



**Ministry of Human Services' Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
*"9-Year-Old Bonita Serious Injury"***

December 2015

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Background

In 2013, a nine-year-old child living with her parents in her First Nations community was taken to hospital, where it was determined that she was suffering from septic shock as a result of severe dental decay. At the time of the incident, Bonita and her family were under assessment by the Delegated First Nations Agency (DFNA) that provided intervention services on-reserve through an agreement with the province and funded by the Federal Government. Inadequate housing, school attendance, neglect, parental addictions and chronic poverty were all noted concerns that were being addressed by several service delivery partners within the First Nations community.

Fortunately, Bonita has recovered from her injury; however, she will require additional surgeries and has been referred for psychological interventions to address trauma.

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.

On May 27, 2015, the Advocate released an investigative review entitled *9-Year-Old Bonita: Serious Injury – An Investigative Review* (“the report”). The report makes three recommendations regarding intervention on neglect and assessments, and understanding and addressing addictions.

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

- A review of existing practices, policies and service delivery agreements in comparison to issues identified in the report;
- A review of current ministry initiatives and program directions related to issues identified in the report; and
- Engagement with internal ministry partners, including other divisions and our regional service delivery partners.

Child intervention practice in Alberta continues to evolve and incorporate new learnings, feedback and input 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.

Child intervention service delivery is conducted provincially through eight Child and Family Services (CFS) regions and 17 DFNAs that provide intervention services in First Nations communities across Alberta. The ministry is engaged in ongoing discussions with CFS regions and DFNAs regarding practice strategies to support early assessment and family engagement for a consistent focus across the province as a whole. The Child Intervention Practice Framework (CIPF) practice strategies, Outcomes-based Service Delivery, Signs of Safety and the First Nations Practice Standards used by some DFNAs are contributing to a decrease in the number of children in care and receiving services (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal).

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate plays a role in identifying systemic issues for vulnerable children and youth, whether 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 better outcomes for vulnerable Albertans.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Human Services should provide clear support for child intervention workers to intervene earlier when neglect is identified as a protection concern. Practical concrete response is required to address the factors that contribute to the neglect of children.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation. A similar recommendation related to neglect was previously made and accepted in the Advocate's 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 Annual Reports.

Child and Family Services is currently implementing a practice framework that supports child intervention staff in their day-to-day interactions and decision making with children and families. The Child Intervention Practice Framework (CIPF) is a set of principles and core elements of leading practice that guide our work. The framework supports an environment where family strengths are recognized and children and youth are respected and supported. The framework also supports the incorporation of evidence-based practice, research, field experience, and a deeper appreciation of cultural practice. Practice strategies under CIPF were introduced provincially in 2014 and implementation and integration is anticipated over the next three to five years.

Some of these elements of practice include slowing down the decision-making process to allow further opportunities for consultation, collaboration, and critical thinking, all with the goal of keeping children healthy and safe and keeping families together whenever possible. Assessment and engagement with families begins as soon as a referral is received; caseworkers work with other service providers to support awareness of and access to community supports and services.

Addressing the root causes of neglect is a complex issue. This larger, shared responsibility requires ongoing collaboration across governments (federal, other provincial ministries and Aboriginal), communities and service organizations. Human Services is committed to working with these partners to determine options for addressing poverty and its impact on parenting and child well-being and safety.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Human Services should engage stakeholders to identify issues and opportunities to address neglect in a manner consistent with best practice. Resources should be committed to help families living in poverty to alleviate child neglect concerns.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the intent of the recommendation. Through a collaborative partnership between the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, Treaty 7 Management Corporation, Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta, the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta, efforts are being made to establish an approach that reflects the needs of the First Nations through a process entitled the Child and Family Services Trilateral Engagement Process. The vision of the Child and Family Services Trilateral Engagement Process is:

All First Nation children, youth and families live in safe, supportive, healthy, nurturing environments based on a holistic approach to their physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological health and well-being of all involved.

The engagement and development of collaborative relationships across governments and First Nations supports child intervention to achieve the outcomes identified by the CIPF. Full implementation and integration of the CIPF is anticipated over the next three to five years.

Recommendation #3:

A) *The Ministry of Human Services, with its service delivery partners, should develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and/or protocol to work together so addictions expertise and consultation is provided to frontline child intervention workers who are working with families where addictions concerns are present;*

and

B) *The Ministry of Human Services should dedicate resources to increase frontline workers' knowledge of addictions and the impact parental addictions has on children.*

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation. A similar recommendation was previously made and accepted in the Advocate's *Remembering Brian* report (June 2013). Human Services is an active participant with Health in the Addictions and Mental Health Strategy and continues with the comprehensive review of staff training including material, training and tools to support staff to meet the needs of the children, youth and families they serve.

Conclusion

Human Services thanks the Advocate for his review and recommendations. The ministry remains committed to learning from the lived experience of Aboriginal peoples, working to honour their culture, traditions and spiritual experience. We also learn from and incorporate what external bodies have told us about the outcomes we are achieving for those we serve and where we can do better. The ministry will continue to focus on supporting the safety and well-being of children, creating strong families and engaging in continuous improvement of the system as a whole – throughout the province for all Albertans.