



News Release

For Immediate Release

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Representative issues urgent call for government to engage with families of children and youth with special needs left out during pandemic

VICTORIA – In a new report released today, B.C.’s Representative for Children and Youth Jennifer Charlesworth calls on the provincial government to immediately begin working with families and community organizations to address the urgent needs of children and youth with special needs who have been neglected during the pandemic and to begin a system overhaul aimed at providing inclusive, equitable and needs-based services.

“On this International Day of Persons with Disabilities, I strongly urge an immediate and sustained re-engagement of community advocates on the design, development and implementation strategy for the new framework currently being created for children and youth with special needs (CYSN),” says Charlesworth. “Advocates and families are calling us to action.”

Left Out: Children and Youth with Special Needs in the Pandemic, created in collaboration with several organizations that work with CYSN families and featuring the voices of families themselves, notes that these children and youth – who number in the thousands – were struggling long before the pandemic. During the crisis, families have felt abandoned and left to figure out their own solutions. These families rely on supports and services for children and youth with special needs provided by the Ministries of Children and Family Development, Education and Health.

“It’s truly heartbreaking to hear these families’ stories of trying to cope in a time of prolonged crisis,” says Charlesworth. “I imagine most British Columbians believe that families of children and youth with special needs are well-supported in our province. That’s not the case.”

The continuing impact of COVID-19 on these families highlights the urgency of addressing systemic barriers and inequities in B.C.’s supports for children and youth with special needs – problems that have been brought to government’s attention many times over the years by community organizations, advocacy networks, this Office and the families themselves. An RCY survey of 545 families conducted in November confirms many unmet needs and ongoing impact as the pandemic continues.

“We can only imagine the impact of the pandemic on the lives of the uncounted B.C. children and youth with similar needs who aren’t eligible for supports, including children with fetal alcohol

spectrum disorder,” notes Charlesworth, whose Office called two years ago for a comprehensive and province-wide needs assessment of all families of children and youth with special needs.

The closure of community services and suspension of in-class learning in the first months of the pandemic left these families to cope with the sudden loss of vitally important services for children with complex medical, physical, behavioral and cognitive needs. Respite arrangements broke down. Approval processes functioned poorly or not at all. Community centres suspended operations. Wait times for assessments and diagnoses grew longer.

Schools have reopened, but families still face difficult decisions around whether to send a child with complex health needs back to school with the ongoing risk of COVID-19 transmission. All impacts of the pandemic disproportionately affect families who are also Indigenous, racialized, new to Canada or low-income.

“The pandemic has revealed a system that fails children with disabilities, denying them opportunities that the rest of us take for granted,” says Karla Verschoor, Executive Director of Inclusion BC. “As we navigate a second wave and chart a future past the pandemic, we can’t go back to the way things were. It’s simply unjust and inexcusable to leave their families alone and unsupported, which is what we’ve done for far too long.”

The report urges seven immediate actions to support CYSN families:

- more and better communication between the Ministry of Children and Family Development and CYSN families, community providers, family networks and advocates
- one-year extension to fall 2021 of all pandemic-related benefits and processes for CYSN families
- creation of a special working table bringing together families, community organizations, advocates and funding ministries for regular check-ins and problem-solving
- funding support for community organizations to help families find alternative services
- a review of virtual service provisions in the first months of the pandemic to inform an improved approach as the pandemic continues
- streamlined processes for emergency benefits and approvals that minimize the paperwork and administrative burden for families and continue to function in the disruption of a pandemic
- exploration of the concept of support “bubbles” for in-home services to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for both family members and service providers.

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A list of our Community Partners follows

Community Partners

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