

Advocate for Children and Youth concerned about the loss of federal funding for early intervention services for First Nations children

SASKATOON – Bob Pringle, Advocate for Children and Youth, is concerned about the health and well-being of young children living on reserve after learning that federal funding for an intervention program serving some of these children will be cut on June 30, 2014.

The federal government has been funding early intervention services for children living on reserve who were receiving services from the province's Early Childhood Intervention Program (ECIP). Staff in this program work with children aged 0-6 and their families in their own homes, addressing developmental delays these young children have in areas such as walking, talking, eating, and interacting socially. Some of these children also have complex medical needs, requiring further support.

ECIP staff may also connect families with other services, and they work diligently to get children ready for school. In the North, ECIP organizes medical outreach clinics, bringing medical specialists to the North to see many children, rather than having each family travel to Saskatoon to see specialists.

Services for children living off-reserve are funded provincially through the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. With this federal funding, ECIP staff have been able to provide services for children living on reserve, some of whom have benefited from continuous services when they move on and off reserve. The Ministry of Education reported to the Advocate that they provided EC IP services to 159 children living on reserve last year, and ECIPS have identified many more children needing services.

"We know from decades of research that children who have developmental delays do best when they get services early, when their brains are developing rapidly," said Pringle. "We also know from research conducted across the province that about 30% of our children arrive at kindergarten without the skills they need to learn there. We actually need more of these kinds of services for young children – not fewer."

Staff in the Advocate's office have been meeting with federal and provincial officials and ECIP directors since late January, when they became aware that these funding cuts were being explored.

"All children should have access to the services they need to get a good start in life, no matter where they live in Saskatchewan. Not only is investing early in children a great public investment, our children have a right to these services, under the Saskatchewan Children and Youth First Principles."

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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