



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
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Feb. 6, 2017

Ministry of Children and Family Development

Government accepts latest representative for children and youth recommendations and moves to do more

VANCOUVER – Government has accepted all of the recommendations in the representative for children and youth's (RCY) latest report and has committed to additional actions to further strengthen the contracted residential care system and improve planning for all children and youth in government care.

The report makes four recommendations themed around:

1. Connecting kids with extended family.
2. Ensuring plans of care are complete and up-to-date for each child and youth in government care.
3. Making child and youth mental health services more available and accessible.
4. Strengthening quality assurance, oversight and accountability for all contracted residential agencies.

"I completely agree with the findings in the new representative's first report," said Minister of Child and Family Development Stephanie Cadieux. "The report is fair, balanced and its call to action achievable. I've told the RCY that I believe more can and should be done, and I hope that his office and the ministry will support each other, in our respective roles, on delivering the additional measures I'm announcing today."

Government has allocated \$2.7 million to help in the development of culturally specific plans of care that are responsive to the specific community and culture of each child. Government is working with a number of Indigenous organizations to assist in the distribution of those funds.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development is mandating 100% compliance with the requirement to have a plan of care in place for all children and youth in government care. Those plans must include considerations around permanency, and cultural components if the child is Indigenous.

"The state of our relationship with the agencies that screen, approve and hire their own caregivers must and will change," said Cadieux.

Child welfare background checks and criminal record checks for all residential caregivers – whether they work directly for the ministry or for a contracted agency – will be brought in-house as a ministry accountability. This will help ensure that all those who work with vulnerable children and youth in government care have the necessary security clearances and skills to properly support them.

The ministry is working to standardize contracting and increase its financial and practice

oversight of resources and homes run by contracted agencies. Government welcomes the input of the office of the auditor general, which has signalled its intent to audit the ministry's oversight of contracted services for at-risk children and youth.

Ultimately, the ministry aims to limit the use of such contracted agency resources. Their purpose will be to help children and youth get stabilized and returned to a family-based setting.

"We know that a caring family member is better than a contracted caregiver in almost every instance," said Cadieux. "We've been making progress on this front, bringing fewer kids into government care and placing more with extended family. Our task is to make it even easier to identify extended family members who can step in. We need to properly train those folks and give them appropriate financial support and access to services, like counselling and respite, to help them succeed as long-term caregivers. As a government, we have prioritized supports for vulnerable children, something that will continue to be reflected when the minister of finance tables his budget later this month."

Quick Facts:

- There are approximately 7,100 children and youth in government care at any given time.
- As of Dec. 31, 2016, there were 699 children and youth placed with 93 contracted residential agencies. Between November 2016 and January 2017, social workers visited each and every one to verify that their living conditions and quality of care met or exceeded ministry standards.
- When appropriate, out-of-care options – such as placement with extended family, friends or community – are a best practice. To help ensure the well-being of children and youth is, these options are pursued as a substitute for admission into government care.
- Over the past ten years the number of children and youth in care has declined by more than 2,000 (20%) while the number of children and youth in out-of-care options has increased six-fold to 1,200.
- Social workers are required to develop a plan of care for every child or youth who is in government care. This plan is developed cooperatively with the child and family, and documents the services and provisions needed to keep a child safe. It must be updated every six months and also include considerations for the child's medical, educational and cultural needs.

A backgrounder follows.

Media Contact:

Ministry of Children and Family Development
Government Communications and Public
Engagement
250 356-1639

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BACKGROUNDER

For Immediate Release
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Ministry of Children and Family Development

Improving B.C.'s system of residential care for children and youth

Immediate actions the ministry has taken in light of the latest RCY report, Broken Promises: Alex's Story.

- Face-to-face and home visits with the 699 children or youth placed in the care of a contracted agency to ensure appropriate living conditions and quality of care.
- \$2.7 million to establish criteria that must be included in the cultural planning for all Indigenous children in our care.
- Commitment to 100% compliance on the development of plans of care for children and youth in the care of the ministry.

