



March 27, 2017

Statement from the Children's Advocate

Re: Release to media of confidential review of 14 child deaths

I am shocked and saddened that a confidential child death review completed by my office in 2014 has been unlawfully given to the media. Child death reviews completed by my office involve broad and intensive examinations of some of the most difficult circumstances Manitoba families can face. Each review details public service delivery in the life of a family and examines sensitive details surrounding deaths of children. My staff undertake these reviews with the utmost of respect and compassion for the tragedies that families have endured and as advocates for children, we attempt to write these reviews through the eyes of the child. Child death reports are strictly confidential because the death of a child should not carry an assumption that the public has a right to examine the histories of each family affected by such tragedy. As many Manitobans may be aware, there is a bill before the legislature right now that would allow my office to release some of our reports to the public, but we know that public reports will not include the degree of personal and sensitive information that is contained in the leaked report. Public disclosure of sensitive details about a family can – and has previously – resulted in increased risk for young people and their caregivers. When public discourse focuses on *issues* instead of *individuals*, systemic changes can happen.

Although much of the work undertaken by my office currently occurs behind legislated walls of privacy, one of the areas we dedicate many of our resources to is advocating for equal access to support services for children, youth, families, and communities that are in rural and remote locations in Manitoba. Too often, families in rural communities cannot access important services like domestic violence supports, addiction treatment, or are left struggling because of inadequate housing resources. With no comprehensive investments in rural communities by our provincial and federal governments, challenging situations can quickly become crisis situations, and then a child welfare agency can be left to scabble together what meager supports they can from a scant list of accessible options in a community.

While it is understandable that when a child dies, people want a scapegoat, it is easy to simply blame a child welfare agency, but that ignores the larger community context in which the agency must provide services. Child welfare should be a system of last resort but too often what we see in Manitoba is that the longstanding denial by governments of real investments in rural communities has created an untenable chasm and families in need are unable to get the supports they require. Band-aids will not fix a broken limb, and patchwork funding will not bring about the equity of services that is needed beyond city limits. Until real investments happen, child welfare agencies will continue to sometimes be the only organization in a community that can piece together minimal supports.

Whoever leaked the confidential child death report to the media did more than just break the law. That person violated the privacy of 14 families for personal gain. They should face the consequences of exploiting the pain of 14 families who lost their children to tragic circumstances.

Darlene MacDonald, MSW, RSW
Children's Advocate