

Missing: Why are children disappearing from B.C.'s child welfare system? **Implementation Assessment (6 Month Update)**

The Representative's report *Missing: Why are children disappearing from B.C.'s child welfare system* was released in April 2023 and included eight recommendations to the Provincial Director of Child Welfare (PDCW) that address the conditions created by the child welfare system and other child serving systems that lead to children running from or hiding from the care system. In this report the Representative also reiterated one recommendation from her 2021 report *Skye's Legacy: A focus on belonging*. This recommendation, which is now past the target implementation date with no progress made, addresses a child's need for a sense of belonging in the child welfare system, a factor found to be of critical importance in the cross-jurisdictional research for *Missing*. Pending further convening of child-serving systems and the children, youth, families and communities they serve to deepen understanding of children who are missing, the recommendations included in this report have identified immediate actions needed to ensure safety to the greatest extent possible for young people who are currently lost or missing, or who will be lost or missing in the child welfare system in the coming months.

Given the urgent need for action, the Representative called for a November 1, 2023 due date for recommendations 1-6; hence a 6-month assessment. Typically, implementation of recommendations is monitored annually, and all 9 recommendations will be monitored annually moving forward.

RCY Assessment Definitions:

- **Complete** = All activities that directly support the implementation of the recommendation are complete
- **Substantial Progress** = Most of the activities that directly support the implementation of the recommendation are complete
- **Some Progress** = Some of the activities that directly support the implementation of the recommendation are complete
- **No Progress** = None of the activities that directly support the implementation of the recommendation are complete (pre-planning may be underway but there has been no progress in formal planning or implementation).

Date Published: March 27, 2024

Recommendation	
#1	Develop and implement an interim plan to improve the collection of reliable information and data to enable the PDCW to more effectively identify, monitor and respond to children and youth who are lost or missing in B.C.'s child welfare system.
Ministry's Response	RCY Assessment
6 Month Implementation Assessment submitted October 2023	6 Month Assessment
<p>MCFD has determined that the current Reportable Circumstance (RC) system is the only viable method of identifying and tracking missing children and youth in care. Given this, the ministry noted that pending the completion of the Information Management/Information Technology (IM/IT) project which will offer a longer-term solution, they plan to address this recommendation through the following improvements to the current RC system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the provincial level PDCW staff have developed and will be responsible for maintaining a spreadsheet and tracking process for children and youth who are missing and have a critical injury. Through the established process PDCW staff are tracking the duration of time that a child or youth is missing and will provide support to local service delivery and Indigenous Child and Family Service Agencies (ICFSAs) as needed. • Increased clarity on when a RC report must be submitted for missing children and youth in care will be enhanced through MCFD's action plan for recommendations #3 and #4. <p>At a later stage, through the IM/IT project, MCFD plans to enhance the RC reporting process in terms of data entry at the local service delivery level, and in terms of tracking and data analysis at the provincial office level.</p>	<p>Some Progress</p> <p>The Representative is encouraged to see that the ministry has recognized the need to improve monitoring for children and youth who experienced a critical injury or death while missing that were not previously included in their tracking processes, however the current action plan still only relies on Reportable Circumstances which are recognized to be an unreliable source.</p> <p>Prior to and following the release of the report, the Representative has communicated to the ministry that reliance on RCs alone for identifying, monitoring and responding to children and youth who are lost or missing raises several concerns, including: (1) the discrepancy in numbers between the RCs reviewed by MCFD and RCY resulting in lower detection of lost/missing children for MCFD, (2) known issues with inadequate and delayed reporting, and (3) concerns around lack of compliance with Policy 5.12 highlighted within the ministry's own audits.</p> <p>The Representative is also concerned that the long-term solution remains focused on enhancing the RC reporting process given the known limitations of this approach noted above.</p> <p>The Representative remains curious to see how implementation could be enhanced with the input of ICFSA Directors as it was noted by the RCY monitoring team that they were not given adequate time to review and provide input on MCFD's proposed action plan.</p>