Further improvements planned or underway:

- A review of the background and qualifications of all staff currently providing care to children and youth, ensuring they have the required safety clearances, skills and qualifications.
- Mandatory financial audits by ministry staff of each residential service contract, ensuring that funding meets the needs of children and youth and that contract funds are being allocated appropriately.
- Increasing the ministry's investment in family-based care in order to reduce the need for children and youth to be placed with residential agencies in the first place.
- Limiting the use of contracted group homes to therapeutic purposes in order to get children and youth stabilized.
- An early warning system that will send an automatic notice to the central ministry offices when a child or youth in government care moves placements frequently.
- Standardizing contracting functions for all residential resources in which children and youth in care may be placed – whether they are ministry resources, family homes, or resources run by a third-party agency.
- Taking over the screening of ministry and contracted caregivers centrally within the ministry.
- Developing a database of current caregivers and their qualifications, allowing us to see where criminal record checks and child welfare background checks have been completed. And should we find that standards have not been met, the home or agency responsible will be subjected to a thorough and comprehensive audit.
- Ensuring an Agreement with Young Adults is automatically offered to every young person who ages out of our care.
- The office of the Auditor General has signalled their intent to audit MCFD's oversight of contracted services for at-risk children and youth. The ministry welcomes that move and will work with them to identify and implement further improvements.

In the last three years, the ministry has:

- Banned the non-emergency use of hotels as placements for youth in care and clearly outlined the approval, tracking, monitoring, oversight and reporting process for hotel stays.
- Raised the standard to require that contracted caregivers be vetted on par with foster parents.
- Publicly posted twice annual performance management reports that show how services are working for children and families across every region of B.C.
- Standardized a process for auditing and reviewing staffed residential resources.
- Hired 200 new frontline staff, with another 100 on the way by the end of fiscal 2017-18.
- Introduced a centralized services hub that will host screening functions – criminal record checks and child welfare background checks – for all ministry and contracted caregivers.
- Begun practice auditing more areas of ministry operation more frequently.
- Hired eight new dedicated quality assurance staff with another 13 to be hired over the next two years.
- Established a new Youth Advisory Council made up of current and former youth in care who help inform ministry policy, practice, training, and operations.

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

[RCY Report]

Ministry of Children and Family Development

Feb. 6, 2017

Q1. Will you accept all of the recommendations in this report?

- I'd like to thank the representative for this report.
- I can tell you right now that we accept all of the recommendations.
- I think they are entirely reasonable and appropriate given the circumstances that have come to light as a result of this tragic case.
- We must do more and we will do more to improve consistency of practice in the management of these contracted resources, including greater oversight for quality of care, financial management, caregiver screening and contract procurement.

Q2. The report concludes "Alex's death was a predictable outcome of his journey through the child welfare system" – a system you've overseen for the last four years. This is the latest in a long line of tragedies that occurred on your watch: Paige, Nick Lang, Carly Fraser... Will you admit today that you failed those children and will you resign as minister?

- What I will say is this: I was deeply concerned by some of what I read in this report.
- Case practice wasn't followed; oversight and quality assurance measures were woefully inadequate; crucial opportunities to help connect this young man with his culture and extended family appear to have been missed.
- We must do better and we will do better.
- I have a job to do and a responsibility to the more than 7,000 children and youth in our care. My commitment is to them and I will continue to do all I can to improve our system for their benefit.

Q3. You've said you're building more work into your budget – can you tell us a little about what that work might entail?

- We're working on:
 - An early warning system that will send an automatic notice to the central offices when kids in our care move placements frequently.
 - Standardizing contracting and providing more ministry oversight for all third-party residential resources in which kids in care may be placed.

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- Taking over the screening of ministry and contracted caregivers centrally within the ministry.
- Developing a database of current caregivers and their qualifications, allowing us to see where criminal record checks and home studies have been completed. And should we find that standards have not been met, the home or agency responsible will be subjected to a thorough and comprehensive audit or review, as appropriate.
- Ensuring an Agreement with Young Adults is automatically offered to every young person who ages out of our care.
- Increasing our investment in family-based care so we can reduce the need for kids to be placed with residential agencies in the first place.
- Limiting the use of contracted group homes to more therapeutic purposes, in order to get kids stabilized.
- As a government, we have prioritized supports for vulnerable children, something that will continue to be reflected when the minister of finance tables his budget later this month.

