



Statement

June 12, 2018

For Immediate Release

As an advocate for British Columbia's most vulnerable youth, I am compelled to publicly express my grave concerns about the operations of some residential agencies contracted by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) that continue to leave many youth in government care at unnecessary and unacceptable risk.

I was shocked and disappointed to learn that, in May of this year, issues at yet another Lower Mainland residential agency had resulted in its closure by the ministry. Those issues were serious enough that MCFD removed and relocated 18 children and youth from the resource following a January disclosure by a youth that a staff member was gang-affiliated, took youth on drug drops, had smoked marijuana with the youth and offered him cocaine.

The subsequent investigation following that disclosure found a number of serious shortcomings with the agency, including the fact that only 10 of 33 staff and caregivers had completed criminal record and other security-screening criteria. The investigation resulted in nine of these employees – who had all been caring for children prior to the investigation – being barred permanently from further such work and 13 others being further screened due to concerning information.

Sadly, this is not an isolated incident when it comes to some residential agencies contracted by MCFD. A report by my Office, released in 2017 and entitled *Broken Promises, Alex's Story*, detailed the tragic 2015 death by suicide of a youth who had been placed in a hotel with unqualified staff and little in the way of supervision or supports. Alex had been moved to the hotel after the residential agency that operated the home he lived in was closed by MCFD and all 33 children and youth in the agency's care relocated due to problems, including inadequate screening of staff, several of whom were found unqualified and unsuitable as caregivers.

In July 2016, the Provincial Director of Child Welfare investigated allegations of inappropriate care being provided by yet another contracted Lower Mainland residential agency. This investigation also found poor qualifications and lack of completed background checks and resulted in more than 20 children in care being moved to other placements.

Screening and suitability of staff and caregivers are not the only concerns that I have with respect to contracted residential agencies. Among other issues are inadequate training and lack of support for staff who often deal with complex care and behaviour management; lack of evidence-based, therapeutic approaches in these facilities; inappropriate matching of the needs of the children and youth with the capacity of the caregivers; issues arising with poor matching of children and youth residing in the same placement; and undue reliance on police intervention for behaviour management and crisis response.

With the release of *Alex's Story*, my Office recommended that MCFD allocate the necessary resources to significantly enhance the provision of quality assurance and financial accountability for all its contracted residential agencies and specifically called for the ministry to review the background and qualifications of all staff who are currently providing care to children and youth through these agencies.

The ministry did create a Centralized Screening Hub as a way to address that recommendation. However, I have recently learned that nearly half (46 of 96) of B.C.'s residential agencies have yet to screen their staff through this hub. Sixteen months after the release of *Alex's Story* – and nearly three years after his death – MCFD has still not reviewed the backgrounds and qualifications of all staff who are currently providing care to children and youth in contracted residential agencies in B.C. Children and youth in these facilities continue to be exposed to risk. This is clearly unacceptable.

In addition to the immediate risk to these children, the decision to close a contracted agency also means that each child must endure the difficulties associated with moving to a new placement, forming relationships with new care providers and other residents, and often changing schools and other key service providers such as counsellors.

The closure of these three residential agencies referenced resulted in about 70 vulnerable children and youth being disrupted with yet another set of changes. The fact that children and youth in the care of MCFD are being relocated and likely re-traumatized as a result of the ministry's failure to ensure that their contracted caregivers are properly screened in the first place is also unacceptable and entirely avoidable.

The ministry has known about these issues for some time, has been presented with options to improve the system and yet continues to place the most vulnerable children in its care in harm's way.

I have written Minister Conroy, asking for a meeting to discuss this urgent matter and requesting an update on MCFD's plans to remedy the situation. My Office will be keeping a close watch on the ministry's response.



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