Recommendation	
#2	Work with RCY to identify opportunities to enhance the quality and consistency of reporting on lost and missing children, inclusive of notifications when lost and missing children have been found.
Ministry's Response	RCY Assessment
6 Month Implementation Assessment submitted October 2023	6 Month Assessment
<p>MCFD has developed and implemented internal procedures for staff who monitor Reportable Circumstances (RCs). This procedure requires reports about missing children to be monitored until the child or youth meets the criteria to be considered no longer missing. These internal procedures were implemented September 8, 2023, with revisions implemented November 1, 2023, to ensure alignment with practice guidelines developed in response to recommendation #4. MCFD has noted that an orientation for PDCW staff regarding the new internal procedures has been developed.</p> <p>MCFD reports that the Ministry will be utilizing the Information Alert/Memo system in ICM to establish an improved mechanism for service delivery and ICFSAs staff to communicate with Provincial Centralized Screening and PDCW about children and youth who are missing. Supported by the practice guidelines developed in response to recommendation #4, information about the circumstances of and planning for children and youth who are missing will be entered using the Alert/Memo system.</p>	<p>Some Progress</p> <p>Whilst the Ministry's response to this recommendation appears reliant on monitoring children and youth who are reported as lost or missing, the intent of the recommendation is to enhance the quality and consistency of reporting of young people who are lost, missing, or have disappeared. Further work is needed to ensure that frontline workers are aware of and completing the necessary reporting for young people who are lost or missing to ensure they are being detected at a provincial level.</p> <p>The Representative notes that while they were invited to the working group, there was an overall lack of information sharing and collaboration with RCY as well as ICFSAs in developing a response to this recommendation. As a result, the Representative is concerned that their important contributions have not been considered and that young people across the province may receive a different response depending on who they are served by. This is particularly concerning given the high rate of Indigenous children and youth reported missing from the child welfare system.</p> <p>The Representative is encouraged to see that the Reportable Circumstance Team and the Aboriginal Service Branch analysts are seeking weekly updates from service delivery practitioners about search and engagement activities and provide supportive, critical feedback to service delivery practitioners. This current recommendation has therefore been assessed as seeing 'some progress' towards implementation.</p>

Recommendation	
#3	Immediately remove the requirement for missing children in the system of care to require additional safety concerns before a child is reported lost or missing and approach as high-risk until a risk assessment is completed to ensure an equitable and robust response to the disappearance of all children and youth in B.C. to align MCFD policy with the B.C. Provincial Policing Standards concerning missing children.
Ministry's Response	RCY Assessment
6 Month Implementation Assessment submitted October 2023	6 Month Assessment
<p>A representative from the RCMP E-Division met with representatives from MCFD, ICFSA Directors and their Secretariat, and the RCY in relation to the current recommendation. MCFD report that the RCMP support the existing MCFD and ICFSA Protocol Agreement with the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police regarding missing children and youth. They clarified that police policy addresses police response to reports and does not set the criteria for civilians making reports to the police. Based on this information, MCFD has focused their response to this recommendation on clarifying the Director's role when a child is missing.</p> <p>A working group comprised of representatives from MCFD and ICFSA Directors and their Secretariat was formed to develop a response to this recommendation.</p> <p>MCFD has updated operational policies and/or practice guidance to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clearer definitions of 'missing' and 'no longer missing.' • Reduce the emphasis on caregiver decisions. • Clearly outline role/responsibility in reporting to the police (with no minimum time of missing required). <p>These updates were implemented on November 1, 2023, and the protocol agreement does not note the requirement of additional safety concerns before a child is reported lost or missing. However, MCFD reports that the operational policy update work has proceeded without meaningful engagement and collaboration with Indigenous partners. MCFD reports that a policy update has been created on the ministry intranet and MCFD and ICFSA staff have been notified via email. A review of policy updates provided by the Provincial Practice Branch has been scheduled for January 2024 in conjunction with an orientation to the new interim practice guidelines developed in response to recommendation #4.</p>	<p>Some Progress</p> <p>The Representative is in agreement with the updates to MCFD's Children and Youth in Care Policy 5.12 – <i>When a child/youth is missing</i>. This update clarifies the roles and responsibilities and when to report a child lost or missing. Additional safety concerns are not required to make a report in the new policy. However, the work completed to date has solely focused on updating MCFD policy for when a child/youth is missing and does not include Aboriginal Operational Practice Standards and Indicators (AOPSI) updates which impact children and youth served through ICFSAs.</p> <p>The Representative remains concerned that the lack of alignment across MCFD policy and AOPSI standards and the existing Protocol Agreement with police risks unintended consequences for Indigenous children and youth, in particular.</p> <p>Both MCFD and AOPSI Standards must be addressed to complete this recommendation.</p> <p>The Representative is concerned about the lack of collaboration with ICFSA Directors and their Secretariat in responding to this recommendation, including a lack of information sharing in the process on the part of MCFD. Although MCFD invited three ICFSAs to participate in a working group for the interim guidelines, it should be noted that there are 24 ICFSAs across the province and information was not shared with the ICFSA Secretariat until days before the changes were implemented. Updates must occur to all operational policies and practice to ensure consistency for all Indigenous children involved with child-serving systems.</p>

