



**Ministry of Children's Services Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
*"17-Year-Old Onessa: An Investigative Review"***

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Children's Services

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Background

In 2014, a 17-year-old youth died by suicide. Though the youth was not receiving child intervention services at the time of her death, she and her family had been involved with Children's Services in the past. The death of any child is a tragedy. Our thoughts are with this young person's family, friends and community as they continue to grieve her loss. We thank the Advocate for this report and we share his desire to make improvements to the ways Children's Services support children and families in need.

Onessa and her family were involved with child intervention due to parent-teen conflict and concerns related to mental health. Onessa's mom was a strong advocate for her safety and well-being, and Onessa was connected with medical and mental health professionals. Police services were also involved due to risk of sexual exploitation. The child intervention file was closed when protection concerns were not substantiated and Onessa declined further services.

The Advocate's report, *17-Year-Old-Onessa: An Investigative Review*, makes one recommendation for the ministry regarding assessment and intervention for young people at-risk of Internet sexual exploitation.

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 ministry partners, including other divisions, regional service delivery partners and other ministries.

Ongoing improvement is essential for the child intervention system. Evidence-informed intervention casework practice in Alberta continues to evolve and incorporate new learnings, feedback and input from a variety of sources, including external reviews, research, the experiences of service delivery staff, and an analysis of the outcomes of children, youth and families receiving services.

The Advocate plays a key role in identifying systemic issues that impact vulnerable children and youth. We welcome recommendations from the Advocate to support the safety and well-being of vulnerable Albertans receiving intervention services.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation #1:

The Ministry of Human Services should:

- a) Review the relevant legislation and policy to consider an enhanced definition of child sexual exploitation; and
- b) Provide assessment and interventions that are specific to young people at risk of Internet sexual exploitation.

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

Thorough assessment of a child or youth's safety and well-being is core to the work of Children's Services. Internet usage among young people continues to grow at a rapid pace and as technologies develop and evolve, so too must child intervention policy and practice. That's why the ministry is currently reviewing its policy and practice related to services provided under the *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act* (PSECA) and the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (CYFEA) to ensure that they reflect assessment and consideration of Internet usage.

Children's Services has revised policy to include a review of a child or youth's online activities when assessing their safety and well-being. While awaiting a broader review of child intervention legislation, including the PSECA, an enhanced definition of sexual exploitation will be incorporated into the PSECA Policy Manual. Further, as a part of enhancing awareness, the ministry will provide training to front-line service delivery staff on best practices for assessing a young person's Internet usage and safety.

Internet safety is an issue that affects all Albertan children, youth and families. To support Internet safety, Children's Services, along with its cross-ministry and community partners, will also refresh websites that have relevant safety information and training for Albertans, including those families receiving child intervention services.

The Advocate also highlights in his report several previous recommendations regarding youth suicide, and indigenous youth suicide in particular. Work is underway on 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 with cross-ministry partners in Education, Justice and Solicitor General, Indigenous Relations and Alberta Health Services, Indigenous communities and other community organizations.

Conclusion

Children's Services thanks the Advocate for its review and recommendation. The exploitation and abuse of young people is a devastating crime that no Albertan should have to experience. Enhancing Internet safety and preventing child sexual exploitation are matters of critical importance that require nimble, innovative solutions. Through ongoing improvement, Children's Services continues to strengthen how it supports and protects children, youth and families across Alberta.