

Government of Alberta

Multi-Sector Review: Youth Assault of a Member of the Public

Findings and Recommendations

January 31, 2020



Children's Services, Government of Alberta

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
FINDINGS	5
Finding #1: Early access to and availability of assessments that consider a young person's range of needs helps a family manage and make connections to supports.....	5
Finding #2: Ongoing support is essential for families with complex service needs who are involved with multiple systems and secure settings	6
Finding #3: Despite coordinated services, families and service providers still face challenges in escalating concerns.	7
RECOMMENDATIONS	9
Recommendation #1: The Government of Alberta establish a cross-ministry response team to help children, youth and families with complex service needs.	9
Recommendation #2: The Government of Alberta review secure settings to determine if they are meeting the needs of youth with complex service needs.	10
CONCLUSION	10

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a youth assaulted a member of the public, which resulted in serious injury to the victim.

The Government of Alberta directed an internal review to assess how various government programs and services were provided to the youth and the youth's family. The committee included representatives from the Ministries of Children's Services, Community and Social Services, Justice and Solicitor General, and Health, as well as Alberta Health Services.

The review examined how services were provided to this family to learn what could be done differently to prevent similar incidents in the future. The Government of Alberta is concerned about this incident and is committed to ensuring services meet the needs of children, youth and their families.

Partners, from the sectors represented on the committee, contributed to the development of the findings and recommendations collaboratively. To understand the family's perspective, government partners met in person with the family. Cross-sector partners focused on this understanding when developing the findings and recommendations, and the family also provided written information that was used to guide and inform this report.

FINDINGS

Three findings were identified in the review.

Finding #1: Early access to and availability of assessments that consider a young person's range of needs helps a family manage and make connections to supports.

Family members continually expressed a willingness and desire to care for the youth and, to this day, the youth maintains a strong connection with family. This connection endured even though family members experienced several challenges: intergenerational trauma from experiences in residential schools, substance abuse, family violence, and occasional homelessness.

The review found gaps in assessments of the youth and the youth's family's ability to care for the youth:

- The youth and family did not undergo assessments in a timely way, and sometimes not at all. This included neuropsychological, caregiver, mental health and risk assessments.
- The youth demonstrated developmental delays early in life. However, the youth did not undergo a full neuropsychological assessment until the youth was a teenager.
 - Children and youth with compromised brain function can develop increasingly complicated problems if left unsupported.
- The family's experiences affected their ability to deal with the youth's complex needs.
 - Family members experienced trauma: the maternal grandparents are survivors of the residential school system, which may have played a role in the family's struggles with addiction. The youth's mother experienced at least two traumatic events in her childhood and did not receive any mental health support to help her cope with the impact of those events.
 - Intergenerational trauma — the way in which a person unintentionally passes the trauma from their own experiences onto the next generation — can have devastating effects on successive generations and create a deep distrust of service providers.
 - Members of the family also experienced violence, neglect, substance abuse, and mental health issues, which made it more difficult for them to engage in services.
- How root issues impacted family members, plus the nature of relationships between family members and how these impacted individuals within the family, were not fully identified or addressed.
- There was no assessment of the family's willingness and ability to care for the youth or of what supports would make this easier for the family.

Comprehensive assessment (such as addiction and mental health, neuropsychological, caregiver and risk assessment) can help determine appropriate services for a family when involvement of different public services is required.

The review also noted that when the youth's family gave the youth structure and supports, the family was more stable. At times the youth's family faced challenges in providing that structure and support without additional outside assistance.

- In the youth's younger years, services were mostly provided to the family at times of heightened need or crisis.
 - Ongoing support is essential for families with complex service needs who are involved with child intervention.
- Government supports for the family during the youth's younger years were often mandated, which contributed to a lack of trust by the family.
 - It is important for families involved with child intervention to play an active role in engaging available services and supports. When there is an extensive history of trauma, relationship-based support is critical to build trust and achieve success.
- In times when the youth's family advocated for additional benefits, such as kinship care supports, they did not receive direction regarding any other relevant supports from which they might have benefitted.

Finding #2: Ongoing support is essential for families with complex service needs who are involved with multiple systems and secure settings.

For the purposes of the review, "secure settings" include any facility that confines youth for justice or welfare reasons, including youth justice facilities, hospitals or treatment facilities. Their focus is to provide safe, secure places for youth to stabilize if they are a danger to themselves or others.

The youth, in this case, experienced multiple, rapid transitions between various facilities and placements under the *Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act* (PChAD), the *Mental Health Act*, and Secure Services under the *Child, Youth, and Family Enhancement Act*. On some occasions, the youth experienced transitions between all of these placements within a period of two months.

The review found the following gaps and issues regarding transition planning in this case:

- The youth's family struggled to obtain comprehensive assessments for the youth and access services.
- There were times when the youth was scheduled for release but plans for living arrangements or placements had not been confirmed.
 - Transitioning quickly can be traumatic and differences in program approaches (e.g. medical vs. psycho-social) can be difficult for youth to manage, especially those with complex needs and cognitive difficulties.
- In some instances, the youth's family members voiced concerns about the youth returning to their care following release from a facility or placement. An Indigenous family wellness worker was engaged to assist the family in addressing those concerns.
 - Youth and family understanding of why transitions are taking place can help families know how they can be involved and supportive.

- In one instance, the youth was subject to a Secure Services order directly after release from a PChAD facility because the youth had not stabilized during the maximum length of stay allowed by PChAD legislation.

Outside of youth justice, the length of stays in secure settings are generally short because of legislative restrictions on confinement.

- Secure settings are not meant to provide long-term treatment for youth. Rather, the intent is that youth transition to less-intrusive care options to receive treatment once they have stabilized.
- Sometimes youth with complex needs take longer to stabilize, which can mean they face multiple, rapid transitions between different short-term programs in an effort to help them achieve stability.

