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For Immediate Release

### **Children's Advocate releases her annual report**

*A growing number of children coming into care and the severity of their challenges create an increase in demands for CFS services:  
Advocate calls for a society-wide approach to child welfare*

Manitoba's Children's Advocate, Billie Schibler, released her annual report for the fiscal year 2007-08 today.

The Children's Advocate cited that the number of children and youth coming into the care of the province continues to increase dramatically. In a six year period beginning in fiscal year 2002-03, the number of children and youth in care grew to 7,837, an increase of more than 2300 children.

"While there is no definitive answer to explaining the increase, CFS workers may be increasingly cautious in child protection matters," said the Children's Advocate. "Plus we are definitely seeing an increase in the number of children coming to the attention of the child welfare system with complex physical and emotional challenges as a result of escalating levels of violence, neglect and substance abuse."

The Children's Advocate noted that while the general public has been saddened and shocked by numerous tragedies in Manitoba's child welfare system, some are looking to find reasons why devolution may not have been successful. She emphasized that these matters require more than one system's response.

"Will we ever have enough resources of skilled, qualified social workers, caregivers and other service providers to meet these growing demands?" asked the Children's Advocate. "As a province attempting to put children first, the question becomes how do Manitobans get there? What is the responsibility of government, society and other service sectors in helping Manitoba find the way? "

Among the many issues shaping Manitoba's child welfare system, the Children's Advocate stressed that she is particularly concerned by:

- the high number of cases awaiting attention at intake to the child welfare system, compounded with high CFS staff turnover,

- the limitation of the child welfare system to legally protect children from damage prior to their birth,
- inconsistencies in services to children, due to the lack of availability in some areas of the province ,as well as inconsistencies in the manner which agencies under different provincial CFS authorities may deliver services, and
- the use of prescribed psychotropic medications to address trauma and resulting behaviours in children and youth rather than addressing their loss, trauma and abuse through therapeutic services.

In the fiscal year ending March 31, 2008, the Office of the Children's Advocate (OCA) received 1,444 service requests, opened 715 new cases and closed 640 cases.

As a result of the concerns raised during casework, the OCA made 66 formal, written recommendations to agencies providing child welfare services, which identified:

- lack of extension of care/age of majority service planning for youth
- breach of service standards, policies, best practices related to:
  - o confidentiality
  - o protection investigations
  - o reunifications of families
  - o follow-up on reporting "Child in Need of Protection"
  - o improper service planning and/or case follow-up
  - o lack of case/file documentation or entry into the CFS Information System
  - o lack of safety planning or caregiver safety checks
  - o lack of therapeutic follow-up for children regarding grief, separation and loss
  - o inadequate staff and foster parent/caregiver training
  - o lack of contact with children and youth as per service standards
  - o lack of appropriate family contact for children in care (i.e.: separated siblings)
  - o breach of preserving and promoting cultural/linguistic needs of children and youth in care
  - o not ensuring children, youth and families are fully informed or included in their case plan and their rights
  - o lack of follow-up on required formal assessments (i.e.: behavioral, medical, cognitive, developmental, mental health addictions and parental capacity) for children, youth and/or caregivers.

Additional work priorities centered on:

- the transition of responsibility for reviewing publicly funded services around child deaths (Section 10 Child Death Reports) from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner to the Office of the Children's Advocate,
- tracking the Manitoba Government's progress and response implementing actions in response to the almost 300 recommendations made in the five major child welfare reports released by the Children's Advocate the previous fiscal year,
- laying the foundation for the 2009 release of a 397-page hotel and shelters report, tracking the Manitoba Government's progress implementing OCA recommendations made in a 2000 report regarding the use of hotels for housing children and youth and a 2004 report on the state of the Department of Family Services and Housing's emergency shelter system, and

- finding new OCA office space to house additional staff and to be more accessible and visible to children and youth requiring advocacy services.

The Office of the Children's Advocate is an independent office. The Children's Advocate is empowered to review, investigate, and provide recommendations on matters relating to the rights, interests and viewpoints of children and youth who are receiving, or are entitled to receive, services as prescribed under *The Child and Family Services Act* and *The Adoption Act*.

The annual report and other information are available at [www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca](http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca).

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