Q4. Your ministry did its own review of this case six months ago. Did you change anything after that review or have you waited six months to just now take action because you're being pushed by the RCY?

- In addition to our own case review, we made an exception to allow the RCY's office full authority to review this case, months in advance of the statutory time frame.
- Even as we were conducting our own case review, we were working with the RCY's office on a joint review of hotel placements.
- That led us to ensure hotel stays are only used in exceptional circumstances for short durations, and only with approval from a director.
- We now automatically inform the RCY of any hotel placement lasting more than three days.
- Full public reporting on hotel placements now takes place twice a year.
- And stays are now tracked electronically in a consistent, reliable manner.
- In the past three months, social workers visited face-to-face with each of the nearly 700 children or youth placed in the care of a contracted agency and did home visits to ensure living conditions and quality of care meet or exceed ministry standards.

Q5. Have any staff been disciplined as a result of this case?

- I can't speak to specific personnel matters.

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- What I can say is that we conducted our own review of the circumstances of this case and examining case practice issues was part of that process.
- Where issues are identified in our reviews, we take appropriate measures to address those.

Contracted Residential Agencies

Q6. How many of these group homes are there in B.C.?

- There are basically two types of staffed residential resources in B.C. right now:
 - Those resources, including foster homes, where a social worker screens and approves a caregiver who contracts directly with the ministry; and,
 - Those staffed group homes or satellite homes that are run by an agency which contracts with government but is responsible for hiring, screening and approving its own caregivers.
- It is this second type of resource that this report focuses on.
- As of December 2016, there were 93 agencies throughout B.C. who are contracted to house 699 children and youth in government care.

Q7. Does the ministry simply use the residential care system as a way to warehouse kids you're not willing to deal with?

- All large provinces have a similar model of contracted residential care in place.
- That said, we must do more and we will do more to ensure quality of care, sound financial management, appropriate caregiver screening and consistent procurement practices with contracted resources.
- This is the second report on this particular theme from the representative's office and, while we've made substantial changes in the past three years, we're clearly still not where we need to be.
- That's why I have directed the ministry to take immediate steps to keep kids in family-based care and reduce the need to place them with contracted residential agencies in the first place.
- This means also making sure each and every one of our kids has a care plan. And where we don't, senior ministry officials will be held accountable.
- If contracted residential agencies must be used, then we need to look at doing so for therapeutic purposes in order to get kids stabilized so they can be reunited with parents or placed in a more appropriate long-term family setting.

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Q8. How can you justify a system where the care of the province's most vulnerable children is entrusted to contracted providers who are kept at arm's length, who lack the necessary skills and training, who receive little or no oversight from the ministry, and who are seemingly not held to a consistent set of rules and practices?

- The circumstances described in the report are unacceptable; there's no denying that.
- That's why we are:
 - Enhancing the way we audit and investigate these resources, and doing so regularly;
 - bringing child welfare background checks and criminal record checks in-house, and;
 - more consistently managing contracting for residential service providers.
- These are issues we've been grappling with for some time and this ministry has made significant changes – especially in the past three years – to improve our system.
- Our own investigations, our joint review with the RCY on hotel placements, our review of this case and our involvement with the inter-provincial sub-committee responsible for examining this model of care are just a few examples.
- We still have a lot of work ahead of us to get things right.
- But I can tell you with confidence that the work we're embarking on now – in terms of its reach, scope and thoroughness – exceeds anything we've put in place in response to any prior RCY report.

Q9. This report begs many of the same questions that were brought up following the previous RCY's 2014 "Who Cares" review into the residential care system. Why are you making these changes now – three years after that report and one year too late for Alex Gervais?

- Before we get into what we're doing as a result of this report – it's wrong to suggest the ministry has been idle since the 'Who Cares' report.
- In the last three years, we've:
 - Banned the non-emergency use of hotels as placements for youth in care.
 - required that contracted caregivers for emergency hotel stays be vetted on par with foster parents.
 - Publicly posted twice annual performance management reports that show how services are working for kids and families across every region of B.C.
 - Standardized the practice review of staffed residential resources.
 - Introduced a centralized services hub that will handle criminal record checks and

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background checks for all ministry and contracted caregivers.

