



MEDIA RELEASE

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Children's Advocate releases her first annual report

Schibler sees need for modified approach to children, families

In her first annual report as advocate, Manitoba's Children's Advocate Billie Schibler calls for a new commitment to helping and supporting children as well as providing them protection when they need it.

She has called on everyone to work together to help remove the stigma that exists surrounding family involvement with the child welfare system.

"We believe it would be most beneficial to children if families could approach service providers for help without society somehow feeling that they are bad people or that they must have done something very wrong," said Schibler. "We must all work to create an environment where seeking help can be seen as a positive step, not as something fearful and shameful. Potential risk to children can be minimized when parents feel encouraged to seek out services from a welcoming, supportive and approachable environment."

"We believe that in addition to seeking to protect the child, workers must also look for positive strengths in the family home and for ways of supporting the family," she said. "It is necessary to build upon these strengths so the partnership between the system and the family is enhanced and people on all sides are working to keep the family unified."

She noted that her first year in the office was during a period when the child welfare system was being extensively overhauled in the province, and the experience convinced her more than ever of the need for co-operation and commitment among all the agencies that are involved in child welfare service delivery in Manitoba.

"We need to find a collective approach to attracting, mentoring, training, retaining and supporting workers so they can be the stable, strong and ongoing influence that children, youth and families in our system need, to help them heal and move forward," she said.

While not intended as a criticism of those many dedicated professionals presently working in the system, it is meant to reemphasize the need for a shift in the focus of service delivery. This can only happen effectively if all of the agencies work collaboratively together and with families. The agencies should work from a strength-based practice rather than remaining intent on the family's deficits.

"In many cases," she said, "workers actively look for signs of abuse or neglect, when at times all that a family may require is help and support rather than intrusive intervention."

Schibler said there were 6,629 children in care during the year 2005-06, about 5,100 of them Aboriginal.

She said that during the transition of the child welfare system, many children felt as if no one was recognizing them as the main focus, and committed her office to providing them with a stronger voice that would be heard.

The report also expresses concern about the suicide rate among youth, and said her office had brought together community professions, working together to find the answers needed to help eliminate the causes.

Schibler said her office had opened 670 case files during the year, prompted by calls for help from families (about 61 per cent), children and agencies. During the same period, it closed 529 files. She noted there are many cases that involve more than one child.

Since her first year in office, the Office of the Children's Advocate has issued four major reports.

The reports concluded were:

- Strengthening Our Youth: Their Journey to Competence and Independence
- Honouring Their Spirits: The Child Death Review
- Recommendations: Phoenix Sinclair Special Case Review
- Strengthen The Commitment: An External Review of the Child Welfare System
(Presented in collaboration with the Manitoba Ombudsman)

The report covers the first year of her appointment, from April 1, 2005 to March 31, 2006. The annual report and other reports are available at www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca.

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