



# News Release

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**For Immediate Release  
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## **Health Care Strategy Required for Vulnerable Youth in the Justice System**

VICTORIA – An improved health strategy must be put in place for youth who are in or leaving jails, says B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth.

This is a key recommendation in a report released today by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. She conducted an independent review of practices and procedures relating to physical examinations of youth in custody.

"It's illuminating and somewhat disheartening that for many of these youth, the only time they will get essential health care is when they come in contact with the justice system," she said. "Given that they are at a developmental stage where they are beginning to branch out on their own and engage in risky behaviours, we have a huge opportunity to improve their lives and their futures, if these medical supports could be significantly enhanced."

Many in this group have histories involving substance abuse, physical or sexual abuse, or are street-associated, Turpel-Lafond said. They often have unmet needs including post-traumatic stress as well as mental and physical health concerns. "Because of their extreme vulnerabilities, these youth must be leaving custody centres with solid connections to caring family doctors and better information about taking care of their own health," she said.

Turpel-Lafond is recommending that the Ministry of Health Services lead an initiative to improve in- and post-custody health supports. This should include medical and dental treatment to youth in custody, and comprehensive transitional plans on leaving custody.

The Representative's report examined overall policies and practice that occur when young men and women, as prisoners in the youth justice system, are ordered by the court to undergo a medical or psychological assessment. It was stimulated by complaints about practices that were in place when the review began.

"Some practices relating to medical assessments of youth in custody have been reviewed and changed by government during the course of my review, such as allowing youth to choose the gender of the examining doctor and chaperon, and making totally sure they understand they have the right to decline a breast or genital exam," she said.

Turpel-Lafond, while also commending the Ministry of Children and Family Development Youth Justice for its cooperation and initiative, said these government changes to practice are encouraging but now need to be formalized in written policies.

“The realities of these troubled youth demand an ongoing, deep sensitivity and a full commitment to protecting their human rights. They must be supported through this difficult time in their lives,” she said.

The Representative for Children and Youth, an Independent Officer of the Legislature, undertook this review within her mandates to carry out individual advocacy, and to provide oversight of the child and youth-serving system.

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The report, *“Medical Assessments in B.C.’s Youth Justice System”* and related MCFD documents are available at [www.rcybc.ca](http://www.rcybc.ca) .

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