- Begun quality assurance auditing more areas of ministry operation more frequently and have hired eight new dedicated quality assurance staff with another 13 to be hired over the next two years.
- Established a new Youth Advisory Council made up of current and former youth in care who help inform ministry policy, practice, training, and operations.
- On top of that, today I'm announcing that we are investing \$2.7 to establish criteria that must be included in the cultural planning for all Indigenous children in our care.
- This will help in the development of culturally-appropriate care plans that are rigorous and responsive to the specific needs of each child.
- The office of the Auditor General has also signalled their intent to audit MCFD's oversight of contracted services for at-risk children and youth. We welcome that move and will work with them to review the oversight structure we're putting in place and ensure it meets their expectations.
- A key step for us – and this addresses one of the themes that was most concerning to me – was insisting that we put eyes on every single one of the children and youth we have in the care of a contracted agency.
- Between November and the end of January, social workers did just that – meeting face-to-face with 699 young people and visiting each home to ensure their living conditions and quality of care meets or exceeds ministry standards.
- I've also made it clear to staff that every child or youth in our care must have an up-to-date care plan.
- This is a fundamental requirement for which I'll be holding senior personnel accountable.
- What's more, all our social workers need to be thinking long-term with their every interaction with the kids in our care.
- Their job doesn't end when a child is placed in a resource. I need to know we are looking at every available option that might lead to an appropriate and permanent family placement, and that we are preparing older youth for success in adulthood – whether that means helping them gain life skills, overcome trauma and addiction, or working with them to explore an educational or career path.

Q10. This report paints a dismal picture of how these resources are run – top to bottom. How can we have confidence in the system? How can we be sure that unfit, low-wage workers aren't right now failing in their duties to provide even adequate care to hundreds of the most vulnerable kids in B.C.?

- Those are the very questions I've asked of my ministry – and that's why we're putting in

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place the measures I've been talking about today:

- putting more kids in family-based care and reducing the need to use contracted residential agencies in the first place.
- Limiting the use of such agencies to therapeutic purposes so kids can get stabilized and returned to a family-based setting.
- Standardizing contracting and centralizing oversight for all residential resources.
- Screening contracted caregivers centrally within the ministry.
- Developing a database of current caregivers and their qualifications, allowing us to see where criminal record checks and home studies have been completed. And should we find that standards have not been met, the home or agency responsible will be subjected to a thorough and comprehensive audit or review, as appropriate.

Q11. In the past two budgets you've gotten lifts of \$55 and \$72 million respectively. How much of that money has gone toward fixing the group home system?

- In the last three years, we've:
 - Banned the non-emergency use of hotels as placements for youth in care.
 - Require that contracted caregivers be vetted on par with foster parents.
 - Publicly posted twice annual performance management reports that show how services are working for kids and families across every region of B.C.
 - Standardized the practice review of staffed residential resources.
 - Introduced a centralized services hub that will handle criminal record checks and background checks for all ministry and contracted caregivers.
 - Begun quality assurance auditing more areas of ministry operation more frequently and have hired eight new dedicated quality assurance staff with another 13 to be hired over the next two years.
 - Established a new Youth Advisory Council made up of current and former youth in care who help inform ministry policy, practice, training, and operations.
- Budget 2016 also gave us funding for staff training, 100 more front line staff positions and new staff positions for quality assurance functions. This is above and beyond the 200 staff we have hired since 2014.
- With a stronger staffing contingent, better training and a better ability to deliver on quality assurance, we are in position to improve consistency of practice in the management of these contracted resources, including greater oversight for quality of care, financial management, caregiver screening and contract procurement.

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Q12. Your ministry concluded its own residential review project more than five years ago, yet the same fundamental challenges seem to exist today. What have you done since then?

