



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

For Immediate Release

Manitoba's Children's Advocate Calls for Mandatory Right for all Children and Youth Involved with Child and Family Services to be Informed of Her Office

Office Recognizes 10 Years of Independence by citing they will work toward gaining greater rights for children and youth to have their voices heard

WINNIPEG, MB-July 6, 2009 – Today the Children's Advocate called for greater rights for Manitoba children and youth to have their voices heard. 2009 marks the 10th Anniversary of the Children's Advocate becoming an Independent Office reporting to the Manitoba Legislature.

At a commemorative event held to mark the occasion with children and youth, several of whom are or have been involved with child and family services, the Children's Advocate, Billie Schibler underlined the importance of having an advocate for children and youth who is independent. This independence has been vital for the Children's Advocate to be an objective, strong voice, emphasizing the best interests of the child and youth.

Several members of *VOICES: Manitoba's Youth In Care Network* spoke about their time in care and how the Office of the Children's Advocate had helped them as a child in the care of Manitoba's child welfare system. All recognized the life-changing importance of having at least one person in their lives that had listened to them and advocated for them.

"The most common complaint we continue to hear from children and youth involved with the child and family services system is that they feel that no one listens to them or asks them how they feel regarding decisions being made about them by adults," said Schibler. "It is the Children's Advocate's position that all children & youth have a right to be heard in accordance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child."

Dozens of postcards from children and youth in care expressing their feelings about advocacy continue to come into the Office of the Children's Advocate. A sampling of the views were:

- *"To me Advocacy means to help children and listen to their thoughts and problems."*
- *"I think Advocacy means help, and be there when others are not! Because when my social workers don't call me or attend to my needs, Children's Advocate is! Thanks", and*
- *"Having someone fight for my rights when I don't know what they are."*

“From what youth tell us, we know that Manitoba’s child and family services system still needs to do more to ensure that the adult decision-makers are listening to the children and youth prior to making decisions about them,” Schibler said. “It is important that their voices be heard.”

The Children’s Advocate emphasized that the right to independent advocacy is only a usable right if children in the CFS system know that the Children’ Advocate’s office exists for them.

The Children’s Advocate has noted in every annual report over the years that they see a growing need for children outside the CFS system to have an official Advocate for them as well.

“In our work we often see instances where children and youth in and outside of the CFS system need our help with issues involving areas such as mental health, justice, medical challenges and special needs,” said the Children’s Advocate. “These are highly complex issues and the Children’s Advocate has no jurisdiction in which to help or enforce recommendations in these areas. Who helps these children and youth and protects their rights when they need someone to advocate for them?”

In the coming months, the Children’s Advocate will make a concentrated effort to press for changes that would:

- make it mandatory for CFS workers to provide information about the Children’s Advocate to every child and youth coming into contact with the child and family services system. This would include printed information on their rights, their right to be heard in matters affecting them and how to make contact with the Children’s Advocate
- give the Children’s Advocate greater ability and resources under legislation to advocate for children and youth in areas beyond CFS on issues such as justice, mental health, health and education, and
- help ensure that Manitoba is following Canada’s commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12

During the two fiscal years between 2006 and 2008 the Children’s Advocate received close to 3000 requests for advocacy service.

The Office of the Children’s Advocate was created in 1993 under the Child and Family Services Act, administered by Manitoba Family Services. It exists to represent the rights, interests and viewpoints of children receiving or entitled to receive child and family services in Manitoba. In 1996, consistent with legislative requirements, an all-party committee was established to conduct a review of the office. In response to recommendations arising from that review, the Office of the Children’s Advocate began reporting directly to the Legislative Assembly in 1999 and operates independently from the child and family services system. In September 2008, with the proclamation of *Bill 11, The Children’s Advocate’s Enhanced Mandate Act* the responsibilities of conducting Section 10 Reviews was transferred to Manitoba’s Children’s Advocate. These reviews are now referred to as “Child Death Review Special Investigations.”

-30-

For more information, contact:

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