



**Government of Alberta's Response to the
Child and Youth Advocate
*Toward a Better Tomorrow: Addressing the Challenge of
Aboriginal Youth Suicide***

September 2017

Background

On April 25, 2016, Alberta's Child and Youth Advocate released *Toward a Better Tomorrow: Addressing the Challenge of Aboriginal Youth Suicide* (Report), an investigative review that examined the lives of seven Indigenous¹ youth who died by suicide over an 18-month period between 2013 and 2014.

Each of these losses represents a young person whose hopes and dreams have been cut short, and our thoughts are with their families, friends and communities. Although many of us may not know what it feels like to lose someone in such a tragic way, we all share the pain of these losses in some form. This is what drives us to work together with Indigenous leaders and all levels of government to prevent these tragedies.

The deaths of these young people are painful reminders of the importance of effective action to address the high rates of suicides for Indigenous youth relative to non-Indigenous youth in our province and across the country. One youth lost to suicide is one too many. We are committed to continuing our work with Indigenous partners to better support those at risk and improve the overall collaboration and coordination of services to promote positive outcomes.

All seven individuals in the Report were either receiving child intervention services when they passed away or had received services within two years of their deaths. The youths, aged 14 to 18, came from different communities across the province with unique life experiences and histories of complex trauma that elevated their risk for suicide.

The Government of Alberta and Children's Services thank the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) for its continued role in advocating for children, youth, and families, to ensure issues affecting youth in our province, such as death by suicide, are addressed.

The Report makes 12 recommendations for the Government of Alberta and the Ministries of Children's Services, Health, and Education, as well as associated service delivery partners. Some of the recommendations focus on the practices of individual programs, such as improving training and knowledge for service providers working with Indigenous youth. Others are systemically focused on the government as a whole, such as increasing the self-determination of Indigenous communities in Alberta.

The Government of Alberta is committed to a renewed partnership with Indigenous peoples across our province. The Government of Alberta is also implementing the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in a manner that is consistent with Alberta law and the Constitution of Canada. Additionally, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, its Calls to Action, and the ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, show the need to partner with the Government of

¹ The document uses the words Aboriginal and Indigenous interchangeably, as the Advocate's Report uses the term "Aboriginal."

Canada to address issues such as youth suicide, in Indigenous communities. The Report's recommendations are similar to those in other current reports and processes in Alberta and Canada. *Valuing Mental Health: Alberta Mental Health Review 2015*, the Auditor General's report *Human Services: Systems to Deliver Child and Family Services to Indigenous Children in Alberta - July 2016*, and the OCYA's report *Voices for Change: Aboriginal Child Welfare in Alberta* all highlight the need to focus on root causes that affect Indigenous communities. A part of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention proceedings is to solicit feedback from experts and Indigenous communities on ways to improve ministry practices to address root causes and factors that contribute to child and family involvement in the child intervention system.

Response to Recommendations

The Government of Alberta fully accepts the intent of these recommendations and commits to working with the Advocate, Indigenous leaders, communities, and our partners to explore the best way to implement that intent.

Given the government's commitment to a renewed partnership with Indigenous peoples in our province, it is crucial that a response to this important issue is undertaken in collaboration with Indigenous communities to develop community-led and culturally grounded actions.

Work has begun to develop a provincial youth suicide prevention plan with a focus on Indigenous youth. The strategy is co-led by Children's Services and Health, and is being developed in collaboration with cross-ministry partners in Education, Justice and Solicitor General, Indigenous Relations and Alberta Health Services, and Indigenous communities and other community organizations.

As part of ongoing efforts to improve our cultural practices, the Government of Alberta is implementing a number of initiatives to help address recommendations related to practice and policy of Children's Services, Education, and Health, as well as the systemic recommendations highlighted in the Report.

Recommendations Related to Practice in Children's Services, Education and Health

Children's Services will continue to focus collectively on the enhancement, ongoing development, and implementation of existing programs and services for Indigenous youth and families to reduce risk factors and remove barriers to accessing culturally relevant programs and services. These approaches include but are not limited to:

- Continuing to support a strengths-based practice approach that is culturally reflective and responsive through the ongoing implementation and integration of the Child Intervention Practice Framework and associated practice strategies, including Signs of Safety;
- Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD) is an ongoing approach to encourage collaboration at local and regional levels among Health (including

Alberta Health Services), Children's Services, Community and Social Services, Education, school authorities, and community partners to meet the needs of children, youth and their families more effectively. There are 17 RCSD regions across the province that work collaboratively and share available resources to address regionally identified needs, coordinate and leverage systems, build system capacity, and plan for sustainability. In 2016, RCSD began the engagement and planning work to include interested First Nations across Alberta. We will continue to provide collaborative leadership and support to RCSD regions as they work toward the desired outcomes.

