



**Ministry of Children's Services Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
*"9-Month-Old Sharon: An Investigative Review"***

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Alberta
Children's Services

Table of Contents

Background	3
Specific Recommendations and Ministry Response.....	4
Recommendation #1.....	3
Recommendation #2.....	4
Conclusion	4

Background

In 2014, a nine-month old infant in parental care passed away. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner determined the manner and the cause of death were undetermined. Our thoughts are with this young child's family and community as they continue to mourn her tragic loss.

As described in the Advocate's report, Emergency Medical Services responded to the home because Sharon had been found unresponsive. She passed away that day.

On November 14, 2016, the Advocate released a report entitled *9-Month-Old Sharon: an Investigative Review* (the report). The report makes two recommendations aimed at improving child-centred planning and supports for reunification. As noted in the report, these recommendations are similar to recommendations made in previous Advocate reviews (*Remembering Brian: Investigative Review*, *Kamil: An Immigrant Youth's Struggle: Investigative Review* and *Baby Sadie Serious Injury: An Investigative Review*), all of which the ministry has actioned.

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

We welcome the Advocate's recommendations to support improved outcomes for vulnerable Alberta children.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Human Services should require that child intervention case plans include individual support plans for children that reflect an understanding of the impact of trauma on each stage of child development.

Ministry Response: The ministry accepts this recommendation.

A policy refresh aligned with the Child Intervention Practice Framework (CIPF) principles and strategies will reinforce and strengthen the expectation that the unique needs of each child, based in part on their developmental age and stage and their level of assessed trauma, will be considered and addressed in case planning.

In the short term, Children's Services has begun to implement the Foundations of Caregiver Support model that includes training to support caregivers and staff to respond to children in a developmentally appropriate way, interpret their behaviour through a trauma-informed lens, and develop an appreciation of the impact of grief and loss on a child's development and well-being.

In the longer term, mandatory delegation training is being redesigned to support workers to receive appropriate information at the right time for their learning. This redesign includes embedding the CIPF principles in the curriculum as well as an enhanced understanding of trauma, grief and loss, and planning for developmental ages and stages.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Human Services should enhance child intervention policies and procedures to address the complexity involved with family reunification. Planning should be child-centered and address the need for a child's support, safety and stability. These plans must be monitored and adjusted over a period of time.

Ministry Response: The ministry accepts this recommendation.

Children's Services is continuing with ongoing efforts to align policy with the Child Intervention Practice Framework principles and strategies. One of the principles of the CIPF is "connection" and there is an associated strategy entitled "Lifelong Connections." 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. Once fully developed, the Lifelong Connections strategy will provide an explicit process with timelines and support for staff to use to assist with the transition of children and youth from and to family, and other enduring placements.

Conclusion

Children's Services thanks the Advocate for his review and recommendations. We will continue to implement evidence-informed practice strategies and collaborative and innovative solutions to meet the needs of vulnerable Albertans. Case planning for children and families provides an opportunity for careful examination of each child's unique needs within the family. The ministry is improving case planning by increasing supports and planning tools for front-line staff and service delivery partners to improve planning with families for the safety and well-being of their children. We recognize that we have a shared responsibility, along with communities and families, to do everything we can to learn from these losses and prevent future tragedies.

Our hearts break whenever we hear of tragic losses like this one, and we continue to think of this young person's family, community, and loved ones who continue to feel her loss. In examining this case, and cases like it, it is clear that we need to do a better job of working with families to ensure the right supports are in place and that children are kept safe.