



News Release

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PAIGE'S STORY PROMPTS REPRESENTATIVE TO CALL FOR NEW APPROACH TO HELPING VULNERABLE ABORIGINAL GIRLS

VANCOUVER – A drug overdose in April of 2013 was the direct cause of death for Paige, a 19-year-old Aboriginal girl living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. But it was actually years of abuse and neglect, persistent inaction from front-line professionals and an indifferent social care system that led to this young woman's demise, an investigative report released today by B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth reveals.

Paige's Story: Abuse, Indifference and a Young Life Discarded documents the downward spiral of a child who had great potential but never received the protection, nurturing and care she needed and deserved. Professional indifference to her life circumstances continually left her – and at times even actively placed her – in harm's way.

"Paige's story is one of the most troubling investigations my Office has ever conducted," said Representative Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. "It is a startling example of a collective failure to act by multiple organizations and individuals who should have helped Paige and, in fact, had multiple opportunities to do so. For this girl, the system and those who work in it failed as a whole in their duty to care for and protect her."

The Representative finds it inexplicable that Paige was not permanently removed at an early age from the care of her mother, who struggled mightily with substance misuse which impacted her ability to parent. Instead, Paige was allowed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) to remain largely in the care of her mother, despite being the subject of 30 child protection reports during her lifetime.

Paige's life was chaotic from the very beginning as she was regularly exposed to violence, neglect, open drug use and inappropriate living conditions. That lifestyle had its effects on her education – she changed schools 16 times with sporadic attendance before finally quitting in Grade 10. After her mother relocated them to the Downtown Eastside in 2009, Paige moved more than 50 times, shuttling between homeless shelters, safe houses, youth detox centres, couch-surfing scenarios, foster homes and a number of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels.

"It is incomprehensible that social workers could determine that shelters and SROs in the Downtown Eastside were suitable for Paige or any child," Turpel-Lafond said. "Those on the

front lines knew the danger she was in – some even predicted what would happen to her. Nobody did enough to help.”

In addition to her other vulnerabilities, Paige was also dealing with serious health concerns as she was diagnosed as a young child with Marfan syndrome, a condition that left her legally blind without her glasses. The same illness left her with other unmet health needs, including medication she could not afford and a requirement for ongoing cardiac care.

Predictably, given Paige’s environment and the constant trauma, she developed problems with alcohol and substance use herself. Paige ended up in the Emergency ward or detox after being found unconscious or incoherent at least 17 times. She was involved in more than 40 police files, mostly for public intoxication or disturbances involving alcohol. Yet contact and reporting between health care workers, police and MCFD about these incidents was spotty – in some cases, they went unreported to MCFD; in others, the ministry failed to respond appropriately. In fact, the ministry’s approach to Paige was one of waiting for her to ask for help, rather than proactively offering it and acting decisively to ensure her safety and well-being.

The Representative calls on the provincial government to take immediate steps to address the persistent professional indifference shown to Aboriginal children and youth by many of those entrusted to work in this field including some social workers, police, health care workers and educators. She also recommends that MCFD immediately move to ensure that no children in its care or receiving its services reside in SROs in the Downtown Eastside. As well, the Representative repeats a recommendation to B.C.’s Attorney General, to review the reasons for a lack of enforcement of the duty of all British Columbians to report child abuse as called for in the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* and to take steps to promote compliance.

“Paige’s files are rife with examples of situations in which workers seemed to throw up their hands and declare: ‘What can we do?’, rather than doing everything that was within their power,” Turpel-Lafond said. “When one considers trends exposed in my prior reports dealing with how the system treats Aboriginal girls, this professional indifference is evidently ingrained and needs to be immediately changed.”

The full report can be viewed here:

<http://www.rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/reports>

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