



**Ministry of Human Services' Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
*"17-Year-Old Catherine: An Investigative Review"***

January 2016

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Background

In 2013, a 17-year-old youth in parental care died by suicide following attendance at a rural hospital for suicidal ideation. Our thoughts are with this youth's family, friends and community.

As described in the Advocate report, this youth had significant involvement with mental health services and supports over several years. This youth had a history of several attempted suicides and medical and therapeutic interventions; she was connected with medical and mental health professionals who were actively engaged in medication management, therapy and ongoing risk assessment. Her parents were actively engaged in her medical treatment and were very strong advocates. The involvement with Human Services was very brief prior to the youth's suicide; during the screening process, significant collateral contact and safety planning was conducted with the family, engaged professionals and other agencies.

The *Child and Youth Advocate Act* provides the Advocate with the authority to investigate systemic issues arising from a serious injury or death of a child who was receiving child intervention services at the time of injury or death. Receiving services includes intake/screening and assessment at the front end of service delivery through to voluntary and court-order services and a child being in the care and/or guardianship of the Director under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*. On September 23, 2015, the Advocate released an investigative review entitled *17-Year-Old Catherine: An Investigative Review* ("the report"). The report makes three recommendations regarding collaboration, assessments and working with suicidal youth.

The ministry's response includes information gathered from the following sources:

- a review of existing policies in comparison to issues identified in the report;
- a review of current ministry initiatives, practice and program directions related to issues identified in the report; and
- engagement with our ministry partners, including other divisions, regional service delivery partners and other ministries.

Child Intervention practice in Alberta continues to evolve and incorporate new learnings, feedback and inputs from a variety of sources, including external reviews; research into leading practices; experiences of service delivery staff; and analysis of outcomes for children, youth and families receiving services.

When a serious incident occurs, we examine the circumstances and our practice, and we identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate plays a role in identifying systemic issues for vulnerable children and youth through the course of day-to-day service provision or through the investigation of a single case. We welcome the recommendations from the Advocate to support the improvement of outcomes for vulnerable Albertans.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation #1:

Alberta Health Services should provide service coordinators for children with complex mental health needs and their families, who are accessing mental health services across multiple programs.

Ministry response: The Ministry of Human Services is not in a position to respond to this recommendation, as it does not fall within our mandate or influence. The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate has indicated it is working with Alberta Health Services regarding their review, consideration and response to the recommendation.

Recommendation #2:

A) The Ministry of Human Services should intervene and strengthen their response when parents request help to keep their child safe because the parent is unable to.

B) The Ministry of Human Services and Alberta Health Services should enter into a formal provincial agreement identifying how they will work collaboratively to serve young people with complex mental health needs when their safety is in jeopardy.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the intent of the recommendation. Being responsive to the identified potential safety needs of children, regardless of the referral source, is the basic tenet of child intervention service delivery and is reflected in current policy and practice. Screening and assessment are completed to determine if there is a need for intervention as identified under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* and reviews what services and supports are available to the child and family through their own network and in the community. Practice strategies under the Child Intervention Practice Framework support staff in gathering information, critical thinking and reviewing and responding to the needs of children and families.

The ministry works with Health and Alberta Health Services at the provincial and community level to support collaborative service delivery to children and families. The Mental Health Review, currently underway, will support coordination and collaboration across the government of Alberta, supporting vulnerable children and youth's access to mental health services and interventions.

Recommendation #3:

Alberta Health Services should review how young people attending hospitals are assessed for suicide risk and standardize best practices across the province.

Ministry response: The ministry is not in a position to respond to this recommendation, as it does not fall within our mandate or influence. As with Recommendation #1, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate has indicated it is working with Alberta Health Services regarding their review, consideration and response to the recommendation.

Conclusion

Human Services thanks the Advocate for his review and recommendations. We continue to implement evidence-based practice strategies and collaborative and innovative solutions to meet the needs of vulnerable Albertans. Through our ongoing evolution, we are striving for the development and sustainment of a system responsive to the needs of children, youth and families. We recognize that we have a shared responsibility, along with communities and families, to support the safety and well-being of Alberta's children.