<p>MCFD reports that 3 ICFSAs were invited to participate in the working group for the development of the interim guidelines, and only one was able to participate and provide feedback regarding cultural considerations¹. Despite the lack of meaningful engagement and collaboration to date, MCFD states that they are committed to working in partnership with Indigenous Governing Bodies, Modern Treaty Nations, and other Indigenous partners to further update operational policies and practice regarding missing children and youth. MCFD notes that this engagement is currently in progress and has set a target completion date of February 2024.</p>	
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Recommendation	
#4	<p>Pending the development and implementation of a congruent whole-of-system response that addresses the push and pull factors contributing to children and youth being lost or missing in the child welfare system, adopt interim practice guidelines that support social workers and care teams to meaningfully engage with and respond to children and youth during and after incidents of them going missing. Interim practice guidelines to be informed by research evidence and effective practices employed in other jurisdictions.</p>
Ministry's Response	RCY Assessment
6 Month Implementation Assessment submitted October 2023	6 Month Assessment
<p>MCFD established a working group which included staff from MCFD, ICFSAs and the Youth Advisory Council to review research and practices in other jurisdictions and inform the development of interim practice guidelines that aim to clarify roles and responsibilities of MCFD/ICFSA workers and care teams during and after a child or youth in care is missing.</p> <p>Interim practice guidelines were implemented on November 1, 2023. Orientation sessions on the interim practice guidelines for all staff who provide guardianship services are scheduled for January 2024, in conjunction with an orientation on the updated operational policy developed in response to recommendations #3 and #5.</p> <p>The ministry has implemented practice guidelines that include considerations for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a child/youth comes into care, changes placement 	<p>Substantial Progress</p> <p>The Representative is very encouraged that several practice guidelines have been created or updated with great haste and subsequently implemented to meaningfully engage with and respond to youth during and after incidents of them going missing.</p> <p>While there are some pieces that relate specifically to Indigenous children and youth within the guidelines, the Representative believes that these could be enhanced through meaningful engagement and collaboration with ICFSA Directors and Secretariat.</p> <p>In addition, while the Representative recognizes the short timeline and limitations to engagement, the Representative believes that ongoing and meaningful engagement with young people, ICFSAs</p>

