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Making a case for children at risk

By JUSTINE HUNTER

Current system doesn't understand needs of its charges, watchdog says after 4 months

VICTORIA -- A crayon portrait of the woman who is responsible for overseeing the care of 16,000 of B.C.'s most vulnerable children shows a busy, but smiling, woman.

"Here is a picture of my mom on the phone," says the caption, printed by one of Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond's four young children.

"Mom" is busy trying to overhaul a child-protection system in B.C. that has been crippled by failures, wounded by funding cuts and shaken by political change. Ms. Turpel-Lafond, 44, has taken a leave of absence from her job as a Saskatchewan Provincial Court judge to serve as B.C.'s first Representative for Children and Youth. She is both an advocate for children and a watchdog for the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the government department that administers the lives of children in care.



Photo by Deddeda Stemler

Four months after her office opened, the judge has rendered a preliminary verdict: The system that is meant to protect children doesn't understand them.

"I don't want to rush to judgment, but I see a ministry that really is challenged to manage change at any given time," she said in an interview. "If you look over a 15-year period, it's a chronicle of disaster of managing change. The missing piece, from what I can see, is understanding how it is serving children."

Her judge's robes still hang in her office. Framed awards and degrees cover the walls, charting her rise as a lawyer, university professor, native activist, and one of Time magazine's "100 Global Leaders of Tomorrow" in 1994.

Her children's photos and colourful artwork dominate the room, while native art, reflecting her Cree heritage, fills up every remaining surface.

Like her office, Ms. Turpel-Lafond strikes a balance between the measured language of a judge, and a parent who wants to reach out to children who are hurt.

She is frustrated that B.C. still has no way to measure how well it is doing when it steps in to care for children at risk.



"The state is the prudent parent," she said. "They need to behave as the prudent parent. But the system is not responsive to children."

That observation is shaped in part by the stories that have come to her in her role as advocate. In the roughly 500 e-mails and calls for help she has received, she has discovered problems big and small: a structure that cannot distinguish between the needs of an infant and those of a teenager; inflexible rules that denied orthodontic care to a youth with a cleft palate; and a system that routinely cuts off support to mentally challenged youth on the day they turn 19.

"We really need to look at the standards of care for these children. ... I call it the old model of a child in foster care: 'Get a shirt on their back and a roof over their head.' Well, I think that's not adequate. We have to look at their developmental needs."

Growing up in poverty on a Manitoba reserve, Ms. Turpel-Lafond endured abuse, and was surrounded by domestic violence and alcoholism in her home, a mirror of the upbringing experienced by many of the children she now encounters.

But she went on to collect "more degrees than a thermometer," including a PhD from Harvard.

She was the first aboriginal woman appointed to Saskatchewan's provincial bench in 1998 and has been touted for a seat on the Supreme Court of Canada.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond took this job on because she saw B.C. poised to reform its child protection system, where fully half of the kids in care are native.

While she continues to work with a legislative committee to develop a form of business plan to measure B.C.'s performance in serving kids in care, Ms. Turpel-Lafond also wants to reach out directly to children and youth.

In between talk of benchmarks and other bureaucratic-speak, there is a plan for a "You-have-a-voice" campaign that will be branded on everything from sippy cups to silicone bracelets.

Finally, she wants to relocate the Vancouver office she inherited away from the city's financial district. "You could get your Louis Vuitton [luxury leather goods] here, and then come next door for advocacy," she observed dryly.

A small change, but one driven by looking at the world through the eyes of a vulnerable child.

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