



**Ministry of Human Services' Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
"Remembering Brian – An Investigative Review"**

September 2013

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Background

The unexpected death of a young person is a tragedy that affects everyone who is involved with that young person. In June 2012, a youth who was receiving services under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* died by suicide. It is hard to fathom a life so devoid of hope that a young person is moved to end his own life. We are moved by the need to ensure that we learn as much as possible from this horrible event and the life which led up to it in order to make the lives of other young Albertans better.

The *Child and Youth Advocate Act* provides the Advocate with the authority to “investigate systemic issues arising from a serious injury to or the death of a child who was receiving a designated service at the time of the injury or death.” The Child and Youth Advocate released his first Investigation Review on July 2, 2013, “Remembering Brian: An Investigative Review.”

Whenever there is a serious incident involving a child in care, we examine the circumstances, reflect on our practice, identify where we did well and where improvements could be made by our Ministry, as well as our cross-ministry and community service delivery partners.

The report makes six recommendations about four key areas related to practice and processes with the child intervention system in Alberta. The Ministry agrees with all six of the recommendations and recognizes and acknowledges the spirit and intent of the systemic recommendations put forward by the Advocate. While the report identifies specific strategies, the Ministry has a variety of activities and work currently underway we can build upon to achieve these outcomes.

Child intervention practice in Alberta reflects a continuous progression that includes the creation of the Alberta Response Model; the introduction of the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*, Outcomes-based Service Delivery; and a focus on child and family outcomes that measure key indicators of safety, permanency, well-being, and family and community support. This progression is based on ongoing input from a variety of sources including: external reviews; research into promising practice; experiences of staff; and, analysis of outcomes for children, youth and families receiving child intervention services in Alberta.

We have learned that new tools, guidelines and policies, while important, are only part of the solution to improving outcomes for children and families. Effective and substantive changes to the child intervention system will arise from continued investment in supporting the work of staff and strengthening their practice with children, youth and families. What we have learned from Brian's life will be part of our continued learning and movement forward.

Specific Responses to the Recommendations in the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Report “Remembering Brian: An Investigative Review”

Recommendation #1: Child Intervention Services should engage in comprehensive assessments to ensure a balance is struck between child-focused and family-centered approaches. It is vital that intervention services not only address the presenting issues in a family, but also fully examine and address the impacts those issues have had on children in the family.

Response: Agree

Child intervention assessments require a thorough examination of immediate safety concerns, and identifying the strengths that exist within the family to alleviate these concerns. At times, tension may be created by trying to reconcile two opposing expectations: keeping children safe and keeping families together.

Commitment:

The Ministry will continue to incorporate leading and evidence-based practice to inform comprehensive and balanced assessment processes. We utilize well-researched assessment tools for use at all stages of involvement, with components that explore childhood development, parenting capacity, family / environmental factors and family violence. The Ministry currently has a working group focused on examining and improving assessment practice, particularly at initial stages of involvement.

Actions:

1. We will revise our approach to the way we conduct assessments of children in need of intervention, by redefining risk and safety and building on the strength and resiliency of children, youth and families.

Recommendation #2: Guidelines should be developed that will aid caseworkers in assessing the impacts of family violence and parental addictions on children, and which provide direction for supporting children who have been exposed to these circumstances.

Response: Agree

The Ministry recognizes that family violence and parental addictions have a significant impact on children. The Ministry has policies, training and assessment tools to ensure a robust response to family violence or situations where parental addictions contribute to neglect, emotional injury, and/or physical or sexual abuse. Family violence and parental addictions are issues that can be most effectively addressed through an integrated response involving multiple systems.

Commitment:

The Ministry will continue to work collaboratively with health, addiction and mental health systems, the Courts and policing agencies in the development of practical strategies to assist caseworkers involved with families where family violence, addictions and/or mental health concerns are present. We will continue to build on positive steps already taken, such as the hiring of regional family violence and bullying coordinators, the development and implementation of the mandatory Screening Aide for Family Violence, the development and delivery of mandatory training on the *Protection Against Family Violence Act* and of Family Violence and Bullying 101, Substance Abuse and Addictions training, and delegation training for new staff which included examining the interconnectivity of alcohol addictions, family violence and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Actions:

We have initiated the following strategies:

1. We will develop and provide Family Violence training modules for front-line child intervention workers, police partners, shelter staff, and agency service delivery partners.
2. We will deliver Mental Health First Aid Training to front-line child intervention workers, agency staff and caregivers who interact with youth.
3. We will continue to be an active partner with Alberta Health on implementing the Addictions and Mental Health Strategy, so that children, youth and their families, including those at risk and in care, have access to services and community supports.

Recommendation #3: In developing support plans for children and their families, intervention workers should ensure that comprehensive plans are in place to support and maintain a child's cultural connections, recognizing that family, community and tradition are all important contributors to culture.

Response: Agree

Fostering and maintaining connections to family, culture and community are recognized as key components of a comprehensive case plan.

Commitment:

The Ministry will continue to work with service delivery partners to improve connections to community and culture for children and youth receiving services. We will continue to build on emerging promising practices to increase caregiver capacity across the province.

Actions:

1. We have multiple types of plans for staff to utilize in working with families and caregivers to address all aspects of a child or youth's needs, including supports specific to kinship care and supports specific to ties to community and culture. We will adopt and support approaches that better engage families, caregivers and communities in planning to ensure children and youth have opportunities to maintain or develop familial and cultural connections.

