

September 2011

## **First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition – Notes for Minister of Children and Family Development, Mary McNeil**

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a coalition of provincial and regional organizations, individuals and local community networks who share the belief that children and youth should have “first call” on our province’s resources. Our 90 partner organizations are committed to the achieving the following **4 Keys to Success** for BC’s children and youth:

- A strong commitment to early childhood development
- Support in transitions from childhood to youth to adulthood
- Increased economic equality
- Safe and caring communities

Through recent discussions among and with our partner organizations and meeting participants the following points were identified to bring to the attention of the Ministry. We appreciate the opportunity to carry on this dialogue in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration to improve services, supports and outcomes for BC’s children, youth and families.

### **Key themes:**

#### 1) Permanency for children and youth in care

- See *Belong 4 Ever: Creating Permanency for Youth in and from Care*, Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, August 2010 (<http://www.firstcallbc.org/pdfs/Transitions/2-permanency%20report.pdf>)
- Train all child protection social workers to explore extended family options immediately.
- Enhance kith and kin placement supports (especially supports for grandparents raising grandchildren). Limited access to Extended Family Program (e.g. due to legal guardianship issues) and differential in financial support for foster parents vs. relatives creates inequities for children and increases their vulnerability. Reference: Parent Support Services’ GRG resources ([http://www.parentsupportbc.ca/grg\\_background.html](http://www.parentsupportbc.ca/grg_background.html)) and attached list of recommendations for MCFD.
- Better support adoptions, especially for older children and children with special needs.
- Large social worker caseloads are affecting children and youth in care and the Ministry’s ability to meet its own standards of practice.

#### 2) Prevention of vulnerability through enhanced responsiveness and early supports

- In general, the importance of sustained funding for prevention services (e.g. ECD, family support, youth supports, mental health services) cannot be over-emphasized.
- Improve responsiveness to parents of children with special needs who ask for help. There are anxieties related to perceived increase in Ministry suggestions for voluntary

care arrangements. Wait lists for supported child development spots should be eliminated.

- Improve transitions supports for youth aging out of care into independence and into adult services. E.g., eliminate wait list for access to Agreements for Young Adults and cover what was promised. CLBC's group home closures affecting youth/young adults are worrisome.
- Eliminate IQ <70 eligibility measure for access to children's and adult special needs services.
- Improve supports and options for children and youth with mental health issues.
- Improve cultural competence of Ministry in communicating with newcomer families (staff training and multilingual resources), and in attending to the needs of newcomer children and youth in need of services, e.g. mental health and diagnostic assessments are only available in English. Reference: attached AMSSA-RCY summary of issues and recommendations.
- Work with CLBC on group home closures affecting vulnerable youth/young adults transitioning out of care.

### 3) Crisis for families in accessing quality child care

- Major issues are: availability, affordability, inclusion, and quality. The rise in for-profit/commercial operators in BC is alarming.
- Universal access to quality child care contributes to a reduced need for child apprehensions and to poverty reduction.
- A consistent recommendation from advocates, based on research, calls for federal and provincial governments to stop relying primarily on parent fees to fund child care services and the private sector, whether non-profit or for-profit, to create them. Instead, advocates promote a leadership role for the federal and provincial governments in public planning, public funding and public reporting.
- Community has been waiting many years for a child care plan from MCFD or government in general that would address these issues.
- Child care advocates and early childhood educators have now put forward a comprehensive plan for an integrated early care and learning system under the Ministry of Education.

### 4) Poverty as a risk factor for child apprehensions

- Reference: *Broken Promises, Parents Speak about BC's Child Welfare System*, Pivot Legal Society, February 2008. (<http://www.pivotlegal.org/node/226>)
- BC's child poverty statistics are unacceptable, even when they go down from previous higher rates.
- Income assistance rates are too low to support healthy child development. Other policy initiatives often noted (e.g. lower taxes, rental subsidies) don't help families on assistance.
- Cross-ministry collaboration on welfare policy is crucial. Examples: 1) recent policy change for maintaining shelter rates for parents of children in temporary care was very positive; 2) ineligibility for income assistance for mothers without permanent resident status is putting their children at risk and in crisis.

5) Additional concerns and questions

- Ministry inaction on known sexual exploitation and trafficking of children in Bountiful
- Continued high levels of sexual exploitation and trafficking of adolescents, especially Aboriginal girls from reserves.
  
- Are there policies or guidelines related to sexual abuse allegations when there is a custody and access dispute? There is a gap to be addressed between assessments made through MCFD and custody and access orders through Family Court.
  
- Reference: *Best Practice Approaches Child Protection and Violence Against Women*, MCFD, November 2010  
[http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child\\_protection/pdf/best\\_practice\\_approaches\\_nov2010.pdf](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/pdf/best_practice_approaches_nov2010.pdf)

This document reflects a very promising collaboration between Ministry and anti-violence sector. What is the current status of these approaches being mandated for child protection workers? What are current training initiatives to put these approaches into practice?

Section 28 which allows for an offender to be removed from the home remains one of the most underutilized sections of the Child, Family and Community Service Act. Does the Ministry have statistics on the usage of this section and specifically how often it is used in situations where there is violence against women and children in the home?

- There is a huge cost and challenge for community partners of the constant staff turnover in the Ministry (e.g. at the Community Services Manager or Team Leader level, as well as front line social workers). Ministry staff need to be available and consistent partners in local inter-agency teams focused on child and youth well-being.

6) Communication, advocacy and accountability:

- First Call can bring the breadth and depth of our coalition to better inform provincial policy development affecting children, youth and families across government.
- We also offer an efficient vehicle for the Ministry and government to communicate with community-based child and youth advocates across sectors (education, child welfare, health, youth services, immigrant services, early childhood, etc.)
- We appreciate the improved communication and liaison between the Ministry and our coalition within the last year and a half.
- We are very pleased to see the Ministry's new cooperative relationship with the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth, including the signed Advocacy Protocol and the explicit support for advocacy as part of professional practice and the recognition of the need for external advocacy.