

## BACKGROUND:

Alberta was the first province in the country to have a Child and Youth Advocate. Alberta's Office of the Child and Youth Advocate provides individual and systemic advocacy for children and youth receiving services under the:

- *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (CYFEA)*, and
- *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act (PSECA)*.

It also provides training and support to individuals and organizations interested in learning more about how they can advocate for vulnerable children and families.

The Honourable Janis Tarchuk, Minister of Children and Youth Services, called for a review of child and youth advocacy in the province in November 2008.

A child and youth advocacy review committee made up of members internal and external to government, including two former youth in care, was asked to look at:

- How children and youth in care can have a strong voice while also providing the ability to identify and report on issues to help improve child welfare services;
- Best practices and promising approaches regarding transparent and accountable child and youth advocacy;
- Ways to enhance public reporting.

## ADVOCACY REVIEW REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

In July 2009, the Minister released the report and recommendations from the child and youth advocacy review committee. The government accepted all 10 recommendations and immediately began implementation.

The recommendations were developed in three areas that provide a comprehensive plan for strengthening the child and youth advocacy system and positioning our province as a leader in the area of child and youth advocacy:

### *Accountability, reporting and systemic advocacy:*

1. The Annual Report of the Child and Youth Advocate should be referred on an annual basis to the Policy Field Committee on Health for consideration, following the report's tabling in the Legislature.

With an established process of accountability to the Policy Field Committee on Health, the review committee believes that the Advocate should continue to report to the Minister of Children and Youth Services.

2. Quarterly Reports should be redesigned to focus on clearly tracking service issues, reporting the resolution of those issues, and identifying potential systemic issues and actions to serve as a basis for an Annual Report.
3. An expert advisory panel of youth and other key stakeholders should be utilized to facilitate more transparent and comprehensive identification and validation of systemic issues and actions.

### *Process improvements:*

4. The Advocate should proactively collaborate with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to enhance and foster working relationships with Aboriginal stakeholders, including, but not limited to, DFNAs, Métis and First Nation communities.
5. The relationship between the Advocate and service providers, such as foster parents, contracted agencies, and CFSA and DFNA staff, should be enhanced to identify and develop strategic alliances for change that will benefit children and youth.
6. The Advocate, together with the Ministry, CFSAs and DFNAs should strengthen the processes for dispute resolution available to children and youth receiving child welfare services. The processes should seek to optimize natural or community and professional advocacy options.
7. The Advocate should enhance the office's management system to better link business planning and reporting with child and youth outcomes. These linkages should be shared with the Ministry and service providers.

### *Role of the Advocate:*

8. Alberta's system for child and youth advocacy should reflect four core functions: (1) provide individual advocacy; (2) identify and address systemic challenges; (3) optimize professional advocacy; and (4) enhance natural or community advocacy. The Advocate should work with other stakeholders in Alberta's child welfare system to address each of these functions.
9. The Advocate and the Minister should develop a detailed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that formalizes roles and responsibilities of the Minister, the Ministry, and the Advocate.
10. The Advocate should review its operational processes, competencies, and structure to ensure alignment with changes that may occur as a result of implementation of the report recommendations.

## NEXT STEPS:

While these recommendations propose changes to the child and youth advocacy system in the province, they also preserve the things about the current system that are effective – particularly having an advocate whose main focus is representing the interests of individual children and youth receiving services from Children and Youth Services.

Implementing the recommendations will help ensure that children and youth in care continue to have a strong voice and that the work of the advocate is open, transparent, and accountable to Albertans.

For updates and further information, visit [www.child.alberta.ca/advocacyreport](http://www.child.alberta.ca/advocacyreport).