



News Release

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FRAGILE B.C. FAMILIES SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS OF A PATCHWORK SYSTEM OF SERVICES, REVIEW OF CHILD DEATHS FINDS

VICTORIA – Vulnerable infants throughout B.C. are at risk because of a patchwork of services that exists across the health and child-serving systems, says a report released today by B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth.

“Some of the most fragile families in our province are slipping through huge cracks here,” said Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. “Government needs to take a hard look at this. We need to fix the existing lack of a coordinated and responsive approach, and create seamless coordination among all support services.”

The report, *Fragile Lives, Fragmented Systems: Strengthening Supports for Vulnerable Infants*, is an aggregated, in-depth look at the lives and deaths of 21 B.C. infants. As recommended in the Hughes Review, a large group of infants' lives and deaths was examined in detail, and the information collectively studied to identify and analyze trends.

Findings were then looked at in a broader scope to see if identified factors existed across the province, in order to determine what needs to be addressed in broader public policy to improve the child-serving system.

Recommendations incorporate research specific to this review and from past Representative reports, and learning from the more than 5,600 advocacy cases the Representative's Office has taken on to date.

The 21 families in this review were known to have been facing significant life and parenting challenges, yet the risks to their children associated with these challenges were ignored or the response did not match the severity of the risk, said Turpel-Lafond.

“Too often public health, medical and child welfare professionals noted some of the challenges, but didn't or weren't able to see the whole picture that would have clearly revealed a fragile situation in critical need of intervention,” she said.

The report identifies inconsistencies in when and how supports are given to struggling families to reduce risks and threats to the safety of young children. Provincially, these include essential supports like prenatal and postnatal education and home visits, risk assessments and the provision of safe-sleeping information.

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“It isn’t possible to say that with adequate services, all of these infants would be alive today, but as birth circumstances and multiple common risks play such significant roles in healthy infant development, it is reasonable to say that some of them very likely would be,” said Turpel-Lafond. “The lack of rigorous, integrated system-wide services and interventions led to many missed opportunities for prevention and effective response.”

As well, the report notes that all of these infants lived in serious poverty and died in unsafe sleep arrangements. The risk of sleep-related infant deaths is reduced when known risk factors, including poverty and inadequate housing, are addressed. A key recommendation in the report calls on the Premier’s Office to take the lead the development of a child poverty plan, with demonstrated progress by June 2011.

The report also calls on government to develop provincially coordinated standards for postnatal public health nursing in the province. At present, the province’s regional health authorities offer a variety of programs that vary and are not available everywhere in B.C.

“Public health nurses play a very valuable role in helping to assess families with risks and vulnerabilities and also as part of a support team that can help coordinate services, share information and help identify opportunities to improve the safety of these infants,” she said.

The report recommends that government move quickly to implement a targeted home-visiting program by public health nurses. Programs that identify potentially vulnerable mothers early, begin providing support and information in the prenatal period, and continue after birth have demonstrated effectiveness in improving prenatal outcomes and child health.

Turpel-Lafond also noted that the Ministry of Children and Family Development, which conducted reviews into only 14 of the 21 infant deaths even though all the families were involved with the ministry, missed valuable opportunities for learning and improving practice with vulnerable families. The report recommends improvements to the ministry’s review process, and that it share more widely the results of its reviews with ministry staff and other involved professionals.

“These 21 families, now all grieving the loss of loved ones, struggled with challenges like deep poverty, mental health issues, addictions and inadequate housing. Systems that intersected in their lives failed to respond to risks to these infants’ well-being,” she said. “In order to have the best possible chances for all of our children, we require a more seamless system. Until we have such a system in place, we can’t and shouldn’t assume that vulnerable infants are safe and that unnecessary infant deaths are being prevented.”

Note: The *Fragile Lives, Fragmented Systems* report can be viewed or downloaded at www.rcybc.ca

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