

**Advocate for Children and Youth responds to report to
Canada's premiers on Aboriginal children in care**

SASKATOON – Last week, the Council of the Federation, the national organization of Canada's premiers, discussed the report they had commissioned examining the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system. This report, *Aboriginal Children in Care: Report to Canada's Premiers*, has since been released to the public.

Bob Pringle, Saskatchewan's Advocate for Children and Youth, was pleased to see that the report profiled promising practices in three areas he has highlighted previously: developing strategies to address the social and economic issues that are the root causes of abuse and neglect; improving prevention and early intervention supports for Aboriginal children and families; and supporting child welfare staff through standards and training to deliver high-quality child welfare services.

During his tenure as advocate, Pringle has repeatedly stated that advocacy and investigations by his office show that government services are getting to children too late. "By the time their families come to the attention of the Ministry of Social Services or First Nations Agencies, they are facing many challenges that are difficult to overcome," he says. "We need to focus on prevention and early intervention, before families get so overwhelmed and vulnerable."

Factors that place children at risk include poverty-related conditions, mental illness, addictions, family violence, and disabilities. "Children often have multiple risk factors which layer on their lives, violating their rights and putting them further and further from reaching their full potential."

Pringle was disappointed that the federal government did not participate in developing and releasing this report, despite invitations from the premiers, even though they are responsible for funding child welfare services on reserve.

In terms of progress in Saskatchewan, Pringle said that the provincial government is making progress in addressing these issues. The number of children in care has been declining over the last five years and more children who cannot be cared for by their parents are being cared for by extended family members. Ministry staff in Saskatoon are working with Aboriginal organizations to provide families with more options and culturally-appropriate services through the Flexible Response Pilot Project, which was profiled in the report to the premiers.

At the recommendation of the Advocate, the Ministry has been conducting *Touchstones of Hope* training with staff, to increase their understanding of the strengths and challenges for Aboriginal children, youth and families in the child welfare system.

“We are awaiting the release of the province’s Poverty Reduction Strategy in the near future, which holds the promise of building a strong foundation for addressing the root causes that put children at risk,” says Pringle. “Early childhood development is particularly critical, as it is very well established that children’s experiences in their early years, when their brains are developing, affects their health and well-being throughout their lives.”

Through the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, Pringle joins his counterparts in other provinces and territories in urging the federal, provincial and territorial governments to take “immediate action” to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care across Canada. Among the actions that the Council has called for in August and November of 2014, and again with the release of this report, is a national initiative to measure and report on child welfare, education and health outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth; the creation of a national Aboriginal children and youth participation initiative, with training on child and youth rights, leadership, voice, and civic participation; the creation of a special conference of Federal/Provincial/Territorial First Ministers, with Aboriginal leaders and child and youth delegates; and the creation of an independent National Children’s Commissioner with particular emphasis on Aboriginal children and youth.

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. He leads a team of advocates, investigators and other staff who work on behalf of the province's young people, so their rights, interests and well-being are respected and valued in our communities and in government legislation, policy, programs and practice.

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