

Advocate for Children and Youth Tables 2014 Annual Report

SASKATOON – Bob Pringle, Advocate for Children and Youth, tabled his 2014 Annual Report in the Legislative Assembly today. This report provides the opportunity for the Advocate to reflect on the past year and make recommendations to respect the rights, interests and well-being of Saskatchewan’s children and youth.

In addition to in-depth critiques of the child and youth serving ministries, this year’s report explores several key issues, including the uncertain status of the Government of Saskatchewan’s five-year old *Child and Family Agenda*; and issues for First Nations and Métis children and youth, such as perceived inequities in access to services, and fire safety on reserves. It also includes summaries and updates on the two child death investigations the Advocate released in 2014.

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 that occurred in 2014.

“Far too often, we find that children’s rights are not at the forefront of decision-making, and that service providers are not working together to provide services to children and youth in a coordinated, holistic way,” said Pringle. “This was made clear in the recent Coroner’s inquest into a child’s death in foster care.”

The Advocate aims to prevent and reduce injuries and deaths of our most vulnerable citizens by providing advocacy services on their behalf, investigating critical injuries and deaths, making formal recommendations to improve services, and speaking out on situations that put children and youth at risk.

The Annual Report explores issues in the child welfare system, including the quality of child protection investigations, assessment, and casework. While the Advocate recognizes that Ministry of Social Services has introduced the Structured Decision Making® tools to better assess risk to children, he said that Ministry workers still need more training, mentoring, supervisory oversight and enough time to use these tools as intended.

In the youth justice system, the Advocate sees that uncertainty around reorganization and facility and unit closures continue to negatively impact some young people in custody, making it more difficult for them to be rehabilitated and reintegrate into the community. Pringle has been outspoken about his concerns with the recent closures of Yarrow Youth Farm and Orcadia Youth Residence, facilities designed for open custody, and youth serving open custody sentences being moved to facilities designed for secure custody.

Within the health services and education systems, the Advocate has observed that parents and other caregivers often struggle to get timely and equitable access to health services for children and youth, and to negotiate the patchwork of fragmented early learning services before children enter kindergarten.

In 2014, as part of a child death investigation, the Advocate made a formal recommendation that the Government of Saskatchewan develop and implement well-resourced early childhood development and poverty reduction strategies to advance the goals of its *Child and Family Agenda*. Pringle was pleased that the government announced its intention to develop a poverty reduction strategy in 2015, and will monitor its development and implementation.

“In our role as an independent voice for children and youth, we will continue to work with and challenge the provincial government to improve their policies and practice so that can provide better services to children, youth and their families,” Pringle said. “We will also continue to challenge the federal government to make a similar commitment to First Nations children and youth.”

“I cannot say it often enough—we are all responsible for the care and well-being of our children,” Pringle said. “All children have the right to grow up in safe environments, and to the highest level of care, no matter where they live in Saskatchewan. There is no greater way to honour the gift of our children than to ensure that they are safe, valued and respected.”

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. He leads a 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 2014 Annual Report, please visit: www.saskadvocate.ca.

For more information contact:

Fleur Macqueen Smith
Senior Advisor, Communications
(306) 933-6700 or (639) 471-8585
fmacqueensmith@saskadvocate.ca