



News Release

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July 16, 2024

New report highlights series of significant missteps resulting in a child's death – Representative for Children and Youth calls for both urgent and transformative change in systems of care

VICTORIA – In a report released today, British Columbia's Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) is calling for a collective commitment to "stop tinkering at the edges of an outdated system that does not work for too many children and families" and embark instead on both specific and larger transformative changes that will ensure that our young people are safe, connected and thriving.

"We need to recognize that young people are currently 20 per cent of the population, but they are 100 per cent of the future of this province. Given this, we must commit together to move their needs up the priority list significantly," said Representative for Children and Youth Jennifer Charlesworth. "This report highlights all too clearly how poorly we are serving too many young people and their families in B.C." And when we know better, we can do better.

The report, *Don't Look Away*, includes findings from RCY's investigation into the death of a boy "Colby" who was tortured and killed in the Fraser Valley in 2021 at the hands of extended family caregivers while in the care of the provincial government.

"This child's death was completely preventable and I want to acknowledge the incomprehensible grief and loss that this child's family, those who loved him, and the communities he was connected to have experienced. The provincial care system completely and utterly failed this child and his family and the result of that was the loss of a beautiful little boy and so many lives being forever changed by this trauma."

The report documents the many mis-steps that contributed to Colby's death by the Ministry of Children and Family Development and a number of other agencies, including a failure to adhere to legislation, policy and practice requirements designed

to protect the safety and rights of children including missed criminal record checks, inadequate assessment and follow-up to reports of family violence, flawed decision-making regarding placements for the boy and his siblings and confusion over roles and accountability between the ministry and Nation that the boy belonged to. The report highlights that he was not seen by the social worker responsible for his care for seven months, even though policy states visits must take place every 90 days. Colby was further isolated from school, the medical system and the community by his caregivers.

“It would be too easy to point the finger at a worker, or the caregivers or MCFD and blame them for this tragic outcome. But what we see when we look at the totality of this boy’s story are multiple missed opportunities by many people and agencies, not just a single person, or a single ministry,” said Charlesworth. “In spending almost a year looking very closely at what happened to Colby and his family and examining the systems of care more broadly, we are saying unequivocally that significant change must happen. A collective commitment to young people must ensure that no other child endures the horror that this boy and his siblings experienced.”

Colby’s story is not an outlier. The Representative includes the stories of 14 additional children in the report who were subjected to harm that has either caused life-altering harm or death. The report notes that that in 2023/24 the Office received 6,437 reports of deaths and injuries impacting young people in care or receiving reviewable government services, with close to 3,000 of these meeting the criteria for *critical* injuries and deaths that are within the office’s mandate for reviews and investigations.

“These numbers, are far, far too high,” said Charlesworth. “The system we have now was designed 50 years ago and it is incapable of addressing the complexities that young people and their families are experiencing today. It is a colonial, siloed, rigid, discriminatory and vastly under-resourced system that does not enable those working within it to do the kind of work that most know needs to be done. It is time to think differently, act differently and feel differently in our work with young people.”

The report includes a systemic review of key themes that were prevalent in Colby’s life, and the lives of many of the incidents of injuries and deaths of young people receiving government services that are reported to RCY. Areas highlighted in the report include inequities and a lack of oversight in family caregiving arrangements, significant weaknesses in interagency collaboration and communication, the impact of inadequate family supports and early prevention resources and the risks of confusion

over lines of accountability as Nations transition to having jurisdiction over their own child welfare systems.

A central experience of the young people in the report is the prevalence of violence in their lives, and the intergenerational presence of violence in their families' lives. The concealment, normalization and secrecy surrounding violence are discussed in the report.

"Of all the themes we looked at in this review, we kept coming back to the deep pervasiveness of violence in young peoples' lives," said Charlesworth. "We need to build our systems of support recognizing that children are not simply bystanders or witnesses to family violence in their lives, but they experience it to their core. We must collectively address violence and support healing at individual, family and community levels."

Another central finding was that too often families did not receive the supports that they needed, when they first began to struggle, to help them nurture their children. "We could prevent so much pain and loss and uphold the fundamental rights of children, if we built systems that supported them in their early years and that non-judgmentally helped their families long before a state of crisis and risk defines their lives," said Charlworth

Through the teachings of the children highlighted in the report the Representative makes both short- and long-term recommendations in the report. She calls for collective responsibility and action in five key areas: enhancing child well-being; addressing violence, supporting families including kinship carers, enhancing accountability and supporting jurisdiction. Recommendations include:

- Enhance child well-being through a "whole of government approach" to care and, in collaboration with First Nations, Métis governments and community leaders, develop a Child Well-being Strategy and Action Plan, with progress to be measured and reported out publicly on an annual basis
- Address the prevalence of violence in children's lives by amplifying the commitments made under the *Declaration Act Action Plan* and adding to those made in *Safe and Supported: British Columbia's Gender-Based Violence Action Plan* to specifically enhance services and supports for young people, reinforcing that young people who witness violence are experiencing violence.

- Establish clear outcomes and indicators to measure child well-being and inform planning, decision-making and investments in child, youth and family services.
- Work together with Indigenous leadership and the federal government to identify and mitigate the gaps in provincial and federal legislation that put the safety and well-being of children and youth at risk during the transition to full jurisdiction and capacity and beyond.
- Update the Ministry of Children and Development's case tracking system to embed "non-negotiable" procedures including criminal record checks, violence assessments and follow-up practices and care plans and progressively alert team leaders, local service delivery leadership and provincial monitoring if they remain outstanding.

"Colby's true legacy is a strong call to action. He has much to teach all of us about how our current systems work, where they are strong, where they are weak, what could be done to prevent such tragedies in the future and how we might collectively ensure that children throughout B.C. – in all types of communities and families – are safe and thriving while connected to family, loved ones, their culture and community."

View the Report and Summary: <https://rcybc.ca/hfaq/dont-look-away>

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