- We've done a lot in that time:
 - We've got liaisons in all of our service areas who work directly with contractors and ensure they are held to account for meeting ministry standards.
 - We've strengthened the way we screen, assess and approve caregivers.
 - Caregivers now require a full home study, and additional criminal record and reference checks – including from their home jurisdiction if they are new to B.C.
 - We mandated that all existing staff and residential service providers across the province go through another round of background checks so we can meet these strong standards.
 - We enhanced our practice auditing and have developed stricter oversight of contractors.
- We know those actions don't yet go far enough and that's why we're further improving oversight and quality assurance for contracted residential agencies.

Q13. What qualifications are required to work at a contracted group home?

- Staff in these resources must be vetted on par with foster parents. That means they must take ongoing training as well as an orientation to meet the needs of the job.
- Staff must also have a documented criminal record check, one-on-one personal interviews conducted by the employer; personal and employment references; and a medical reference.
- This report highlights circumstances where these standards weren't followed.
- That's unacceptable, and it's why we are enhancing our ability to review and investigate, bringing caregiver assessment and criminal record checks in-house and working to more consistently manage contracting for residential service providers.

Q14. The RCY is particularly critical of the agency subcontracting model, saying it dilutes accountability. Isn't it time to abandon this flawed model altogether? Shouldn't the ministry take direct accountability for the safety and well-being of kids in government care?

- I agree 100% with the RCY. The circumstances described in the report are unacceptable; there's no denying that.
- That's why we are:

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- Strengthening our financial and practice audits and investigations;
- bringing caregiver assessment and criminal record checks in house, and;
- more consistently managing contracting for residential service providers.
- These are issues we've been grappling with for some time and this ministry has made significant changes – especially in the past three years – to improve our system.
- Our own investigations, our joint review with the RCY on hotel placements, our review of this case and our involvement with the inter-provincial sub-committee responsible for examining this model of care are just a few examples.
- We still have a lot of work ahead of us to get things right. But I can tell you with confidence that the work we're embarking on now – in terms of its reach, scope and thoroughness – exceeds anything we've put in place in response to any prior RCY report.

Q15. You've talked about screening caregivers and holding them to a higher standard, but how do you expect agencies to recruit the best and brightest caregivers if those agencies are still free to set their own wages, avoid giving benefits and forego an actual employer-employee relationship with their subcontractors?

- Step one is to limit the use of agencies to getting kids stabilized and returned to a family-based setting – and we'll be doing just that.
- By standardizing and providing greater oversight for contracting and taking on the screening of contracted caregivers in-house we'll have better control of quality of care and the use of funds by those agencies.
- And we're developing a database of current caregivers and their qualifications, so we can see where criminal record checks and home studies have been completed. Where they haven't, the home or agency responsible will be subjected to a more thorough and comprehensive audit or review, as appropriate.

Q16. You closed down ACV because abuses were rampant; you're investigating other agencies for related concerns. More oversight and accountability sounds great, but what happens if you need to shut down other agencies? We saw what happened to Alex when his resource closed – what's your backup plan to protect kids in those homes?

- We've learned a lot from our investigations into some of these residential resources and that knowledge will inform how we proceed in the event of any further closures.
- The goal is to reduce our reliance on these agencies, while at the same time strengthening our oversight powers to ensure that agency-contracted caregivers are appropriately skilled, qualified and vetted.
- Better oversight will alert us to potential problems earlier so we can work with providers

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to get them back on track.

- Shutting down a resource and moving children should be a last resort.

Family supports

Q17. How can you justify paying so much money to an agency that will then hire the nearest truck driver, former bouncer or career criminal to care for an already traumatized youth with multiple challenges?

OR

Q18. How do you justify providing so much funding – the example here is \$9,514 per month per child – to a caregiver who may have been pocketing Alex's money and who had not seen him at all in the ten days prior to his death?

- This is a two-part challenge:
 - 1) We need to know our caregivers have the skills, capacity and security clearances to do the job right. That's why we're bringing screening functions in house so that the ministry can monitor and thoroughly vet every caregiver who works with one of our kids.
 - 2) We need to enable more family-based placements so kids don't need to be placed with contracted agencies in the first place. Doing so means giving better support and incentives to families.
- I agree that a loving family is preferable to a contracted caregiver in almost every instance. And we've been making progress on this front, bringing fewer kids into care and placing more with extended family.
- Our job is to make it easier to identify family members who might be able to step in and provide care.
- We need to properly train those folks, give them appropriate financial support and ensure they have access to services, like counselling and respite, so they have the best chance of long-term success as caregivers.
- As a government, we have prioritized supports for vulnerable children, something that will continue to be reflected when the minister of finance tables his budget later this month.

