



**Ministry of Children's Services' Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
*4-Year-Old Marie: An Investigative Review***

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Background

In 2014, a four-year-old little girl living under the guardianship of extended family in her First Nations community passed away in hospital after being brought in with life-threatening injuries. The child was not receiving intervention services at the time of her injuries. Her death is under police investigation. The death of a child is devastating for family, friends, community, and those involved with the child and family, and our thoughts are with all those who continue to grieve for this little girl, who the Advocate described as shy, but active.

This child and her biological family had been involved with child intervention services for several years. Marie had been brought into care in early 2011 and placed in a foster home. Transition planning occurred over a period of 11 months for Marie to live with extended family (her kinship caregiver) in her home community. Her kinship caregiver applied to the courts for and was granted Private Guardianship under the *Child, Youth, and Family Enhancement Act* ending child intervention involvement. Approximately one year later, Marie was brought to the hospital and passed away after being removed from life support.

This heartbreaking case touched many Albertans, and inspired a renewed public interest in strengthening the child intervention system and preventing similar tragedies from happening. This case led to an emergency debate in the Legislature, a commitment from all Members to work together and put vulnerable children first, and the establishment of the all-party Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention to explore improvements to the way government supports children and families.

On November 14, 2016, the Advocate released an investigative review entitled *4-Year-Old Marie: An Investigative Review* (the report). The report makes three recommendations regarding kinship placements and terminating guardianship.

The ministry's response includes information gathered from:

- 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 partners, including other divisions, regional service delivery partners, and other stakeholders.

We welcome the Advocate's recommendations and thank him and his office for their ongoing commitment to strengthen supports for vulnerable children, youth and families.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Human Services should:

- a) Implement a home study tool specifically for kinship care that is culturally relevant and addresses the unique kinship circumstances.
- b) Require the collection of collateral information in the completion of the home study from community professionals, who are familiar with the applicant, regarding the demonstrated ability of the kinship applicant.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

The ministry of Children's Services is currently working on enhanced tools for kinship care home assessment that specifically reflect the unique circumstances and support requirements for kinship caregivers.

Current policy and practice require the collection of collateral information. A policy review is underway to clarify home study requirements for kinship care, foster care, adoption and private guardianship, which will also require the collection of collateral information from community professionals.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Human Services should:

- a) Require that policy be consistent with other information that indicates kinship orientation training is mandatory for kinship caregivers.
- b) Provide a continuum of culturally relevant, supportive services for kinship caregivers.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

Policy has been updated to clarify that kinship orientation training is mandatory.

The ministry of Children's Services is developing new kinship assessment tools that require a support plan, which encompasses a range of supports including culturally relevant supports, be developed concurrently with the initiation of the home assessment process and revisited as the assessment progresses.

The ongoing implementation of Foundations of Caregiver Support provides a series of training for caregivers and front-line staff to recognize and support child development, grief and loss, and trauma, and highlights the critical need to ensure culturally relevant supports are provided to children and their kinship caregivers.

Recommendation #3:

The Ministry of Human Services should:

- a) Require that caseworkers complete a child-specific assessment and resolution of risk factors prior to terminating guardianship.
- b) Implement policy that requires the same checks and balances when terminating guardianship as is currently required when bringing a child into care.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

The ministry of Children's Services is currently working on enhanced tools for kinship care home assessment that will guide critical thinking regarding safety related to a kinship caregivers, and the specific needs of a child. In addition to the tools, training and accompanying practice guides are being developed for staff and home study practitioners.

Provincial implementation of the Child Intervention Practice Framework includes connection as a key principle. In order to support this principle, the Lifelong Connections practice strategy is being created using leading practice and research. This strategy will outline an explicit process for staff to follow in transitioning children and youth to long-term placements. Before consenting to caregivers assuming guardianship, specific supports and timelines will be established.

The Lifelong Connections practice strategy pilot, which began in April 2017, will inform further changes to policy, training, and practice in the area of transitions for children and youth, as needed. The strategy requires ongoing supports for 12 months prior to ending a permanent guardianship. We will be working towards expanding this program throughout the province.

Conclusion

Children's Services thanks the Advocate for his review and recommendations. Assessing and supporting kinship caregivers and private guardians who care for vulnerable children and youth is a complex and dynamic process that requires thoughtful practice and strong professional connections with both children and caregivers. The department takes this responsibility to heart, and will always strive for better policy, better supervision and better work with the kids and families we serve.

While many Albertans may not know the pain of losing someone in such a tragic way, we all feel the devastation of a young life being cut short. The sad story of the little girl we now know as Serenity won't be forgotten – an ongoing reminder that we must remain steadfast in our commitment to safeguard the wellbeing of all of Alberta's children.