

Speaking Out: A Special Report on LGBTQ2S+ Young People in the Child Welfare and Youth Justice Systems

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

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BACKGROUND

On November 20, 2017, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) released *Speaking Out: A Special Report on LGBTQ2S+ Young People in the Child Welfare and Youth Justice Systems*. The report focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirited (LGBTQ2S+) young people served by the Ministries of Children's Services and Justice and Solicitor General. *Speaking Out* highlights both challenges and opportunities as Children's Services works towards positive change in serving LGBTQ2S+ young people.

Speaking Out identifies four key themes that emerged from interviews, surveys, and focus groups with young people and stakeholders:

- *Identity*: LGBTQ2S+ young people may experience negative messaging about who they are; support in developing a healthy identity is imperative.
- *Safety*: LGBTQ2S+ young people experience higher instances of violence, harassment, and other forms of abuse. Safe environments are needed for the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of LGBTQ2S+ young people in care.
- *Appropriate places to live*: LGBTQ2S+ young people need stable, safe and accepting places to live, and a voice in where they live. Specific housing for LGBTQ2S+ young people would benefit those who require specialized supports.
- *Services and Supports*: LGBTQ2S+ young people require support accessing services that meet their spiritual, emotional, physical and mental health needs. Navigating systems can be difficult, and not all services are supportive and affirming.

To positively impact outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ young people receiving child intervention services, the OCYA made five recommendations for Children's Services to address. Children's Services' 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 Children's Services initiatives, practice, and program directions related to issues identified in the report; and
- engagement with Children's Services partners, including other divisions, regional service delivery partners, and other ministries.

The OCYA plays an integral role in identifying systemic issues that impact young people. We welcome the OCYA's recommendations to support the safety and well-being of LGBTQ2S+ young people receiving intervention services.

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Children's Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should make certain that LGBTQ2S+ specific training and education is required for all employees who work directly with young people or make decisions that affect them.

Ministry response: Children's Services accepts the recommendation.

Children's Services is employing different strategies to ensure that training and education specific to LGBTQ2S+ young people is available for those who work directly with this population. To educate and provide awareness to staff in their daily practice, Children's Services is reviewing training options, such as online modular training for child intervention practitioners. Training will help to ensure that LGBTQ2S+ children, youth and their families are provided safe, supportive and informed service. Children's Services is also in the process of updating training for foster and kinship caregivers to include a module on supporting LGBTQ2S+ young people. This module will be focused specifically on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression.

Children's Services is partnered with the Comprehensive Health Education Workers project in Edmonton. Research stemming from the project will help strengthen supports for LGBTQ2S+ young people in Alberta by informing Children's Services' overall strategy for working with this unique demographic.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Children's Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General create LGBTQ2S+ specific living options for young people.

Ministry response: Children's Services accepts the intent of the recommendation.

As stated in *Speaking Out*, the development of the LGBTQ2S+ Youth Housing and Shelter Guidelines was an important step in supporting youth and organizations. Children's Services has adopted the guidelines as a commitment to LGBTQ2S+ young people, and as a guide and touchstone for common terminology. The guidelines also serve as a foundation to build more specific expectations of youth-serving staff and organizations. The LGBTQ2S+ Youth Housing and Shelter Guidelines signal a commitment to improving all supports, including living options, for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth receiving child intervention services. The guidelines have since been made available both within Children's Services and to external stakeholders for use in current practice.

Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ young people have safe and accepting places to live is critical to supporting their mental health and well-being. We acknowledge that the ministry's current ability to provide LGBTQ2S+ specific placement options to young people varies across the province based on location and proximity to resources. To strengthen our capacity in this area, the ministry has created an internal working group to build knowledge and understanding of how to best provide services and supports to this group of young people. Relying on input and advice from the working group, the ministry will ensure that the unique service and placement needs of this population are specifically addressed in ongoing tender and contracting processes going forward.

Recommendation #3:

The Ministry of Children's Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should review and revise their policies and practices in relation to identity, safety, appropriate places to live, and services and supports for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth.

Ministry response: Children's Services accepts the recommendation.

Children's Services is working to ensure that policies and practices respect the rights and needs of LGBTQ2S+ young people. An internal working group has been launched that will identify and document systemic gaps, issues and successes for sexual and gender diverse children and youth receiving child intervention services in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. This working group will inform practice, policy and programming changes that better supports this unique demographic.

Children's Services provides grant funding for group and individual mentoring opportunities to LGBTQ2S+ young people in Alberta to improve resiliency and reduce the impact of risk factors such as mental health challenges, substance use and suicide. By providing this support, an LGBTQ2S+ young person may be less isolated and have opportunities to explore, discover and express their identity. Children's Services will also be funding research stemming from the Comprehensive Health Education Workers project. This research is intended to inform how Children's Services can best work with LGBTQ2S+ young people.

Recommendation #4:

Children's Services should establish policy that guides decision-making for employees in their role as guardian, regarding consent for medical interventions and support services for transgender young people.

Ministry response: Children's Services accepts the intent of this recommendation.

Children's Services has policies to guide decision-making for staff in their role as a guardian of children in care. These policies apply to both temporary and permanent guardianship, and include

consent for medical interventions. While policy isn't specific to every medical scenario, it does direct frontline staff to work with medical professionals, caregivers and young people to ensure that medical needs are met. This means that medical decisions are made in collaboration with appropriate health professionals, people involved in the young person's life and the child or youth where appropriate.

Children's Services is creating practice supports for several areas where complexities occur in decision making, such as medical interventions. To better assist child practitioners in making decisions when working with transgender young people, a practice support for working with LGBTQ2S+ young people will be developed to accompany existing policy.

Recommendation #5:

The Ministry of Children's Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should ensure young people in their care receive appropriate and inclusive sexual health information.

Ministry response: Children's Services accepts this recommendation.

Children's Services does not have expertise in the area of sexual health information. Child intervention practitioners work with experts in their communities to connect young people and their caregivers with the information or services appropriate to their unique circumstances. A working group of ministry staff is working to identify existing tools and resources that can be leveraged for child intervention practitioners, to ensure that LGBTQ2S+ young people have accurate and inclusive sexual health information.

CONCLUSION

We thank the Advocate for taking the time to thoughtfully engage with vulnerable LGBTQ2S+ youth across the province. No young person should receive negative messaging, abuse or violence because of who they are. LGBTQ2S+ young people deserve to feel safe and accepted just as any other young person in Alberta. Children's Services recognizes that safety, acceptance, and inclusion are essential for the development of healthy identity.

We are committed to strengthening supports for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth receiving child intervention services. That's why Children's Services adopted the LGBTQ2S+ Youth and Housing Shelter Guidelines and will continue working to address LGBTQS2+ placement and service needs. We are also enhancing staff and caregiver training, reviewing policies and programs, creating new practice supports, and working with our community partners to support the needs of LGBTQ2S+ young people.

Children's Services appreciates the opportunity that the Advocate provided in allowing our staff to participate in the development of this report. The report highlighted the challenges that many LGBTQ2S+ young people face in Alberta. The recommendations and themes identified in *Speaking Out* will help inform changes in Children's Services and strengthen how LGBTQ2S+ young people involved in the child intervention system are served, now and in the future.