Q19. Instead of paying thousands to suspect agencies that hire deadbeat caregivers, why not invest that money in families and provide supports to folks like Alex's stepmom or aunt so they can take care of their own?

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- I agree that a loving family member is preferable to a contracted caregiver in almost every instance.
- In each of the past four years, we've increased the number of kids being placed with extended family – even as the number of kids in government care has gone down.
- Our job is to make it even easier to identify extended family members who can step in. We need to properly train those folks, give them appropriate financial support and access to services, like counselling and respite, so they have the best chance of long-term success as caregivers.

Q20. Why would Alex's stepmother only be offered the bare minimum – \$700 per month – to care for Alex when a third party agency that hired criminals was being paid four times that amount?

- It's inexcusable and underlines the pressing need for greater oversight and accountability. That's what the measures I've been talking about today aim to address.
- And, yes: we are looking to extended family more and more in cases like these.
- When they're approved as being safe and appropriate to provide care, we need to ensure they get the training, funding and support to be successful long-term caregivers.
- I agree that a loving family member is preferable to a contracted caregiver in almost every instance. That's why we're looking at what we can do to offer more funding as well as supports like counselling and respite.

Delegated Aboriginal Agencies / Cultural connections

Q21. Alex's social worker was an inexperienced newbie with a case load of 30+ kids who failed to give him the support he needed. Was this bad practice or a workload issue? Is this a DAA problem or a ministry problem? What are you doing to fix it?

- It's our responsibility to do better.
- Grand Chief Ed John delivered a thorough report on our Indigenous Child Welfare system with recommendations for the ministry, for DAAs and for the Federal government.
- We are committed to working with our partners in line with the direction of that report.

Q22. The Premier blamed the DAA for placing Alex in a hotel. This report shows there were other problems the DAA didn't address in this case. Have there been any consequences for the DAA? Isn't it time to rethink the DAA model in its entirety?

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- Delegated Aboriginal Agencies work on behalf of the ministry.
- We've acknowledged in this case where the system didn't work the way it should have and we're acting on that.
- Further, we're working – in line with the direction of Grand Chief Ed John's report – on a suite of measures to strengthen the way we serve Indigenous children and youth in care.

Q23. The DAA paid Alex's last caregiver more than \$9,000 per month plus costs of living at a hotel, yet he was rarely there and didn't see Alex in the 10 days leading up to his death. What discipline has this person faced? Was he fired? Charged? Is he still on the government payroll? Still working with vulnerable kids?

- This individual is no longer acting as a contracted caregiver to children and youth in care.

Q24. Do DAA's require their social workers to have the same credentials and training as ministry social workers? Are DAA social workers paid on par with those in the ministry?

- All social workers – whether they are employed by the ministry or a delegated agency – must be delegated under the Child, Family and Community Service Act.
- To meet the criteria for delegation, they must participate in a delegation readiness assessment and have training provided to them. Training is ongoing after that, and keeps them up to speed on best practices.
- In terms of pay, our commitment is to ensure DAA salaries are on par with ministry social workers – and we are doing more work in this regard as part of our response to Grand Chief Ed John's report.

Q25. The report highlights the value of the Roots program. Is that still in place? How does it work? How much funding does it receive? Will you consider expanding it?

- Some service delivery areas have active ROOTS programming.
- This is something we are looking at as part of our work to address the direction of Grand Chief Ed John's report – whether it's through the ROOTS model, or another means of supporting greater cultural and family connections for Indigenous children in care.

Plans of Care/permanency/youth transitions

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Q26. According to the report, Alex didn't have a care plan or transition plan. This is a common theme in RCY reports. Are social workers just overworked? What are you doing to ensure they have the time to sit down with kids and help plan for their future?