A report released by the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate ([*Into Focus: Calling Attention to Youth Opioid Use in Alberta*](#); 2018) recommended that Alberta Health review the PChAD Act and its policies, so related services better meet the needs of youth and their families.

- The report recommended reviewing:
 - Court processes for families;
 - Timelines and services; and
 - Services after PChAD involvement ends.
- The recommendation was accepted, and Alberta Health is conducting a review. The review and any resulting recommendations are expected to be complete in 2020.
- Alberta Health Services already completed an internal evaluation of PChAD, which included actions to improve policies and practices to facilitate a seamless transition to post-PChAD treatment programs and services.

Finding #3: Despite coordinated services, families and service providers still face challenges in escalating concerns.

Historically, ministries involved with the youth and the youth's family tended to work in isolation from each other. Agencies working to support this family did not generally share information. However, over time, there was enhanced collaborative work between service providers, which improved information-sharing and service coordination.

Starting in 2017, cross-ministry collaboration assisted in planning for coordinated services for the youth and the youth's family, including regularly scheduled case-conference meetings between the family and a planning team.

- The planning team consisted of the case management lead with child intervention services; representatives from the youth's school; Alberta Health Services (including the youth's psychiatrist and clinical health team); community organizations and representatives from

Indigenous community programs.

- The wide variety of expertise at these case conference meetings provided flexible service options and solutions for the family's recurring complex issues. Sectors used a variety of approaches to address issues faced by the youth and the youth's family, including, but not limited to: cultural supports, Community Treatment Orders, and 24/7 in-home supports.

Despite improvements in how sectors collaborated, the review heard that collaborative approaches to case conferencing and service planning continued to face challenges:

- Team members had concerns about the collaborative care planning and outcomes for the youth and the youth's family.
- Service providers assess risks in different ways, based on their expertise and care approach. At some points in the planning, risk assessments did not align between sectors. This resulted in conflicting advice and treatment planning for the youth and the youth's family.
- The multiple services offered exceeded the family's capacity to carry out the treatment plan without the addition of more supports.
 - The case conferencing team did not have any official processes for escalating collective concerns about the youth and the youth's family.

Information-sharing and collaborative practice have changed substantially since the youth and family's interaction with government services. For example, protocols have been developed to outline how sectors interact, and changes to legislation have given ministries greater flexibility to share information to enhance planning.

In cases where complex family challenges require the involvement of multiple sectors, cross-ministry collaboration needs to take a broader approach to problem-solving:

- to view how issues facing a youth and family can be collectively managed;
- to align resources based on needs of youth and families; and
- to address root causes that undermine the family's capacity to carry out treatment plans.

Additionally, collaborative approaches also need to find more ways to address emerging needs, so that complex service needs faced can be addressed early.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: The Government of Alberta establish a cross-ministry response team to help children, youth and families with complex service needs.

- Development of the response team will focus on:
 - A process to allow individual ministries and/or multi-sector case conferencing teams to escalate concerns about high-risk situations, such as cases where children, youth and families require supports from multiple sectors such as mental health and addictions, resources for children with disabilities, housing supports, etc.
 - The escalation process would inform senior leaders when there is a child, youth or family with complex service needs involved with multiple ministries. This will provide additional oversight and expedite services if unintended barriers emerge.
 - An evaluation of barriers to enhanced, timely, cross-ministry collaboration. This could include evaluating:
 - the authority structure of current cross-ministry teams;
 - the financial structures that may limit the ability of ministries to meet the immediate needs of children, youth and families;
 - access to data and information on the challenges facing children, youth and families;
 - how multi-sector case conference teams interact and build trust with families; and
 - barriers affecting policies and programs.
 - Development and implementation of an evaluation framework to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of the cross-ministry response team.
- The response team will take a holistic approach to meeting the needs of children, youth and families with complex service needs and include all sectors that affect children and youth, and youth transitioning to adulthood.

Outcome: Children, youth and families with complex service needs will have access to timely and coordinated supports from across government services, to address issues as early as possible.

Recommendation #2: The Government of Alberta review secure settings to determine if they are meeting the needs of youth with complex service needs.

- Children’s Services, Community and Social Services, Health, and Justice and Solicitor General will explore emerging practices such as legislated lengths of stay, transition strategies, and potential treatment pathways. Other ministries may also be invited to participate in the review.
- This review will align with or include the following:
 - Health’s current review of the *Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act* and its associated policies; and
 - Health’s review of the *Mental Health Act* and detention provisions.
- Children’s Services will conduct a legislative review and evaluation of secure services under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*.
- The Government of Alberta will provide joint recommendations for provincial legislative and policy changes for secure services to improve effectiveness and reduce the need for transitions between secure settings.

Outcome: Children and youth have secure and safe settings to maximize the potential of recovery.

CONCLUSION

The Government of Alberta is committed to ensuring services meet the needs of children, youth and their families. The findings and recommendations outlined in this review identify a number of opportunities to improve how ministries collaborate to support children, youth and families.

There are several actions currently underway to address the findings and recommendations in this report. In summer 2019, Alberta Health began a review of the *Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act*, which includes a review of secure settings. A cross-ministry leadership committee has been formed to focus on improving services for youth and families with complex service needs. To improve cross-ministry collaboration, a toolkit has been developed that guides information-sharing between those who plan or provide critical programs and services for children and youth.

The Government of Alberta will continue to act on the findings and recommendations in this review. This includes development of a cross-ministry response team to increase coordination and efficiency of government services for children, youth and families with complex service needs. Additionally, a review of secure settings will focus on aligning government services to reduce difficulties faced by children, youth and families in accessing and maintaining effective treatment.