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For Immediate Release

45 RECOMMENDATIONS MADE TO IMPROVE THE PLIGHT OF YOUTH LEAVING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

Today, Manitoba's Children's Advocate released a report on the struggles facing youth leaving the child welfare system, including 45 recommendations for improving outcomes for their lives after care.

The report was initiated and funded by the Manitoba Office of the Children's Advocate in response to concerns voiced about the lack of support and resources for youth who reached the age of majority (18) and have to leave the care of the child and family services system; and by youth in care, or formerly in care, who are feeling inadequately prepared for the transition to adulthood.

In the next three years, almost 1,600 youth will be "aging out of care" in Manitoba. Most of the youth (70%) are Aboriginal and a significant number (28%) have a diagnosed disability. Many others may have disabilities that have never been formally diagnosed

"Research has shown this population of youth is disconnected from the family and community supports that other young adults enjoy well beyond the age of 18," said Children's Advocate Billie Schibler. "Only in the child welfare system do we systemically force children to leave their homes and support system at 18. Leaving care, they are already vulnerable, poorly prepared for the challenges of living on their own and at high risk of becoming victims again and again."

Research by the National Youth in Care network showed that less than 30% of youth in care complete high school in Canada, compared to 85% of the general population, so they become unemployed, underemployed or receive social assistance to survive.

A large number of former youth in care become homeless. Because educational, financial and emotional challenges put them in unsafe environments, it is not uncommon to see a high number of youth who have left care drifting toward gangs, engaging in substance misuse, becoming victims of sexual exploitation and being involved in criminal activities. They are more likely to be at risk of self-harm, have suicidal ideations and suffer depression due to their life circumstances.

"It simply does not make sense to expect that these young people can make it on their own without adequate financial, emotional and moral support the instant they turn 18," said Schibler. "But that is largely what happens to youth leaving the child welfare system in Manitoba and the resulting situation does not benefit them or society".

In Manitoba, the legislation governing care is complex with more focus on entry into care and little attention to exiting care. While Manitoba has taken steps to ensure the availability of adult service programs that support youth with special needs, mental health issues and disabilities

after the age of majority, the province is lagging behind in setting policy that would provide a consistent and systematic co-ordinated approach to the issue across government, particularly involving strengthened independent living services, educational support, housing and post care assistance to youth that are aging out of the child welfare system in the province.

“These young people need help while in care to prepare them to live independently,” said Schibler. “They need to be better educated so they can have more options. They need a safe place to live once they leave. They need time to transition. They need at least one person in their lives, ideally a network of caring people, to take a significant interest in their lives while in care and after care.”

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Backgrounder:**A Summary of Recommendations by the Children's Advocate to Improve Outcomes for Youth Leaving Manitoba's Child Welfare System**

First and foremost, outcomes for these youth leaving care would be greatly improved by including the youth in his or her independent living preparation as much as possible.

Other recommendations by Manitoba's Children's Advocate include:

- the establishment of a committee with representatives from the Department of Family Services and Housing and the Authorities along with service providers, youth in care, or formerly in care, and stakeholders to develop policy and regulatory standards for youth leaving care, including:
 - o independent living preparation prior to leaving care and post care service, and
 - o ensuring that these policies and standards are applied consistently across the province.
- providing assistance up to the age of 21 years, rather than 18.
- extending the maximum age eligibility for Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) from 21 to 25 years to enable youth to achieve higher education and develop work skills, and:
 - o to include temporary wards of the province who will be in care until the age of majority,
- that the Child Protection and Support Branch, or designate, develop a core set of life skill competencies for youth aged 15 years, 16 years, 17 years and the age of majority. These competencies should provide guidance to caregivers in developing appropriate life skill activities and transition planning with youth at each age level.
- that standards for services to prepare youth for leaving care outline a flexible and functional process for graduating from dependence to interdependence and include mandatory needs assessments, individualized transition plans and post care services, including provision for the diverse needs of Aboriginal youth in care and youth with disabilities such as FASD who do not meet the criteria for adult supported living programs.
- that a comprehensive and consistent tracking system be implemented for all children while in care and after leaving care. Measuring their progress while in care could include consideration of their education, health, identity, family, social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development, and self-care skills, such as those outlined by CANLAC's seven determinants of health.
- that the Department of Family Services and Housing establish a fund for aftercare services to former youth in care. This funding should be available to community organizations to develop programs offering services to meet the varying needs of former youth in care.

For the most part, youth in care do not have a functional social support network upon which to rely during the transition from dependence to independence. Having a significant person in their lives improves outcomes for youth leaving care. Many times this is a caring worker or foster parent. We recommend that:

- a team of individuals significant to the youth and willing to be a part of independent living planning with the youth should be included, so that the youth has a strong support network upon leaving care;
- workers and foster parents be trained to assist youth in preparing and transitioning youth and that case workers workload be lessened to create the time needed to assist youth in the transitioning years and after;
- a mentoring program should be developed linking “aging out” youth with former youth in care through Voices, Manitoba Youth in Care Network; and
- that Authorities and Agencies develop a practice standard that promotes reconnections with biological and extended family, former foster parents or other significant persons in the life of the youth.

Better Housing is required.

- The Authorities and Agencies should increase the number of specialized foster homes for youth over the age of 15 preparing for independent living,
- The Department of Family Services and Housing should develop a directory of independent living programs and resources in the province,
- The Department of Family Services and Housing should develop a number of affordable, short-term transition and emergency housing options and long-term apartments located in safe areas for youth leaving care, and
- The Department of Family Services and Housing, in collaboration with the Social Planning Council, establish a committee to review and adjust the independent living rates for youth in care

In Education:

- The departments of Family Services and Housing and Education must develop a policy paper on reducing school moves due to placement changes, encouraging youth in care to complete high school and improving academic outcomes for children in care.
- Authorities and Agencies should develop a practice standard that promotes educational achievement as a priority for children in care, and support this by providing practical assistance such as educational assessments, tutoring, counselling, learning aids and tools, and assistance with learning.
- The Department of Family Services and Housing should create a program within its Employment and Income Assistance Program, with flexible and supportive admission rules and expectations, providing counselling, guidance and emotional support to former youth in care, to engage them in planning for a career. It is essential that the program is responsive to issues of youth development, youth engagement and the varying needs of this special population group.
- The Department of Family Services and Housing, through the Employment and Income Assistance Program, should provide an adjusted living allowance to youth leaving care until the youth is able to earn a comparable or better living allowance through employment or the youth reaches the age of 21 years.

- The Department of Family Services and Housing should introduce financial incentives to enable youth in care to pursue higher education or training. This could include tuition waivers, education vouchers, bursaries, grants or loans.
- Education funds should be started for all children in care with those born after 2003 eligible for the Canada Learning Bond.

In Health:

- The departments of Family Services and Housing, Education, Health and Healthy Living should launch an exploratory research initiative on the health and mental health needs of street-involved youth, and Healthy Child Manitoba should extend its Healthy Adolescent Development Strategy to address the needs of youth in care and former youth in care.

We must come to the aid of older teens requiring protection services. They are often turned away by agencies as they are seen by the child welfare system to be too close to the age of majority to commence involvement. Little or no attention is given to the emotional damage and future challenges these young people face. They are referred to the adult welfare system for financial and shelter support. We recommend that:

- the authorities review the admission to care standards to allow for the admission of youth under the age of 18 in need of shelter and emotional/financial support; and
- the Department of Family Services and Housing provide funding to increase the number of transition and emergency bed spaces in the province for youth under or approaching the age of majority.