

Ministry of Children's Services'

Response to the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate

Three Young Children: An Investigative Review

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background	1
Response to Recommendations	2
Recommendation #1	2
Recommendation #2	3
Recommendation #3	3
Conclusion	4

BACKGROUND

On July 18, 2017, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) released a report entitled, *Three Young Children: An Investigative Review*. The report is a review of the lives of three young children who had been removed from parental care for a period of time and subsequently died after returning to parental care.

The death of any child is devastating. As Albertans, we all feel the loss of these three young children and the grief felt by their families, caregivers, and communities. We also know that Indigenous children and youth experience grief, trauma, and loss far too often.

As described in the OCYA's report, five-year-old Sarah was an outgoing and affectionate girl. Sarah was removed from parental care as a young child due to concerns of family violence, neglect, and parental addictions. When she was four-years-old, Sarah returned to her mother's care under a Supervision Order. She died two months after the Supervision Order ended.

Two-year-old Anthony was an active young child. He was removed from parental care as a newborn due to concerns of parental substance abuse, family violence, and neglect. When Anthony was 18-months-old, he became subject of a Permanent Guardianship Order. Anthony's mother remained connected to her children and continued to work towards reunification. Shortly after his second birthday, Anthony went on a visit with his mother and remained in her home. He died three months later.

One-year-old Mikwan was a healthy, content baby who loved to cuddle. He was removed from parental care as a newborn due to concerns of parental substance abuse and neglect. When he was one-year-old, Mikwan was transitioned back to parental care with supports from extended family. He died a few months after returning home.

The OCYA's report makes three recommendations for Children's Services regarding the reunification process for children and families, and the supports and services provided to families when children return home.

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
- a review of current measures and methods to assess fidelity of practice expectations.

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

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Children's Services and community partners should implement intensive, sustained plans to specifically support young children who are returned to family after being in care. Additional care should be taken with children who have disrupted attachments or developmental challenges.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

Policy is being updated to reinforce the expectation each child's unique needs, based in part on their developmental age and stage, and their level of assessed attachment and developmental needs, will be considered and addressed in case planning. Expectations about the reunification process (returning children to family) will be aligned to the guidelines in the Lifelong Connections practice strategy. The Lifelong Connections strategy, currently in the pilot stage, will guide decision-making related to returning a child or youth home or to extended family, and will assist in creating realistic plans that contribute to the safety and success of these transitions.

Staff will attend training sessions on the strategies included in the reunification process before the policy changes are implemented. These sessions will be recorded and available to staff for use in the future.

Recommendation #2:

The Ministry of Children's Services should implement a research-based framework that guides casework through the reunification process with families including ongoing risk assessment and robust after-care plans that provide the level of supports the family requires.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

Because connection is critical to safety and well-being, the ministry, using leading practice and research, developed the Lifelong Connection practice strategy.

Lifelong Connections emphasizes slowing down the transition process and the importance of detailed safety plans that are reassessed regularly. This includes ensuring that transitional and community supports are available and in place, and working with the family before the child intervention file is closed.

Recommendation #3:

The Ministry of Children's Services should ensure that children are returned to their families with a continuity of health, education and social supports comparable to what they received when they were in care.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

The ministry is working to align policies and practice to assist front-line staff to know what to do when health, education, or social supports are not readily accessible for children and families. Guidelines in policy and practice strategies assist staff to include more people in planning for the child's well-being and safety, and provide concrete steps to follow when gaps in services are found. Knowing what to do when an identified support is not available will help front-line staff collaborate more efficiently with families, communities, and other service providers to obtain those supports.

CONCLUSION

We would like to thank the Child and Youth Advocate for this report. In response to the profound legacy of residential schools and other traumas on Indigenous families and communities, governments across Canada have been working to reunify families whenever possible. At the same time, assessing and supporting the safety and well-being of children during the reunification process is complex.

The ministry uses leading practice and research to ensure complex needs are acknowledged, the right supports are in place, and that children are kept safe during this vulnerable period. This will include providing increased supports over a longer period of time so families are supported to deal with the complexities and challenges of reunification.

The tragic loss of these three children is a reminder of the vital role we all play in supporting families. Their deaths highlight the importance of ensuring that the right supports are in place for every child.

We accept the recommendations and will work to implement them to help support the safety and well-being of vulnerable children in Alberta.