

Child protection should be priority: advocate's report

Anne Kyle, Saskatchewan News Network

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REGINA -- Children and youth must take priority over family rights and jurisdictional battles, Saskatchewan Children's Advocate Marvin Bernstein said Thursday when he released his 2007 annual report.

"While my office supports the importance and value of children, culture, language and community in the life of any child, the child must, nonetheless, be at the centre of that circle. His or her safety, protection and best interests must always remain paramount," Bernstein said.

A glaring example of the system's failure, he said, is the case of Tyler, a two-year-old boy who was beaten so badly by his father that he is now paralyzed on one side of his body. The Children's Advocate investigation last year revealed Social Services had received more than 40 documented referrals regarding this family during a 13-year time period, but Tyler was never taken into care despite his siblings being apprehended for brief periods of time.

"It is the opinion of this office that the critical injury to Tyler was preventable, had the ministry provided Tyler with the child-centred protection services to which he was entitled," Bernstein told reporters.

Social Services Minister Donna Harpauer said she will hire a senior ministry official to take on the responsibility of overseeing child and family services and review the system in light of the children's advocate's concerns.

She also committed to review legislation with the intent of adopting the principles of a child-centred service delivery model.

"I as the new minister believe the safety of our children is of primary importance. I have expressed in the past that I have concerns. I have concerns that need to be looked into and opening the legislation for review is going to do just that," Harpauer said.

"We need to start that process this year," she said, adding it is unlikely any legislative amendments would be ready to be tabled in the legislature this fall.

According to Bernstein, the Ministry of Social Services' family centred approach -- a desire to preserve the family unit at all costs even where there is a significant risk of harm to the child -- in combination with inconsistent child welfare practices and an uneven application of relevant policy to all children has lessened the necessary vigilance to child safety, protection and well-being and the ability of service providers to consistently place the needs and interests of children and youth first.

"In addition, we have seen too many instances where the safety, protection and well-being of children and youth have been compromised in order to achieve political, jurisdictional or financial advantages," Bernstein said.

Bernstein urged government to adopt a "child first" or "child-centred" approach for services through legislative changes to the Child and Family Services Act and the Adoption Act, incorporating the Children and Youth First Principles in policy and putting that philosophy into practice.

Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations vice-chief Guy Lonechild said the federation supports the children- and youth-first principles for services to children and youth both on- and off-reserve.

But while a child's safety and well-being is a priority, Lonechild said the FSIN doesn't want to see children removed from their family and community because of a lack of resources and services on-reserve.

It's important, he said, that the federal and provincial governments work in partnership with the FSIN to provide for the needs of children both on and off reserve.

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