¹ Further context information provided from MCFD on November 15, 2024.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caregiver efforts to locate a child/youth in care when they are unreasonably late and whose whereabouts are unknown • When a child/youth in care cannot be located • When a child/youth is located but doesn't return to their placement • When a child/youth in care returns after being missing or away from their placement • Assessing and supporting the caregiver • Clinical supervision. 	<p>and their Secretariat about these guidelines would add to their effectiveness as more is learned about need and impact as they are developed further.</p>
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Recommendation	
#5	Immediately remove the requirement for youth to be 'habitually' missing before workers are directed to work with the child or youth to determine why they go missing.
Ministry's Response	RCY Assessment
6 Month Implementation Assessment submitted October 2023	6 Month Assessment
<p>MCFD has amended policy to remove the need for a child to be habitually missing before action is taken. Updated operational policy was implemented November 1, 2023.</p> <p>No evidence was provided for similar updates to AOPSI standards for ICFSAs at this time.</p>	<p>Substantial Progress</p> <p>The Representative is in agreement with the updates to MCFD's Children and Youth in Care Policy 5.12 – <i>When a child/youth is missing</i>. Particularly, this shift requires that steps are taken for any child/youth who has gone missing, rather than specifically for a child/youth who is habitually missing. The Representative also is encouraged by the addition of standard 5.12(3) which requires that a plan is in place for the caregiver that includes what actions should be taken if the child/youth goes missing again; and how to strengthen the child/youth's relationship with the caregiver and the child/youth's feeling of safety and belonging in the home.</p> <p>The Representative remains concerned that the AOPSI Voluntary Services Standards (standard 13), and Guardianship Practice Standards (standard 22) for when a child is missing, lost or runaway have not been changed and continue to include specific provisions for when a child habitually runs away, rather than for all children who are missing. The Representative is concerned that the lack of meaningful engagement and collaboration with the Secretariat and ICFSAs will increase the</p>

	<p>likelihood of different responses for Indigenous children and youth in care, depending on who they are served by.</p> <p>The Representative believes that all related MCFD and AOPSI Standards must be addressed to complete this recommendation.</p>
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Recommendation	
#6	Adopt the recommendations from <i>In Harms Way? Serious Occurrences Report Vol. 2, 2017</i> , to include information on: why the child left, what happened while they were away, if medical care was required, and what could be done to prevent them from needing to leave again. (Note: this should be sent as a resubmission and should not delay the initial reportable timeline).
Ministry's Response	RCY Assessment
6 Month Implementation Assessment submitted October 2023	6 Month Assessment
<p>MCFD established a working group which included staff from MCFD, ICFSAs and the Youth Advisory Council to review research and practices in other jurisdictions and inform the development of interim practice guidelines that aim to clarify roles and responsibilities of MCFD/ICFSA workers and care teams during and after a child or youth in care is missing. In addition to the interim practice guidelines, MCFD reports that the working group has created tip sheets focused on relationship and belonging informed by the APPF and gathering the circle document.</p> <p>MCFD notes that the guidelines developed by the working group were also informed by <i>In Harms Way? Serious Occurrences Report Vol. 2 (2017)</i> and contain directions to staff for documentation via Information Alerts/Memos on the ICM system. Interim practice guidelines were implemented on November 1st, 2023.</p> <p>In further evidence provided by MCFD in November 2023, the Ministry provided the following "Tip Sheets":</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to Help a Youth Who is at Risk of being Missing or Absent from their Placement - Prevention Tips for Caregivers • Missing or Absent from their Placement Prevention – Tips for Staff 	<p>Substantial Progress</p> <p>The Representative acknowledges the significant work completed by the working group to create the "Tips Sheets". Notably the incorporation of questions which could support the recommendations from <i>In Harms Way? Serious Occurrences Report Vol. 2 (2017)</i>. The Representative is encouraged that this step is taken in the spirit and intention of the recommendation.</p> <p>The Representative continues to be concerned by the lack of meaningful engagement with ICFSAs in the development of these guidelines. The lack of cross referencing with the practice guidelines within AOPSI standards also risks ICFSA workers being unaware of these practice guidelines.</p> <p>The Representative also remains concerned about the suggestive nature of the guidelines and how MCFD will ensure a practice shift with these new practice guidelines, as internal MCFD audits have previously shown a significant lack of compliance with internal guidelines: for example, seeing children in their home or care plans.</p> <p>The Representative also notes that the recommendation from <i>In Harms Way? Serious Occurrences Report Vol. 2 (2017)</i> includes creating "a mechanism for responding to differential risks faced by</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When a Youth is Missing or Absent from their Placement and Returns Prevention – Tips for Caregivers• When a Youth Returns – Tips for Staff• Youth at Risk of Being Missing or Absent from their Placement – Information for Staff.	<p>missing children through a province wide discussion that includes police, service providers, and residential service providers”. For this recommendation to be assessed as complete, this mechanism needs to be created.</p>
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