

Advocate for Children and Youth calls for change to better identify and protect children at risk

Regina - Bob Pringle, the Advocate for Children and Youth, has released a special investigative report calling for substantive changes in child protection practices following the death of a two-and-a-half-month-old First Nations infant. In the report, *Duty to Protect*, we have named the child 'Aiden' to protect the identity of both Aiden and his family members.

Aiden was born prematurely in August 2015, spent a month in hospital, was discharged home and eventually died of Bronchopneumonia, secondary to a bacterial infection. His family had received services from the Saskatoon Tribal Council Health and Family Services Inc. (the Agency) in the twelve months before his passing; therefore, the Advocate was notified of his death.

“This was a difficult and challenging investigation. The Agency took the position that our office had no jurisdiction to investigate its activities. As a result, its cooperation was reluctant and selective. However, in the current context, our office is the only body with a legal mandate to provide independent oversight to child welfare services from a children’s rights perspective, no matter where in the province these occur,” Pringle said. “Our investigation could not determine with absolute certainty whether additional services could have prevented Aiden’s death. However, it did reveal that serious concerns were raised on numerous occasions about the care Aiden was receiving, his living conditions, and the level of supervision in the home.”

The Agency confirmed it received calls and made inquiries related to the safety of Aiden and his siblings. While referrals were made to support programs in the community, the Agency assessed that no further action was required and did not monitor or evaluate further risk. “In determining whether this was the proper course of action,” Pringle noted, “our investigation discovered intake and investigation processes that lacked rigour, and an inadequate framework for the provision of protection services when vulnerable children are in parental care.”

In light of these findings, the Advocate makes five recommendations related to intake and investigative processes, documentation of identified risk, and case planning that is monitored and evaluated. Pringle further recommends the Agency develop and implement training on the use of risk assessment, critical thinking, and file documentation.

Pringle’s recommendations highlight the importance of the Ministry of Social Services working closely with Saskatoon Tribal Council Health and Family Services Inc. and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to clarify their understanding of prevention services as they pertain to the mandate of *The Child and Family Services Act*. As well, he recommends that the Ministry and the Agency operationalize a shared definition of, and process for, family service delivery.

Finally, the Advocate calls upon the Ministry to increase its understanding of the manner in which all First Nations child and family service agencies operationalize their prevention and protection services within the framework of *The Child and Family Services Act*.

The Advocate aims to prevent and reduce injuries and deaths of children and youth by providing advocacy services on their behalf, investigating critical injuries and deaths, making formal recommendations to improve services, and speaking to situations that put children and youth at risk. Throughout his tenure, Pringle has focused on improving outcomes for children and youth, and the need to address the factors that put them at risk – poverty and its related conditions, mental illness, violence, disabilities, addictions, racism, and the legacy of colonialism and residential schools.

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. He leads a team of professionals 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 honoured, respected and valued in Saskatchewan communities and in government legislation, policy, programs and practice.

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