- Sitting down with kids and working with them on care plans is part of social work – it's an essential duty, in fact.
- We've hired 200 new social workers in the past two years with another 100 on the way.
- And even as our staffing numbers have risen, the number of kids in our care continues to decline.
- The bottom line is that every one of our kids needs to have a current and up-to-date care plan.

Q27. Care plans are a requirement, yet the RCY says staff aren't doing them. What level of compliance is the ministry at right now?

- Right now we're at about 46%. That's unacceptable and it won't stand.
- Every one of our kids needs to have a current and up-to-date care plan and we will be holding senior ministry officials accountable through compensation measures where that isn't happening.

Q28. For years, the previous RCY said these plans weren't getting done. Why should we believe your commitment to doing them now? What has changed?

- I acknowledge this has been a point of weakness for this ministry, largely chalked up to social worker caseloads and workload issues.
- I've made it clear that position no longer holds weight.
- We've hired 200 new social workers since 2014 with another 100 on the way.
- We've changed the way we do business – through centralized screening, for instance – to give social workers more time to focus on priority work, like care plans.
- Ensuring care plans are completed is an essential part of social work. And, if we don't meet our targets senior ministry staff will be held accountable.

[if pressed on how they will be held accountable]

- The completion of care plans is a performance measure and where these plans aren't getting done, senior staff will have that reflected in their remuneration.

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Q29. The report claims that, earlier in Alex's life, social workers were just thinking in the moment and not looking at long-term family placements for him. Why wasn't this a priority for social workers?

- That's actually one of the biggest changes I've seen in my time as minister and it reflects an accountability the Premier outlined for me in my mandate letter.
- I've demanded that our social workers apply a permanency lens with every kid on their caseload, and we're seeing the results of that focus.
- We have fewer kids in our care than ever before.
- ...partly because of the significant work that ministry and DAA staff do with families to ensure that, whenever possible, children don't come into care in the first place.
- ...and partly because of our efforts to connect our kids with forever homes through guardianship and adoption.
- Over the past two years we've connected 644 children and youth with adoptive placements, including a record 368 placements in 2015/16.
- This fall we introduced Adopt BC Kids, a user-friendly adoption site that lets prospective adoptive parents manage their application online, allowing adoption workers to help find the right family match faster for waiting children.
- My hope is that, as we do a better job of completed permanency plans and plans of care, we'll continue to see more and more kids connected with forever homes.

Q30. Alex feared aging out and didn't have the skills to live independently. Why aren't you doing more to prepare kids for life after care and do you cut off services at the age of 19?

- Caregivers should be working with kids, as early as the age of 15, to begin preparing them for adulthood and ensuring they have the supports they need to thrive.
- For 16 to 18-year-olds who are looking for supported independence we offer Youth Agreements. We also provide funding for education and health care, but our involvement doesn't end there.
- We've expanded the Agreements with Young Adults program by doubling the amount of time youth can receive AYA supports – from 24 to 48 months, increasing the eligible age of enrolment by two years – from a young adult's 24th birthday to their 26th birthday, and adding Life Skills programming to the list of eligible programs for AYA support.
- And we launched agedout.com – an up-to-date warehouse of information on resources and services available to young adults, and a learning tool to help people feel empowered as they leave government care.
- We recognize there is always more we can do – in particular to support indigenous

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youth and young adults from care. This includes our commitment to address the themes brought forward in Grand Chief Ed John's review of B.C.'s Indigenous Child Welfare System.

CYMH

Q31. This is the second report in a year that paints Child and Youth Mental Health services as a broken system. What are you doing to fix this?

