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Important task

By Dave Paulson

For someone who's been on the job officially for less than two months, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond already appears to have a firm grip on the monumental task ahead.

Turpel-Lafond is B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth and her appointment is a result of last year's Hughes report into government bungling in the Ministry of Children and Family Development. This week the former Saskatchewan provincial court judge put emphasis on the child protection challenges in the northern half of the province by announcing a full-time child and youth office in downtown Prince George will open in July. It is one of three in B.C. -- the others are in Vancouver and Victoria -- and it will have a drop-in component in addition to monitoring the work of the ministry.

Statistically, children in care in northern B.C. are worse off than those elsewhere. Whereas only 20 per cent of children in care provincially graduate from high school, the number is much lower in the North, Turpel-Lafond said in an editorial board meeting with *The Citizen*. There are also more teen pregnancies and suicide attempts per capita in the North.

She also pointed out that 90 per cent of children in care in northern B.C. are aboriginal. With that, it is of no small significance that Turpel-Lafond has an aboriginal background -- a Cree father and Scottish mother -- and has a first-hand understanding of the challenges and pressures facing aboriginal children.

Visiting Prince George this week, Turpel-Lafond was impressed by the work being done at Youth Around Prince, a drop-in and resource centre near Seventh and George, and would like to see its services expanded.

She says there aren't enough drug and alcohol treatment or resources for teens, especially those just released from youth containment facilities, which are essentially detox centres for many inmates, Turpel-Lafond said. She is bothered by a conversation with one young offender in the Prince George facility who is excited because his coming birthday means he can graduate to adult jail.

To remove that mentality from the culture, Turpel-Lafond sees it as crucial to give children a voice and a feeling of connectedness early on. She aims to rehabilitate a system that sees children dying in foster care and others who become ensnared in sexual exploitation and drug addiction and a life on society's fringes.

In short, she wants to fill the cracks through which so many children fall.

It won't be easy, nor does Turpel-Lafond expect it to be. She left behind a fulfilling, important career on the Saskatchewan bench because she wanted to be the person to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children in a troubled B.C. system.

The early evidence suggests those children are in good hands.