



Statement

June 27, 2019
For Immediate Release

The very thorough and comprehensive report entitled *Oversight of Contracted Residential Services for Children and Youth in Care* that was released last week by British Columbia's Auditor General Carol Bellringer raises serious concerns – yet again – about a system of contracted residential services for children and youth in care that is no system at all and which continues to be beset by a litany of shortcomings.

What is especially troubling is that these inadequacies have been previously well documented and well known to the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) for nearly a decade. Yet, despite previous public commitments to address the issues, there has been little progress in substantive reforms of the system that are so necessary, as is so clearly demonstrated by the Auditor General's meticulous analysis.

Contracted residential resources will always be necessary in order to properly serve the children and youth in care of MCFD who have the most complex needs – needs that are beyond the capacity of foster homes to address. These include children and youth with complex health, behavioural or developmental needs – sometimes in combination – who often require high staffing ratios, specialized medical expertise and equipment, and in some cases round-the-clock supervision. In 2018, a total of 1,148 children and youth spent time in these contracted resources.

The issues with B.C.'s system of contracted residential services begin with the fact that it really isn't a "system" at all. Among other things, the Auditor General's report found that MCFD had no strategy for the use of contracted residential services, did not adequately match the needs of children and youth to suitable residential services, didn't partner with Delegated Aboriginal Agencies in the use of such services, didn't effectively manage contracts for these services and had little idea about the quality of services being provided in these resources.

In short, MCFD has been contracting residential services on an ad-hoc basis with no plan and at a considerable cost, with no assurance that the services being delivered are of an acceptable quality or are effectively addressing the typically very complex needs of the children and youth placed in them.

To the uninitiated, that's a shocking revelation, especially when one considers that MCFD spent \$151.5 million on such services in 2017/18 alone.

But even more shocking is the fact the ministry and government have known about this problem for nearly a decade with little progress to show over that period.

From 2010 to 2012, as the then Executive Director of the Federation of Community Social Services of BC, I co-led the Residential Review Project – a joint exercise by MCFD and the Federation to identify issues with, and recommend changes to, how the ministry was using and managing residential resources. That comprehensive review had been prompted by significant concerns about the state of residential services at that time that were – and still are – shared by many skilled and dedicated agency staff who deliver these services.

The final report from that project, released in 2012, made many similar observations and recommendations to those set out in the Auditor General’s report. The government of the day accepted all the recommendations from the 2012 Residential Review Project and pledged to implement them but obviously failed to do so in a fulsome and systemic manner.

In the ensuing years, the RCY also raised serious concerns about contracted residential services several times. In reports issued in both 2013 and 2014, B.C.’s first Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, called for sweeping improvements to residential resources, including a 2014 request for the Auditor General to conduct the very audit that was released this month.

In 2017, as part of an investigative report into the tragic death of Alex Gervais, my immediate predecessor, Bernard Richard, recommended that government significantly enhance the provision of quality assurance oversight and financial accountability for all contracted residential agencies. And in June 2018, Mr. Richard issued a statement that expressed *“grave concerns about the operations of some residential agencies contracted by MCFD that continue to leave many youth in government care at unnecessary and unacceptable risk.”*

I am pleased to hear that MCFD has accepted all the Auditor General’s recommendations and is taking them very seriously. However, I am also mindful that we have been here before.

My hope is that the Auditor General’s report has imparted a sense of urgency on MCFD and all of government that has clearly not been there over the past many years. Because, during that time, too many children and youth – most of whom had already been traumatized through no fault of their own – have not been helped in the way they need and deserve, and some have been further harmed because of this inaction.

The RCY’s report on the case of Alex Gervais is a tragic example. After being shuttled through 17 different care placements in 11 years and never receiving the supports he desperately needed, this Métis teen ultimately committed suicide in September 2015. RCY’s report into that case found that the lack of oversight of the

contracted residential agency caring for Alex “*directly contributed to the multiple harms he suffered while in care and to his eventual death.*”

This issue is about real children and youth and delays in addressing it have already had very real and, sadly, tragic consequences. The time for merely planning and expressing good intentions is long past. It is time for substantive action by MCFD, and my Office will be closely watching for real and positive changes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J Charlesworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth