

Ministry of Children's Services'

# Response to the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate

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15-year-old Levi: An Investigative Review

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# BACKGROUND

In 2015, a 15-year-old youth died by suicide. The youth was not receiving child intervention services at the time of his death but had received services within the previous two years.

The death of any young person is devastating. Our thoughts are with all those who loved and cared for this youth. Levi was kind, with a good sense of humour, and a love for skating, biking and the outdoors. No child should experience the challenges that he was forced to overcome.

Levi had child intervention involvement at various times throughout his life. He had been exposed to domestic violence, parental addictions, and mental health concerns in his parental home. He had extended family members who supported him while he was in parental care and, at times, provided care for him.

Released on May 24, 2017, the OCYA's report, *15-Year-Old Levi: An Investigative Review*, makes two recommendations regarding the engagement and active participation of children in decision-making, and the early identification and support for children at risk of homelessness.

Government'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 intervention casework practice in Alberta continues to evolve and incorporate new learnings, feedback, and input from a variety of sources, including external reviews, research and the experiences of service delivery staff, and by analyzing 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 OCYA's recommendations to support the health and well-being of vulnerable Albertans receiving intervention services.

# RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Children's Services should establish formalized procedures for the engagement and active participation of children in decision-making. There must be a record of how a child's views were considered and what influence they had on the decision-making process.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

In 1999, the Government of Alberta endorsed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since that time, Alberta has incorporated these rights into legislation and policy.

Children must always have a strong voice in their care. That's why the Ministry of Children's Services formalized procedures for the active participation of children and youth in decision-making. Legislation requires that staff inform children and youth of their rights, and policy provides a guideline for staff to engage children in age-appropriate discussions about their rights, including the right to know about and be part of the decision-making process when decisions are made about them.

When a decision is being made about a child, policy is clear regarding the child's involvement. Policy requires that whenever possible, the child will attend any case conference where decisions will be made on their behalf. The child must have the opportunity to ask questions and discuss their procedural rights at any time. The child may have supports (both formal and informal) with them when a case conference occurs, and every discussion with them regarding decision-making and their procedural rights must be documented.

A practice support manual is being developed to support practice and reflect the principles within the Child Intervention Practice Framework. Specific to this topic, the manual will explicitly outline how a caseworker will use the framework's approaches and tools in day-to-day decision-making. This manual will include information on how and where to document the perspective/voice of the child throughout the continuum of service provision.

In 2016, Children's Services also collaborated with the OCYA to refresh the "*Children Have Rights*" and "*Youth Have Rights*" booklets. Staff use these tools in conversations with children and youth in care about their rights. Policy also guides practitioners to document the conversations they have had with children and youth about their rights. This is further supported by the ministry's online information for children and youth on child intervention legislation and their rights.

Provincial implementation of the Child Intervention Practice Framework also includes practice strategies (such as Signs of Safety) that support front-line staff to engage children and youth to actively participate in decision-making.

The Signs of Safety approach provides workers with tools to collaborate with families and children/youth to increase safety and reduce harm. The approach includes a tool that is very effective in helping a child talk about their life story in a way they can understand and be fully involved in planning. These tools support children and youth to understand what is happening for them and their family and express their opinions, wishes, and fears. The tools strengthen the opportunity for a child to be involved in planning about them.

## Recommendation #2:

The Ministries of Children's Services and Education should develop processes for the early identification of children who may be at risk of homelessness. Community-specific strategies must be developed in partnership with all levels of government, to support and intervene with these children and their families.

**Ministry response: The ministries accept the recommendation.**

Families who are at risk of homelessness are best identified and supported when we work together. The Ministries of Education and Children's Services will continue working to support families at-risk of homelessness and the professionals working with these families by providing education about and connection to community homelessness supports.

Current Children's Services policy and practices guide staff to work with families to identify their strengths and areas of need, including when they are in need of housing supports. When families have immediate needs for shelter, ministry staff are able to provide interim supports until families are connected with housing supports in their communities.

Starting September 2017, the Ministry of Education has a new role supporting schools and school authorities to address chronic absenteeism. The new Office of Student Attendance and Re-engagement (OSAR) supports a solution-focused, student-centred approach to addressing the barriers students and their families face. Absenteeism is often one of the first symptoms that a child is having difficulty in an area of their life.

The OSAR was not in place while the OCYA was conducting its investigative review and drafting its report. Through OSAR, school authorities are encouraged to understand and address root causes of absenteeism that may include homelessness, poverty, family violence, and mental illness. Schools and school authorities, in collaboration with families, community partners, and other ministries, may develop individualized plans to support the student and family towards improved attendance and re-engagement in learning.

The Ministry of Education will also increase access to information for educators about risk factors for homelessness and provide schools with information about Alberta Supports that may help families identify assistance in their area.

# CONCLUSION

Children's Services and Education thank the Advocate for his review and recommendations. This report demonstrates the challenges that too many children and youth experience in Alberta.

Every child has the right to have their voice heard and basic needs met. Good casework practice ensures that children are aware of their rights and involved in decisions made about them. Moving forward, Children's Services will work to strengthen supports for staff so that children's perspectives are always effectively considered and documented in decisions. We will also continue to implement evidence-informed practice strategies and innovative solutions to meet the needs of vulnerable Albertans, including those who are at risk of homelessness.

Too many of those who come into contact with the intervention system are at some risk of neglect and homeless. That's why Children's Services and Education continue to strengthen supports and improve collaboration and coordination across services. We have a shared responsibility, along with our cross-ministry and service delivery partners, communities, and families, to do everything we can to learn from this death and prevent future tragedies. We remain committed to improving, and doing whatever it takes to ensure that every child receiving intervention services has the chance at a happy, healthy life.