



Statement

Nov. 24, 2021

For Immediate Release

Since the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) announced long-term plans to fundamentally change its Children and Youth with Support Needs (CYSN) program, many parents, volunteers and others who work with children and families have expressed serious concerns about those changes. Sadly, the announcement has resulted in uncertainty, fear, anxiety and stress for many families, particularly for those whose children have autism.

At the same time, the announcement was greeted with cautious enthusiasm by other families who saw a glimmer of hope that they might finally be able to access much-needed supports and care for their children. Now they, too, are fearful that their children's needs might not be met if the new CYSN framework is abandoned, and some have been criticized and shamed on social media as they expressed hope that their children would finally get supports.

It is time to take a step back to address the uncertainty and fears and ensure clear information is available to families and advocates, while not losing sight of the need to build a much better system of care for CYSN.

As B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, I have long been calling for a fundamental shift in the CYSN system. Like many others, I have questions and concerns about the framework as announced on Oct. 27. However, I also see within MCFD's plan the potential for much-needed and long overdue improvements. In this regard, I am in favour of the long-term direction as laid out by Minister Mitzi Dean.

In particular, I support the shift towards a needs-based rather than a diagnostically driven CYSN system. This shift will enable children to receive timely supports based on assessed developmental needs even before they receive a diagnosis – which currently can take many years. I also support the intention to enhance community-based access to a diverse array of care and supports, from infancy through to young adulthood.

The minister described the current CYSN system as “patchwork” and said that it leaves too many children on the outside without services. I couldn't agree more and, therefore, long-term improvements are absolutely necessary.

In my three years as Representative, I have released three reports that illuminate the weaknesses in the current CYSN system. These challenges include lengthy and growing wait lists for assessments and diagnoses, lack of access to assessments and quality care in many communities, lack of timely developmental supports to enable young people to thrive, lack of wrap-around support and resources for families who are endeavouring to meet the exceptional needs of their children, discriminatory screening and referral patterns, and inequity in services provided depending on a child's diagnosis.

Through thousands of RCY advocacy cases and reports of critical injuries and deaths, as well as through deep engagement with young people, families and community partners, we see the extent of the weaknesses in the current system. While some current CYSN services might be adequate for some children, youth and families, we know the system as it exists today does not work at all for many. It does not work for children

with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, with undiagnosed neuro-cognitive developmental disorders, with complex medical needs or with complex developmental and behavioural concerns. It also does not work well for many children with autism and their families and caregivers, as we described in our 2018 report entitled *Alone and Afraid*.

If we as a society are going to meet the call of Article 23 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which speaks to the rights of all children and youth with special needs to access care and support and live a life of dignity, belonging and connection, then the current system needs to be transformed.

Despite the concerns about the CYSN framework announcement that have been raised during the past few weeks, I trust that we can all agree on some basic facts and principles: The current CYSN system does not work for many children with support needs and their families and must be transformed. All children and youth with support needs deserve access to equitable, timely, culturally attuned and community-based care, resources and supports. Families, young people, caregivers and service providers need to be meaningfully engaged in the design and development of a transformed system of care. And, finally, a transformed CYSN system that works for all children will require significant government investment.

While I support the long-term direction of the CYSN framework, I also share many of the concerns expressed by families and those in the sector and have a number of questions about the announcement that require answers in order to ensure that children and families who need support are provided with the confidence that they will receive it – both now and into the future.

MCFD's plan is long-term and does nothing to help children and families who are struggling right now. As my Office documented in our report *Left Out* last December, many of these children and families are in crisis and a plan that won't be fully rolled out for at least 3 ½ years is not enough. The Community Partners we worked with on that report tell us that things are even worse for the families they serve now, nearly a year after the *Left Out* report.

While a long-term plan is admirable, action is needed now. We believe a fully resourced, short-term strategy by MCFD is required to solve lengthy wait lists for assessments, respite and services until the new system is fully functional.

Aside from an urgency to address current needs, I am concerned that there has been no indication that increased resources are on the horizon, which will be critical if the system is to serve more children and families and do it faster and more effectively. MCFD says its plan will expand services to 8,300 additional children across B.C. but the ministry does not have the resources to properly serve the children currently on its caseload.

After three recent RCY reports and one by the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth that addressed shortfalls in the current CYSN system, I am pleased to finally be seeing a plan for change. But how will even more families be served without more money and resources being put into a system that is already very under-resourced? A commitment to significantly enhance investments will go a long way towards easing the understandable concerns that there will be a watering down or elimination of services and supports, particularly for those receiving autism funding, in order to serve more children with the same funding.

I have other questions about the MCFD plan, including how the proposed service hubs will be rolled out, and how they will serve families who do not live in a hub community as well as hard-to-serve families? And how will this plan support Indigenous communities to either develop their own robust array of supports or ensure that they are well-served and have access to culturally attuned and safer supports within community hubs?

Autism advocates and parents, quite understandably, are concerned that a move away from individualized funding will erode services that they rely upon. Meanwhile, advocates and parents of children with other support needs argue, quite understandably, that their children deserve equity when it comes to supports and services provided by government. Better and ongoing communication and engagement by MCFD with parents and advocates of all children with support needs is needed to ease those concerns.

Having said that, I reiterate that changes to the current CYSN system are necessary. I urge government to offer short-term help to struggling children and families while its long-term strategy is rolled out. I also urge government to fully engage with parents and advocacy organizations of all children with support needs to ensure that the long-term result is a revamped system that is well-resourced and that works for everyone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J Charlesworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth