

Advocate for Children and Youth tables 2013 Annual Report

SASKATOON – Bob Pringle, Advocate for Children and Youth, tabled his 2013 in the Legislative Assembly today.

This report provides the opportunity for the Advocate to reflect on progress in the past year and make recommendations to respect the rights, interests and well-being of Saskatchewan’s children and youth. It includes analysis of the Government of Saskatchewan’s Child and Family Agenda, which is in its fourth year, and the circumstances of First Nations and Métis children and youth. It also examines issues in child-and youth-serving systems, including the child welfare system, criminal justice system, health, particularly around mental health issues, and education system, focusing on action around bullying, and early learning.

The Advocate also reports on critical injuries and deaths of children and youth in care or custody, or receiving services from the child welfare and youth criminal justice systems. In this year’s report, instead of reporting on files closed in the office in the previous year, we are reporting on information contained in notifications of deaths and critical injuries received in 2013.

“It is clear from the advocacy and investigations that we undertake every year that we are reaching many children too late,” said Pringle. “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. 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.”

This year’s report includes a summary of the Advocate’s investigation into the deaths of two young children, ages seven months and 16 months. “Carly” and “Tessa” were born to mothers struggling with addictions, family violence and mental illness, who needed intensive services. The investigation found that the child welfare system failed to keep these children safe.

Recommendations from this investigation include one for the Ministry of Health to provide evidence-based models of care for pregnant, substance-misusing women province-wide. There are some services like this already available, and the report profiles *Raising Hope*, a partnership that provides housing, outreach services and a high level of support for high risk pregnant women and their children.

In the Annual Report, Pringle commends the Government for their *Child and Family Agenda* and its goals: children get a good start in life; youth are prepared for their futures; families are strong; and communities are supportive. However, he remains concerned that this Agenda, which was established in December 2010, is not well known outside of Government, or even in some parts of Government, and that it does not go far enough.

“We need to address the risk factors that make children vulnerable; otherwise, not much is going to change,” he says. “Strategies for poverty reduction and early childhood development could provide an overarching framework to address these risk factors in a focused, measurable way.

At the beginning of 2013, the Advocate for Children and Youth participated in an advisory capacity in the legislative review of the *Child and Family Services Act*. The provincial government recently announced an engagement process to gather feedback on proposed changes.

“This is a key piece of legislation for child-serving ministries, and we are happy that it appears to be back on track, as we have many outstanding recommendations that call for legislative changes to strengthen the child welfare system,” said Pringle.

In the 2014-15 budget, the Government announced funding for independent legal representation for children and youth involved in child protection hearings. The Advocate has worked with the Pro Bono Law Society of Saskatchewan since 2007 so that children and youth would have access to these services, all while advocating that they need to be independently structured and funded.

“I was very pleased to see funding for the Counsel for Children in the last budget,” said Pringle. “We are optimistic that this will be a forum to focus attention on children’s rights, and the importance of giving children and youth a voice in matters that affect their lives.”

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

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

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