Ministry of Human Services' Response to the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate "16-Year-Old Sam Serious Injury"

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berta

Human Services

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Background

In 2013, a 16-year-old residing in care sustained a brain injury after attempting suicide. This youth, now a young adult, receives supports and services to meet his needs as a result of the injury, which affected his motor skills, mobility, speech and memory. Our thoughts are with this young man, his family and friends.

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 *16-Year-Old Sam: Serious Injury – An Investigative Review* ("the report"). The report makes three recommendations regarding assessments, healthy relationships and attachment, and working with suicidal youth.

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 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 inputs 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.

When a serious incident occurs, we examine the circumstances and our practice, and identify areas of strength as well as areas for improvement. 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 into a single case. We welcome the recommendations from the Advocate to support the improvement of outcomes for vulnerable Albertans.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Human Services needs greater early intentional focus on assessment and intervention that includes an equal emphasis on children, siblings and parents.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation. A similar recommendation was previously made and accepted in the *Remembering Brian* report (June 2013). Human Services continues to implement the Child Intervention Practice Framework (CIPF), associated practice strategies and Signs of Safety (SOS) to improve how we engage families and their supports to understand and develop solution to address identified child intervention needs. Practice strategies, including increased focus on critical thinking, early assessment and understanding of harm and danger under CIPF

were introduced provincially in 2014, with full implementation and integration anticipated over the next three to five years.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Human Services should find ways to teach children and youth about healthy relationships and attachment. Added supports should be provided to help young people when important relationships are disrupted by change.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation. Similar recommendations were previously made and accepted in the *Youth Aging out of Care* (March 2013) and *7-Year-Old Jack* (January 2014) reports. Practice strategies implemented under the CIPF are focused on early and ongoing engagement of the family and their supports, which facilitates the identification and support of long-term relationship development and continuity, and skills development for increased personal resiliency. Supports are available to young people who experience disruptions of relationships, including counseling, youth workers, and, in some instances, ongoing contact between the young person and the caregiver. Full implementation and integration of the CIPF is anticipated over the next three to five years.

Recommendation #3:

The Ministry of Human Services should provide caregivers and caseworkers with the skills they require to engage with suicidal youth on an ongoing regular basis and encourage young people to develop, identify and practice positive coping skills.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation. A similar recommendation was previous made and accepted in the *15-Year-Old Tony* (November 2014) report. The ministry has committed to reviewing the current policy for clarity and will engage in discussions with the service delivery staff regarding planning and service delivery for youth who may be at higher risk for suicidal behaviour and/or ideation. Additional tools and resources are being developed to support service delivery staff in providing services and supports to high-risk youth.

Conclusion

Human Services thanks the Advocate for his review and recommendations. We continue to learn from the lived experience of the children, youth and families we serve, as well as from what external bodies say about the job we are doing. Our focus will remain on the safety and well-being of children, creating strong families and making sure there is continuous improvement in the supports and services we provide.