

# Beyond Trauma: Disrupting Cycles, Effecting Change

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Government of Alberta's response to the  
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate

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# BACKGROUND

On November 6, 2017, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) released the report *Beyond Trauma: Disrupting Cycles, Effecting Change*, an investigative review examining the lives of three Indigenous teenaged girls who died over a period of seven months in 2015.

The death of any child is devastating. Our thoughts remain with the families, caregivers and communities who continue to mourn the loss of these young people. While each of these young girls was unique, all three of them experienced grief, trauma and loss far too often.

As described in the OCYA's report, 13-year-old Tina was an energetic girl who loved horses. Tina was cared for by her grandparents and the family had significant ongoing child intervention involvement during her life. Tina died by suicide shortly after her 13th birthday. She had received services within two years of her death.

Sixteen-year-old Shirley was a gifted writer who wanted to become a doctor. Child intervention services were involved with her family a number of times throughout her life. Shirley was 16 years old when she was hit by a car and passed away. She was in care at the time of her death.

Nineteen-year-old Jazmine was well-spoken, artistic, intelligent and determined. She was also a mother. Jazmine died by suicide, and had received services within two years of her death.

The Government of Alberta'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 initiatives, practice and program directions related to issues identified in the report; and
- Engagement with all ministry partners, including other divisions, regional service delivery partners and other ministries.

The Government of Alberta would like to thank the Advocate and his staff for their ongoing work to better the lives of children, youth and families who are involved with the child intervention system.

# RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendation #1:

The Government of Alberta should create and implement cross-ministry training for all child-serving ministries specifically related to the impact of trauma at every stage of childhood development so that appropriate interventions can be provided.

**Ministry response: The Ministries of Children’s Services, Education, Health, and Justice and Solicitor General accept this recommendation.**

The Government of Alberta is committed to ongoing professional development and training of frontline staff who work with children and families. The Ministry of Children’s Services is currently updating a training module based on findings from a literature review on trauma, child development, healing and resilience. Training focused on the impact of trauma on childhood development will now be provided to all caregivers. In recognition of over-representation of Indigenous children receiving services, Children’s Services is also developing training to assist staff in better understanding the impacts of historical trauma on Alberta’s Indigenous communities. A new framework is being implemented to provide the ministry with a holistic learning and development approach to Indigenous cultural understanding.

Alberta’s health sectors are also implementing new training to improve understanding of trauma and childhood development. The Ministry of Health is currently working with other ministries to build understanding about how to support Albertans with adverse childhood experiences. The ministry is also raising awareness about adverse childhood experiences within the context of brain and child development, including the importance of the early years and inter-generational factors. Alberta Health Services is implementing the Trauma Informed Care approach, which recognizes that most people have had adverse life experiences that can negatively impact their physical, mental, emotional or spiritual well-being, particularly if these traumatic events happened in childhood. Foundational online learning modules are being deployed for all staff.

It is important for schools and communities to work together to promote positive mental health and focus on social-emotional competencies of children and youth. To support educators in this work, the Ministry of Education released a resource, *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools*, which combines material on mental health, brain development and the impact of positive learning environments. A grant has also been provided to the Calgary Regional Consortium to support the province-wide implementation of this resource through awareness sessions, webinars, collaborative communities, networking sessions, and presentations at conventions and conferences.

To support youth involved with the criminal justice system, the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General is implementing a trauma-informed service delivery approach across the young offender branch program areas to improve outcomes for young people. This will include training on brain development and the impact of trauma. The approach is based on key principles, including trauma awareness; emphasis on safety and trustworthiness; opportunity for choice, collaboration and connection; skill and strength-based building; promoting a sense of safety; and

empowerment and acceptance.

## Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Children's Services should make certain that children and caregivers receive culturally appropriate, timely interventions that directly address the impact of trauma on the developing brain.

### Ministry response: The Ministry accepts the recommendation.

Children's Services is currently implementing a variety of initiatives to support children, youth and families who have experienced grief, trauma and loss. To support services that directly address the impacts of trauma, the ministry is implementing new practice guidelines for staff to support children and youth throughout transitions they experience while in care. Children's Services is also implementing Foundations of Caregiver Support to provide caregivers and front-line staff with training and tools to better understand healthy child development, and the impacts of trauma, grief and loss. The training reinforces the need for staff to approach all children, youth and their families holistically to address childhood trauma.

A key part of trauma training is shifting thinking from "what is wrong with you" to "what happened to you." With this shift in focus, Children's Services will continue to refresh and enhance policy with an appreciation of the impact of trauma, grief and loss on all children's well-being and development.

The ministry also recognizes the importance of providing culturally appropriate services to children, families and caregivers, and the importance of cultural practices in healing trauma. Training for both staff and caregivers is being enhanced to include new experiential and intercultural training. One example is the Honoring Indigenous Children experiential training, which was developed with First Nations communities and contains a variety of teachings on Indigenous culture.

Recommendations from the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention also suggest providing trauma-informed practices and culturally appropriate historic trauma healing services as support services for families and children. Children's Services is currently engaging with Indigenous partners and others regarding implementation of these recommendations.

# CONCLUSION

The Government of Alberta thanks the Advocate for his work conducting this review, and for providing these thoughtful recommendations. We are saddened by the loss of these three young women, each of whom experienced significant grief and loss throughout their lives.

When we support children, youth and families who have experienced trauma, we must ensure that services address the effects of trauma. That's why ministries across the Government of Alberta are strengthening staff professional development and training around brain development and the impact of trauma. This training will increase staff's ability to support healthy development and improve outcomes for children, youth and families across Alberta.

Many First Nations people and communities currently receiving child intervention services have experienced trauma, grief and loss. Addressing this requires a coordinated response that focuses not only on the individual and immediate safety needs of young people, but on the broader realities of community trauma. Children's Services is currently implementing new training to help improve staff's understanding of Indigenous history, culture and experiences, as well as teach staff and caregivers how to support children and families who have experienced trauma.

By providing ongoing support for children and caregivers, and culturally appropriate, trauma-focused training for staff, the Government of Alberta aims to improve the lives of all children and families who are involved with the child intervention system.