the total number of children in out of home care in Saskatchewan, 83 per cent are Aboriginal.

Manitoba – As of March 31, 2014, there were 10,293 children in care in Manitoba; 8,960, or 87 per cent, were of Aboriginal descent.

Ontario – The Ministry of Children and Youth Services does not collect information with respect to the ethnicity or Aboriginal origins of children in care of Children's Aids Societies (CASs). In 2013/14, there were 2,097 children in care of Aboriginal CASs and 14,338 children in care of non-Aboriginal CASs. The number of children in the care of Aboriginal CASs, expressed as a share of the total number of children in care of all CASs, has increased each year from 2009-10 (10.6 per cent) to 2013-14 (12.8 per cent). [Note that Aboriginal CASs may have non-Aboriginal children in their care, and non-Aboriginal CASs may have Aboriginal children in their care.]

Québec – Statistics on the number of Aboriginal children in care are not available.

Nova Scotia – As of April 2014, Nova Scotia had a total of 1,160 children/youth in care, of which 261 were Aboriginal children/ and youth, representing 23 per cent of the total. Thirty-eight of those 261 were in temporary care and 223 in permanent care.

Newfoundland and Labrador – As of March 2014, Newfoundland and Labrador had a total of 885 children and youth in care, of which 315 were Aboriginal children and youth representing 35 per cent of the total children and youth in care. Of these 315 Aboriginal children and youth in care, 165 were in continuous custody.

New Brunswick – As of March 31, 2014, approximately 3,000 Aboriginal children and youth receive services from First Nations agencies. A total of 227 of these children are in care, meaning 7.6 per cent of Aboriginal children and youth receiving services are in care with 100 of them in permanent care.

New Brunswick corporate reports do not distinguish between ethnicity/culture. Aboriginal children living outside their community may be receiving services from a non-Aboriginal agency.

Yukon – In 2013/14, there were an estimated 153 children and youth in continuous care and 80 in temporary care. The Advocate's Office estimates that approximately 80 per cent of the children and youth in care in the Yukon are Aboriginal with the number being higher in the communities (regions outside of Whitehorse).

Nunavut – As of September 30, 2014, there were a total of 304 children in care in Nunavut. Of this total, 287 (94%) were Inuit and 17 (6%) were non-Inuit. It is important to note, that unlike many other Canadian jurisdictions the majority of the population in Nunavut is Inuit. Inuit represent approximately 85% of the territory's total population.