



Unit 100 - 346 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba CANADA R3C 0C3  
(204) 988-7440 • 1-800-263-7146 • Fax: (204) 988-7472  
[www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca](http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca)

Thursday, March 26, 2009  
For Immediate Release

### **Children's Advocate Releases Emergency Shelters Report**

*Schibler wants the child welfare system to improve its information system and create one centralized system to share emergency and foster resources*

*Government Departments must develop a joint strategy to deal with high needs children and youth who are placed in shelters with nowhere to go*

Manitoba's Children's Advocate, Billie Schibler, today released a 397-page report reviewing the Manitoba Government's progress on implementing the 90 recommendations made in the previous Children's Advocate's 2000 Hotel Review and 2004 Shelter Reviews.

The Advocate found that 25% of the recommendations made in the previous reports have been implemented by the Manitoba Government and another 38% are in progress, but the state of emergency placement resources for children and youth who require emergency care remains concerning.

"When children come into emergency care it is a time of high emotions and potential volatility," said the Children's Advocate. "While our office can not support hotels and emergency shelters being the ideal place for children and youth, we understand that hotel and shelter staff are largely doing an admirable job in extremely difficult, sometimes dangerous circumstances. The sampling of children and youth we spoke to, primarily regarded the staff and their experiences in shelters positively."

Several factors impact on the emergency shelter system.

- Emergency placement resources continue to be utilized for longer periods of time than intended,
- There is a shortage of foster homes and alternative longer-term placement facilities for large sibling groups and for youth with multiple needs and high-risk behaviours,
- There are no standards in place that specifically regulate short-term emergency facilities. A two-tiered system has emerged where some facilities are being developed under the Places of Safety designation, where monitoring is the responsibility of the placing agency. This may differ from the provincial licensing standards developed for longer-term residential treatment facilities,
- The number of children in care has increased by over 1,700 in the last five years,
- 81% of children and youth in care are Aboriginal, and
- The number of children in care is predicted to continue increasing over the years.

To improve the emergency shelter system to adequately meet the needs of this population of children and minimize risk there needs to be:

- A centralized office, housed in the Department of Family Services and Housing, responsible for monitoring, tracking and the regulating of short-term emergency placements,
- Immediate improvements to the manner that information on children and youth is entered and tracked on the Child and Family Services Information System (CFSIS),
- Enhanced skill development and training for shelter staff,
- Additional services such as health and education specialists attached to the shelters,
- Formal assessments on the children in order to better plan for them,
- Collaboration between government departments such as Family Services and Housing, Education, Justice, and Health to determine the services required for each individual child coming into emergency shelters, and to develop a seamless service delivery to meet their specific needs, and
- Collaboration between government departments to develop specialized residential resources for longer-term placements for children and youth with severe high needs and risks.

"I am troubled by seeing instances where workers are not entering information on children and youth into the Child and Family Services Information system in a timely manner so the system may not have updated information on where that child is or what is taking place in their care plan," said Schibler. "This is a concern that has been voiced to the child welfare system by the Children's Advocate over the years."

The Children's Advocate is also very concerned by the high number of reported incidents of aggression and assaults by children and youth in emergency placements.

Emergency Shelters are highly complex and some can be potentially volatile environments. Often little background is known of the child's emotional and medical state coming into the shelters. Shelter staff needs the highest level of skill and training to be able to immediately assess risk, diffuse situations and accurately determine the emotional needs of the children and youth being suddenly thrust into emergency care.

"We knew emergency shelters were being used for sibling groups and children and youth with highly complex special needs," said the Children's Advocate "but we discovered that the complexities of those with special needs were much more pronounced than we had anticipated."

Some children and youth remain in emergency shelters far too long because they are extremely difficult to place with foster families, as they have highly severe physical or emotional needs or exhibit behaviours that may cause harm to themselves or others.

Locating suitable long-term placements for children and youth in emergency care is further compromised by the absence of a standardized, province-wide placement information system that tracks and shares all bed space vacancies and related information between agencies.

“We will continue to voice recommendations made by my predecessor around the need for a centralized placement system for the province,” said Schibler. “It makes perfect sense to have one province-wide database that is immediately available to all workers where they can identify what placement resources are out there, the level of skill and expertise available at each placement, and their availability because everything happens lightning fast when kids come into the child welfare system.”

Presently there are 25 child and family service agencies in the province, each with their own set of foster homes and no standardized system of assessing information on vacant foster bed spaces between the agencies. Inequities in resources exist between jurisdictions.

The Winnipeg EPR system provides emergency placement for children and youth from across Manitoba. In the fiscal year 2007/08, shelters were used around 1,000 times to house children and youth in Winnipeg Child and Family Service's 52 Emergency Placement Resource (EPR) shelters at a cost of more than \$350 per day per child. The total cost of the EPR Shelter System in Winnipeg during that year was more than \$15 million.

Information contained in the *Emergency Placements for Children In Manitoba's Child Welfare System Report* is based on data and facts obtained during and prior to the period from April 2007 to September 2008. The complete report is available with coloured graphs at [www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca](http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca).

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**For more information, contact:**

Billie Schibler, Manitoba's Children's Advocate, 204-988-7440 or 1-800-263-7146