



**Ministry of Human Services' Response to the  
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate  
2013/2014 Annual Report**

**December 2014**

*Alberta*   
Human Services

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## Background

The *Child and Youth Advocate Act* requires the Advocate to report annually to the Legislative Assembly about the work of the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA). The ministry is pleased to respond to the Advocate's 2013/2014 Annual Report.

Human Services continues to welcome the Advocate's comments on ways to strengthen the child intervention system and on our shared goal to achieve positive outcomes for Alberta's children, youth and families.

In 2013/2014, Human Services received and responded to 43 recommendations for the child intervention system, including 16 from the OCYA.

Responses are posted on the Human Services website. All recommendations are being tracked (with immediate actions taken where necessary in the short term) and are analyzed to determine themes, assess work underway, identify current opportunities and options, identify collaborative actions required with partnering ministries and, finally, determine next steps.

## Response to Recommendations

**The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate's 2013/2014 Annual Report did not include formal recommendations for the Ministry of Human Services or the Child Intervention system.**

The report states:

- *“The Ministry’s responses often do not address the recommendations, but rather, include a summary of activities that are already underway and do not directly link to the Advocate’s recommendations. In most cases, the progress noted relates to the Ministry’s commitment to take action, yet there has actually been minimal action taken on most of the Advocate’s recommendations. Also, some of the Ministry’s responses are similar to what was provided previously, so no further progress is noted.*
- *These reports stress the need for the Child Intervention system to build a structured process that ensures responses to the Advocate’s recommendations translate into actual practice improvements. When a child dies, it is important that everyone learns from the tragedy. The Advocate’s recommendations are intended to help facilitate this learning, so that those who provide services to young people can improve their circumstances and avoid similar tragedies from occurring in the future.”*

The ministry believes that the commitment and actions identified in previous responses are directly related to the intent of past recommendations, with the ultimate goal of quality assurance and continuous improvement for the child intervention system.

The ministry has rigorous internal procedures that help us identify issues similar to those identified in reports from the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate or other bodies with oversight. Those internal procedures direct and drive ongoing improvements. That is why the ministry’s response details activities and steps taken to improve the overall quality of the services we provide. These activities have ranged from policy development and revision to training implementation, as well as service delivery and program development and enhancements, all of which need to be sequenced and paced in a way that can be executed and implemented successfully so that we meet our overall objective of sustainable system improvement.

The ministry shares the Advocate’s assertion that the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care is one of the most significant challenges within Alberta’s child intervention system.

Across Canada, this over-representation is driven primarily by situations involving neglect, which is linked to root causes, including poverty, inadequate housing, mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence. Short-term, protection-focused strategies on their own are not enough.

Human Services continues to work with other ministries, the federal government, Aboriginal leadership, communities and agencies to develop a broader, more comprehensive response to the root causes that bring families to the attention of the child intervention system. This is why the Government of Alberta has tasked Human Services to work with community-based organizations to

develop a poverty reduction strategy, support ongoing work to prevent and reduce homelessness and invest in mental health supports.

All new child intervention program, practice and policy development is done with a view to specifically improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families. Recent child intervention program enhancements have included the adoption of [Signs of Safety and the Child Intervention Practice Framework](#). We are engaging with families and extended families in a different and more collaborative way to identify strengths and support networks so that children can remain safely at home.

We have also implemented new kinship training and support, with dedicated extended family search workers and kinship support workers in most regions. Staff are collaborating with family and communities earlier on in our involvement to identify family members or significant people in the child's life as a kinship care placement option for any child coming into care. This supports greater connection to family, culture and community.

The ministry has provided funding to First Nations communities to ensure cultural and community involvement in decision making and planning for their children who are involved with the intervention system. Early involvement of a "First Nations Designate" is helping to identify natural support networks that allow children to remain at home and/or with family.

Human Services is working closely with Alberta Health Services to enhance access to mental health supports for children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect, and to ensure front-line staff and caregivers can access crisis mental health services for the children they care for. More than 1,300 Human Services staff and service delivery partners have received Mental Health First Aid training so they can recognize the early signs of mental health problems.

## Moving Forward

The Minister's [Implementation Oversight Committee](#) (IOC) was appointed in January 2014 to prioritize responses to previous recommendations for improving the child intervention system. Based on IOC feedback and recommendations, the Child and Family Services Division has initiated the development of a formalized approach to responding, actioning, tracking and reporting on recommendations that are received.

This approach relies heavily on collaboration with recommending bodies to support the development of clear, actionable high quality recommendations for system improvements. Implementing this approach will support the ministry in creating measurable action plans, based on the intended impact of the recommendation. It will also support tracking and reporting on progress in a way that is clear, open and transparent. The approach has been discussed with the Child and Youth Advocate and additional collaborative efforts will continue.

In accordance with new provisions within the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* as a result of Bill 11, public reporting on recommendations received and progress will be posted online each year.

## Conclusion

Throughout the year, the Child and Family Services Division has maintained a strong working relationship with the OCYA through regular meetings to support ongoing exchange of information and through working groups focused on policy development and revision, program development and design, and information sharing.

The Child and Family Services Division is committed to continuing the collaborative working relationship with the Advocate and his staff. By working together to meet the needs and of the children, youth and families receiving intervention services, we can model collaboration and principle-based practice where children, youth and families are heard, valued, included and respected. The ministry welcomes the OCYA's observations regarding systemic issues, and strives to be proactive in making improvements and being responsive to recommendations made in past reports.

As in previous years, we continue to focus on strengthening practice, tailoring supports and services to meet the challenges of each family, and providing creative and accessible training and development for caregivers, child intervention workers and agency partners that will lead to improved outcomes. We have a shared responsibility with other government ministries, communities, and families, to support the safety, security and well-being of Alberta's children.

We thank the Advocate for his ongoing advocacy for Alberta's children and for supporting them to have a voice and be able to express their views and interests. We look forward to continued collaboration to support positive outcomes for children, youth and their families.