Recommendation #4: Kinship caregivers should be provided with specialized training and support plans which are both tailored to meet their individual and unique needs. The goal should be to ensure kinship caregivers have the resources they require to manage the unique challenges that come with their caregiving, such as dual loyalties, unrealistic expectations, changes in family dynamics and feelings of loss, guilt and shame.

Response: Agree

The Ministry recognizes that there are unique complexities and dynamics involved in being a kinship care provider. While training is certainly a component of ensuring successful kinship care placements, the support offered is also a critical element.

Commitment:

The Ministry will continue to support initiatives to improve understanding of the expectations placed on caregivers. Specific attention will be paid to supporting kinship care training and integration of that learning into their everyday experience. We will continue to build on progress that has already been made, including the update to the Orientation to Caregiver Training program, the development and implementation of the Kinship Caregiver Guidebook in 2010, and the strengthened and expanded kinship care policy package that was implemented in 2011.

Actions:

We have completed much of the work to develop and deliver specialized training for caregivers, as is recommended in the report. We will continue to move forward on specialized training opportunities that have been developed for all caregivers, including Safe Baby training, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Training, and the Transitioning Youth Successfully initiative, and will take additional steps.

1. We will work with the foster care community and our regional service delivery partners to provide universal access to foster parent supports and training for kinship caregivers.
2. Working with the Alberta Foster Parent Association and the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families, we will develop and provide specialized training for all caregivers, including resources focused on supporting youth in care to transition successfully to adulthood and providing care for drug-exposed infants as well as children and youth affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

Recommendation #5: Intervention workers should be provided specialized training so they have the competencies required to manage unique situations presented by kinship care arrangements. The goal should be to ensure caseworkers can effectively support kinship caregivers in providing protection, well-being, and a bridge to permanency for children in their care.

Response: Agree

Kinship care is the preferred placement for children. The unique complexities and dynamics of kinship care require a different type and level of casework support. Intervention staff need to understand these differences in order to provide effective services.

Commitment:

The Ministry will continue to support learning and training opportunities for staff. We will continue to place emphasis on building capacity for staff in this area.

Actions:

We have initiated multiple strategies to develop and deliver focused training for child intervention staff. The Ministry regularly delivers accessible, practical training via province-wide videoconferences on a variety of practice topics and we are convening a committee to examine issues regarding placements. Delegation training for new staff includes enhanced training on providing supports to foster and kinship care providers. We will be exploring other promising training opportunities as they emerge.

1. We will continue to work with our regional service delivery partners to develop strategies that will help caseworkers to better support kinship caregivers.
2. We will continue to look at how other jurisdictions address kinship care and how each regional service delivery partner operates their kinship care program to develop leading practices.

Recommendation #6: Alberta Human Services should review and amend policies and guidelines to bring about consistent practices among regions and ensure seamless, coordinated inter-regional delivery of intervention services.

Response: Agree

The Ministry recognizes that a change in residency for a child, youth or family should not result in a disruption in services. Our regional services delivery partners must work collaboratively in the co-ordination of services for children, youth and families that support their safety and well-being, regardless of where they live.

Commitment:

The Ministry will increase consistency and minimize administrative delays when a child, youth or family moves between service delivery areas. Focusing on the needs of the child and family, rather than geographic boundaries and administrative processes, will help to minimize the impact of these moves on the child's well-being. In addition, legislation has been introduced to dissolve the Child and Family Services Authorities. Services will continue to be provided but with better collaboration between the regional delivery partners.

Actions:

We have initiated much of the work as recommended in the report, and we will continue to build on the work being done by the Kinship File Transfer Committee, including reviewing existing policy, standard timelines and removing potential barriers to transfers. The Inter-regional/DFNA Point Person contact list was updated and placed in a more accessible area on the Ministry Intranet.

1. We will work with our regional service delivery partners to develop clarity and consistency in transferring and receiving files so that families, caregivers and the children in their care experience the least disruption in services and understand what types of supports will be provided and by whom.

2. We will ensure staff have easy access to an up-to-date Inter-regional/DFNA Point Person contact list.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Human Services was created in 2011 to align and integrate social-based programs to achieve positive outcomes for Albertans. Many of the issues that lead to a child and family requiring child intervention services are rooted in long-term societal concerns such as poverty, mental health issues, and addictions. Solutions to the issues take time and do not lie solely with the child intervention system. Human Services is working to address a number of these issues, including poverty, homelessness, family violence, early childhood development and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, all of which may result in children and families needing intervention services.

The Ministry has made, and will continue to make, significant investments in service delivery to children, youth and families involved with the child intervention system. We will continue to focus on strengthening practice; tailoring supports and services to meet the challenges of each family; and providing creative and accessible training for both caregivers and child intervention workers that will lead to improved outcomes.

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 on-the-ground services 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.

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. As Human Services continues to transform and to move towards delivering integrated services that are relevant, effective, and meet the needs of Albertans and our communities, Family and Community Engagement Councils have been proposed to replace the Child and Family Services Authority boards. The Family and Community Engagement Councils will build relationships and conduct meaningful engagement with communities and other stakeholders such as school boards, health advisory councils and municipalities to identify issues and collaborate on creating local solutions. The Councils will include Aboriginal co-chairs to ensure the social and cultural perspectives of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples are reflected.

The Ministry is confident that with the ongoing development of a Child Intervention Practice Framework, the proclamation of the *Children First Act*, the development of Alberta's Children's Charter and the upcoming review of the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*, we are continuing to build purposeful practice on a strong foundation of well-researched tools, policies, legislation and training that are taking us in a positive direction for children, youth and families.

The Ministry is committed to continuing to work collaboratively with the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate in addressing systemic issues and achieving mutually desired results for the child intervention system.