

17-year-old Donovan: An Investigative Review

Ministry of Children's Services response to the Office of the
Child and Youth Advocate Report

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BACKGROUND

In 2015, a 17-year-old youth living in a community-based open custody group home died by suicide. At the time of his death, Donovan was receiving child intervention services under a custody agreement with youth

The death of any young person is devastating for their family, friends and community. Our thoughts are with all those who continue to grieve for this young man, whom the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) described as quiet and good-natured.

On October 30, 2017, the OCYA released, *17-Year-Old Donovan: An Investigative Review*. As described in the OCYA's report, this youth and his family had extensive involvement with child intervention services in another province. Donovan had been exposed to domestic violence and substance abuse within his parental home. At the age of three, he was permanently removed from his parents' care and placed with relatives. As a teenager, Donovan was reunited with his mother in Alberta.

The OCYA's report makes two recommendations regarding staff awareness and use of the protocol between the ministries of Children's Services and Justice and Solicitor General.

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.

Ongoing improvement is essential for the child intervention system. Evidence-informed casework practice in Alberta continues to evolve and incorporate new learnings, feedback and inputs from a variety of sources, including external reviews, research, the experiences of service delivery staff, and analysing the outcomes of children, youth and families receiving services.

The OCYA plays a key role in identifying systemic issues that impact vulnerable children and youth. We welcome the recommendations from the Advocate to help us support the health and well-being of vulnerable Albertans involved with child intervention.

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Children's Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should make certain that all frontline staff are aware of and use the existing protocols involving youth who have involvement with both Ministries.

Ministry response: The Ministry accepts the recommendation.

Children's Services and the Justice and Solicitor General signed a Youth Criminal Justice Protocol in 2013 to support front-line staff to work collaboratively when youth are involved with both ministries. The protocol creates a process for collaborative case planning as well as resolution of day-to-day issues, thereby laying the foundation for good working relationships and a more effective coordinated provision of services for youth.

Children's Services' policies outlining when to use the protocol and training for casework practitioners have been refreshed to include information on the Youth Criminal Justice Protocol.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Children's Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should work together so that contact and relationships for youth are maintained with family—particularly for youth in custody outside their home community.

Ministry response: The Ministry accepts the recommendation.

Children's Services recognizes and values the importance of stable, permanent and nurturing relationships for the well-being of children, youth, families and communities. Family and connection are two key guiding principles of the Child Intervention Practice Framework. Strategies under development aim to incorporate a collaborative planning component to support staff in ensuring family, community and cultural considerations are at the forefront in planning for children and youth.

As part of the work of reviewing and refreshing the Youth Criminal Justice Protocol, the ministries will work together to identify opportunities to strengthen references to the importance of supporting young people to maintain relationships.

CONCLUSION

Children's Services thanks the Advocate for the review and recommendations. The tragic loss of Donovan and the challenges he faced have not gone unnoticed.

When youth with complex needs have contact with government services, it is essential that we communicate and coordinate services to meet their needs in the most effective way possible. Children's Services will continue working collaboratively with our ministry partners to support staff in providing cohesive and coordinated services for those involved with the youth criminal justice system.

We also know that strong connections to stable adults play a vital role in helping children and youth to develop resilience and overcome hardships. Maintaining meaningful relationships is crucial for healthy development. That's why Children's Services is working to develop more collaborative planning components that will help ensure that youth like Donovan maintain strong family, community and cultural connections. This is an important part of our ongoing work to support the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and youth.

Children's Services will continue to evolve practice towards increased collaboration and connection so that youth like Donovan will have the supports they need, when they need it.