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For Immediate Release

Children's Advocate releases her annual report

Schibler wants better communication and cooperation across the child welfare system

Manitoba's Children's Advocate, Billie Schibler, released her Annual Report for the fiscal year 2006-07 today.

Work centered around four external reviews with respect to the child welfare system and service delivery. Her office also released a major report around the challenges facing youth exiting from the child welfare system.

"In the 289 recommendations made in the five reports, we found ourselves re-voicing historic concerns regarding service delivery within the child welfare system," said Schibler. "We found ourselves looking at issues cited by the Children's Advocate and others that had been ignored for far too long – things like the overwhelming numbers of caseloads carried by individual workers, insufficient training in assessing risk, barriers to the effectiveness of the child and family services information system (CFSIS), and youth in care being inadequately prepared for independence."

The Children's Advocate noted that she has the ability to make recommendations regarding almost every aspect of child welfare, but there is no mechanism in place that gives the Children's Advocate the power to ensure these recommendations are carried out. Not giving these recommendations full attention over the years has been at the peril of this province's most vulnerable children.

"The outcomes that can result from implementing the 289 recommendations in our five reports have the potential to further change the course of history regarding child welfare in Manitoba," said the Children's Advocate. "However, those in every facet of the child welfare system must fully acknowledge the content of the reviews we conducted. Accept it. Resolve it. Then move on to something better. Make a commitment that you don't want to go back there again. Change. Cooperate more. Communicate. Work together. Put children first."

The Children's Advocate noted that challenges continue post-devolution regarding instances where workers and managers in the various child and family services systems are not information sharing or are not fully aware of their responsibilities according to provincial standards. The current post-devolution environment strongly suggests that ongoing education and training is essential. The Advocate also recommended that a forum be conducted around the benefits and challenges of standardized practice.

Section 10 Child Death Reports are moving from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner to the Office of the Children's Advocate. Three Acts are being amended to reflect the changes in the duties and responsibilities. Recommendations from the Section 10 Reports will now be provided to the Minister of Family Services and Housing, the Ombudsman and the Chief Medical Examiner. The OCA will provide an annual report on the child death findings. The Ombudsman will now report annually on the follow-up of the OCA recommendations.

Schibler's annual report highlights seven system issues, including:

- 49 cases where there were concerns that children in care were being neglected or injured in their foster homes, group homes, or emergency shelters. Six were substantiated. In two cases criminal charges were filed against the caregivers. In three instances, service providers at emergency placements or collateral placement agencies did not report these incidents when they occurred. At the time this report was written, six cases were still being investigated.
- A need for greater advocacy for youth incarcerated in youth correctional facilities, sexually exploited children, and those affected by access and custody disputes.

Schibler also noted that she will be reporting on the child welfare system's progress regarding the use of hotels and emergency shelters as emergency placements for children and youth, an area that has been reported on by the Children's Advocate's Office as far back as the year 2001.

In the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007, the Office of the Children's Advocate opened 602 cases requiring intervention by Advocacy Officers. An additional 933 requests for assistance were resolved by phone and through brief advocacy services. Hundreds of additional calls seeking simple information are received and answered, relating to matters outside our mandate which are referred to other service agencies for assistance.

The annual report and other information are available at www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca.

For more information, contact:

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