



News Release

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SAFETY RE-SCREENING URGENTLY NEEDED FOR THOUSANDS OF B.C. CHILDREN

VICTORIA – A large group of B.C. children is at risk of potential harm while living in homes of relatives, and there is an urgent need for government to re-screen the adults caring for them, says an audit report released today by B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth.

No Shortcuts to Safety; Doing Better for Children Living with Extended Family reports on an in-depth audit carried out by the Representative, examining B.C.'s Child in the Home of a Relative (CIHR) program.

Today, about 4,500 B.C. children and youth remain in the CIHR program, and many will continue to live with relatives under the program for years to come. CIHR is a financial assistance program that supports children placed by their parents in a relative's home, when parents are unable to assume full responsibility for financially supporting the child. Most kin carers are women, often single, and living near or beneath the poverty line. They are also often grandmothers of the children.

"Government needs to go back and do the right thing for all the children that remain in the CIHR program," said Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. "Service providers have raised serious concerns for years about the well-being of children placed in relatives' home under this inadequate screening, and my audit finds much basis for those concerns."

The audit identified numerous problems with CIHR screening, including some cases where relatives were approved as caregivers despite an adult in the home having a troubling criminal record or previous child protection concerns. Placements sometimes took place without anyone from government actually seeing the child or assessing the home's suitability for an at-risk child.

"Without the ability to accurately assess and mitigate the risk to these children, government is turning a blind eye to their plight," she said. "These children do, in most cases, become invisible to government and are unable to have their voices or concerns heard."

Turpel-Lafond said that although these children and youth are not in a formal care arrangement such as foster care, they are still vulnerable, and government still has a responsibility towards them. "Government must re-screen to ensure they are not being subjected to harm because of a belief that the care of a relative is always safe or best," she said.

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Turpel-Lafond said that although the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) deserves credit for recognizing the inadequacies of the old CIHR program, she has significant concerns about the new Extended Family Program (EFP).

“The ministry suggests the EFP is an improved service with greater supports, but by not committing additional funding, it appears government has chosen the lowest-cost option,” she said. “The EFP appears to be designed to serve a very limited number of clients, and appropriate alternatives are not available for those families ineligible for the new program.

“Program reform should not result in significantly fewer children served. Grandparents and other relatives willingly assume the responsibility of caring for children when the parents cannot, and for this we owe them much gratitude. These relatives have earned and deserve better in terms of consistency across the province and fairness in access to needed supports,” she said.

EFP materials show a lack of clarity and similar gaps in policy and procedures that became evident in the audit of the CIHR program, and Turpel-Lafond is calling on government to address the audit findings to help improve the new program.

“These children under EFP, like those who remain under the capped CIHR program, are entitled to the safety and stability that would be enhanced by government action on the 10 report recommendations,” she said.

The Representative said she is pleased government announced June 1 they would improve criminal record checks, by addressing changes recommended in the audit. “I hope we see such quick action on other aspects, in particular a corresponding commitment to provide and in some cases enhance supports – financial and otherwise – that caregivers need.

“If we believe that rights belong to every member of our society, we cannot ignore the very real gaps that will exist for the children continuing to live under CIHR, for the many caregivers who will struggle by being excluded from the new program, and for all those children whose lives will be shaped in the future by living with extended family,” she said.

The Representative’s audit began with a study population of 1,280 applications and, using standard audit random sampling practices, case files were selected from the overall study population for in-depth file review. An important part of an audit process is to interview staff to understand their view of the program and how it works, and interviews were also held with government front-line staff and management.

Note: The full report, *No Shortcuts to Safety; Doing Better for Children Living with Extended Family*, can be found at www.rcybc.ca

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