



**Ministry of Human Services' Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
*15-Year-Old Tony: Investigative Review***

May 2015

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Background

The death of a young person affects everyone who is involved in the young person's life. In October 2012, a youth who was receiving services under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* died by suicide. Our thoughts are with this youth's family, friends and community. It is hard to understand and accept that a youth could believe that their only option left is to end their life.

We need to learn as much as possible from this youth's life, and death, to make the lives of other youth in Alberta better. Whenever there is a serious incident involving a child receiving intervention services we to examine the circumstances surrounding the death, to reflect on our practice, identify where we did well and where improvements could be made by our ministry, as well as by other government ministries and community service delivery partners.

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) plays a key role in identifying systemic issues pertaining to vulnerable children and youth, whether they arise in the course of the OCYA's day-to-day service provision or emerge as part of an investigation into a single case. For this reason, we welcome the OCYA's perspective and insight.

The *Child and Youth Advocate Act* provides the Advocate with the authority to investigate systemic issues arising from a serious injury or death of a child who was receiving child intervention services at the time of injury or death. The Advocate released an investigative review entitled *15-Year-Old Tony: An Investigative Review* ("the report") on November 26, 2014. The report makes recommendations about three key areas related to practice and processes concerning services to vulnerable children in Alberta.

The ministry's response includes information gathered from

- A review of existing policies in comparison to issues identified in the report.
- A review of current ministry initiatives in comparison to issues identified in the report.
- Engagement with internal ministry partners, including other divisions and our regional service delivery partners about opportunities to enhance practice and service delivery approaches.

Child intervention practice in Alberta continues to evolve and incorporate new learning, based on ongoing input from external reviews, research evidence-based practices and feedback from Albertans receiving services, community stakeholders and delivery partners. Much work is underway; however, improvements and enhancements are needed to address some of the areas identified for systemic improvement as a result of this young person's death.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1: *The Ministry of Human Services, with its service delivery partners, should strengthen processes related to:*

- *The search for meaningful relationships in an Aboriginal child's life and ensure that the extended family of both parents is explored.*
- *The ability of placement facilities to provide Aboriginal children in care continuous and ongoing access to traditional knowledge and activities.*
- *These processes should be documented and audited for compliance to ensure that Aboriginal children remain connected to their family, community and culture.*

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

Engagement of extended family, maternal and paternal, is a necessary part of supporting children and youth and their connection to family, culture and community. Continued implementation of the Child Intervention Practice Framework and Signs of Safety support family engagement and connectivity. Revised caregiver training will be implemented in 2015/2016.

Current contract and caregiver requirements reflect the need for placement resources to facilitate ongoing access to culturally appropriate activities for Aboriginal children. Ongoing efforts to monitor and support current practice are underway. An evaluation will be completed as part of the ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and any identified concerns will be addressed.

Recommendation 2: *The Ministry of Human Services, with its service delivery partners, should require a suicide risk inventory be completed for all young people, who have been identified as at risk of suicide, on a regular and ongoing basis – not just at the time of crisis.*

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the intent of this recommendation for ongoing assessment and awareness of a young person's needs and potential risk for suicide.

As part of the implementation of the Child Intervention Practice Framework and Signs of Safety, an active review of assessment, practice alignment and well-being factors incorporated into outcomes is underway and expected to be completed in 2016/2017.

Current policy related to suicide will be reviewed and revised as necessary to ensure the ongoing requirement to be aware of and assess a child, who is not only actively suicidal but may be at risk, is reflected in the next policy revision cycle in 2015/2016.

Recommendation 3: *The Ministry of Human Services, with its service delivery partners, should review policy and practice in information sharing when a child transitions to a new placement. Emphasis must be placed on direct communication between day-to-day caregivers to support the continuity of successful treatment approaches. This means those caregivers who work directly with young people in their placements.*

Ministry response: The ministry accepts the recommendation.

The recommendation for caregiver involvement to support placement transitions is reflected in current policy and practice. Ongoing efforts to monitor and support current practice are underway, including an article in the Alberta Foster Parent Association *Bridge* in the spring of 2015 and ongoing discussion at the Provincial Placement Resources Table. An evaluation will be completed as part of the ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and any identified concerns will be addressed.

Conclusion

Youth suicide is a broad societal issue. Alberta Health Services identifies suicide as a leading cause of death among Albertans; suicide claims more lives annually than motor vehicle collisions, AIDS or homicides¹. According to the Alberta Injury Prevention Centre, suicide is the single greatest cause of injury-related deaths for Aboriginal people with a youth rate five to seven times higher than the national average².

We have a shared responsibility, along with communities and families, to support the safety, security and well-being of Alberta's children. We continue to take action on multiple levels that range from establishing strategic partnerships and relationships to service delivery and supports that directly serve the needs of Aboriginal people. There is a shared understanding between the ministry and Aboriginal leadership and communities about the need to deliver services that better support Aboriginal children, youth and families.

Child intervention is one part of integrated response of government ministries, community service delivery partners and the community in general. We believe effective and substantive changes to the child intervention system will evolve from continued investment in improving and strengthening practice, and in strengthening our relationships with other service delivery systems.

The ministry continues to learn from the lived experience of the children, youth and families we serve, as well as from what external bodies have to say about the quality of the services we are providing and the outcomes we are achieving. Our focus will remain on the safety and well-being of children, creating strong families and making sure there is continuous improvement of the system as a whole – throughout the province for all Albertans. The ministry is committed to working collaboratively with the OCYA to facilitate improved outcomes for children, youth and their families.

¹ <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2774.asp>

² <http://injurypreventioncentre.ca/suicide>