- The Alberta Mentoring Partnership supports evidenced-based mentoring programs that reduce risk factors and build protective influences for children and youth, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. Through this partnership, Education and Children's Services continue to ensure that tools developed will help reduce risk factors and enhance connections to supportive adults for children and youth. A new mentoring initiative developed in the Wood Buffalo region supports Indigenous youth whose communities were affected by the Fort McMurray wildfire. This is managed by the Boys and Girls Club in Fort McMurray, and is supported by the Prevention and Early Intervention Branch in Children's Services. In addition, the Aboriginal Mentoring Handbook was refreshed to equip mentoring agencies supporting Indigenous youth and their mentors in a more culturally appropriate way. We continue to explore how mentorship can play a positive, life-changing role in the lives of children and youth.
- Alberta Health continues to work on mental health and suicide prevention through the *Valuing Mental Health* initiative. In February 2016, the initial review specifically recommended partnering among the Government of Alberta and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, and communities to meet their mental health needs more effectively. Released in June 2017, *Valuing Mental Health: Next Steps* specifically addresses children and youth, and Indigenous people, as two of four target populations. Work on *Valuing Mental Health* will be coordinated with the development of the provincial youth suicide prevention plan.
- Alberta Health Services is issuing community-based grants under the Honouring Life: Aboriginal Youth and Community Empowerment Strategy for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and organizations to develop and implement wellness programming. Implementing this strategy enables provincial services and systems to support holistic community-led localized strategies to address Indigenous youth deaths as a result of suicide. The strategy is ongoing and active within seven Alberta First Nations, eight Metis Settlements and five urban Indigenous organizations.

Children's Services, Education, and Health will also focus on:

- Expanding evidence-informed suicide prevention training for service providers administering support to Indigenous youth; and
- Ensuring supports are available to Indigenous young people who have lost someone significant to suicide.

Systemic Recommendations for the Government of Alberta

Many of the factors that contribute to the increased risk of Indigenous youth dying by suicide are exacerbated by issues that extend beyond the scope of the practices and processes related to child intervention services. In many Indigenous communities, factors relate to poor infrastructure, cultural disconnection, geographical isolation, unemployment, marginalization, and intergenerational trauma. The Report acknowledges these social and community challenges, and notes that “the quality and health of our communities dramatically influences the quality of the routine settings in which we have our interactions with others.” To implement the intent of the Report’s recommendations, consideration needs to go beyond individual factors and programs to include the overall health of the community.

Several initiatives by the Government of Alberta and our associated service partners will work towards a collective approach focused on community needs, including:

- Implementing cultural training for ministry staff and service providers that supports meaningful engagement with Indigenous peoples;
- Incorporating cultural components into services provided for Indigenous youth; and
- Focusing on prevention and early intervention supports for Indigenous parents and children.

Several of the Report’s recommendations highlight the need for collective action by government ministries and service providers. Children’s Services continues to work with all ministries involved to ensure Indigenous communities are supported and have the tools to support their members.

Progress on this important issue also requires a strong, collaborative partnership with the Government of Canada. Given its public commitments to an improved relationship with Indigenous Canadians, the federal and provincial governments, along with Indigenous leaders, have an opportunity to make substantial progress on the many issues that impact rates of Indigenous death by suicide.

Conclusion

It is heartbreaking to think of any young person losing hope, feeling alone and helpless, or believing their community or their society is not there for them.

The deaths of these young people are tragic reminders of the urgency for taking timely and meaningful action to address the increasing rates of Indigenous youth deaths by suicide in our province and across the country. They are losses not only for those who loved and cared for these young people, but also for our community as Albertans and as human beings. We all feel these losses in some way, which is why we remain steadfast in our commitment to do what it takes to prevent these tragedies.

As we implement the intent of the Advocate's recommendations, the Government of Alberta will collaborate with Indigenous leaders and experts to create community-led and culturally grounded actions that address the identified needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities across the province.

Meaningful collaboration will require time and partnerships with Indigenous communities to explore how the recommendations made by the OCYA and other reports can prevent youth suicide in Alberta. Part of this collaboration is occurring through the proceedings of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention.

The Government of Alberta thanks the Advocate for his review and recommendations. The Government remains committed to working with the Advocate, Indigenous communities and service delivery partners to prevent Indigenous youth deaths by suicide in Alberta.