- The ministry currently invests approximately \$94 million annually to address child and youth mental health and substance use challenges in B.C.
- Three-quarters of the overall funding is spent on community-based mental health services, including the services that CYMH workers provide.
- The remainder is spent on specialized services, including the Maples Adolescent Treatment Centre, and mental health and substance use treatment services for youth involved in the justice system.
- We are working with our service partners and stakeholders, including Aboriginal agencies, school districts and health authorities, to strengthen the system.
- We have made a number of significant improvements since 2013 – improvements that are making a big difference in the lives of B.C. children, youth and families.
- We've introduced:
 - The complex care unit at the Maples Adolescent Treatment Centre.
 - Five new integrated youth centres in B.C. will offer mental health, substance use, and other services to up to 2,500 youth each year.
 - Ten new complex care beds in Vernon and Prince George.
 - More than 90 walk-in mental health intake clinics offering more efficient intake and assessment of children and youths' mental health needs.
 - Tele-health videoconferencing in remote communities throughout B.C. to connect children and youth to psychiatrists in Vancouver.
 - An online mental health and substance use service map that makes it easier for families to find information and services for children and youth in their community.
- We've heard from individuals and families that we can still do better in making the mental health system easier to navigate – and we're listening.
- We've also convened a cross-ministry Cabinet Working Group on Mental Health to review current child and youth mental-health programs and services to identify and address key gaps in the current system and make sure that individuals and families can access support services early – before they find themselves in a crisis.

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Q32. Despite five separate referrals, Alex was never connected with the mental health supports that could have prevented his tragic passing. How is this possible? Is this another case of social worker indifference?

- It would be inappropriate for me to speculate on decisions that were made in the field.
- What I can say is that we've done a lot to improve the CYMH system and make it more accessible.
- We are committed to improving supports to B.C. families, and we continue to work with all of our teams to find ways to improve services, like the intake clinics, so young people get the help they need as quickly as possible.
- That's one of the reasons government has a Cabinet Working Group looking at ways to improve mental health in B.C. – especially child and youth mental health.
- They're reviewing current child and youth mental-health programs and services to identify and address key gaps in the current system and make sure that individuals and families can access support services early – before they find themselves in a crisis.
- In the coming months, the Province is also expected to release a Mental Health Strategy designed to improve access to supports and services for children and youth.

Q33. The report mentions 'Aboriginal child and mental health (ACYMH)' and just 'child and youth mental health (CYMH)' services. What's the difference? Don't all children and youth get access to the services they need as quickly as possible?

- Child and Youth Mental Health services are available to all B.C. children and youth – but we know there are improvements that must be made.
- We are working – in line with the direction of Grand Chief Ed John's report – to do a better job of ensuring the delivery of appropriate and timely mental health services to Indigenous youth.

[if pressed on the difference between ACYMH and CYMH]

- In most cases, CYMH practitioners have their clients visit them in an office setting.
- Aboriginal CYMH workers are more likely to do outreach work, travel to their clients' communities and build relationships there.
- The services the clients receive aren't different, they're just delivered in a different way.
- All CYMH workers receive cultural awareness training, and the ministry encourages all of them to be familiar with the cultural practices of their local First Nations people.

Thank you for joining me here today.

I want to thank the representative for his report.

And I want to send my condolences again to the family and friends of the young man whose story is at the centre of this report. Today must be especially difficult.

Alex's story is, undeniably, painful to read. It outlines the life and tragic passing of a young man who seemed to want nothing more than a meaningful connection with an adult who had his best interests at heart.

We agree wholeheartedly with the RCY's insight. As he says: "When tragedy occurs, it is our responsibility as a society to learn lessons and make the changes required to prevent similar occurrences"

Today, I'd like to assure the representative – as well as all of you – that this report has effected change will continue to prompt change at the ministry. We accept all of the report's recommendations and we are going to do even more to ensure the ministry evolves and improves to support the vulnerable youth entrusted to us by society.

Kids do better when they grow up with family. Our goal over the past three years has been to take fewer kids into care and our stats on that are trending in the right direction – albeit slowly.

Let me be clear, we need to get to a place where contracted residential agencies are the exception, not the rule. Where we have to use them, we must do so only to get youth stabilized so that they can grow up in a long-term family setting – hopefully with relatives – or in a foster home.

Over the coming months we'll enhance our computer system to automatically alert the provincial director of child welfare if a child or youth is bouncing from foster home to foster home or group home to group home. That shouldn't be happening except in the rarest of cases; and when it does happen, the most experienced social workers in the provincial director's office need to review that file to find out why and find a way to stop it.

For those of you wondering about the 700 kids who are currently in a contracted resource – let me reassure you that as of January 31, each and every one of them has been seen by their social worker and their home visited. And – as good social work practice dictates – we will have eyes on those youth every 90 days to ensure they are safe and sound.

We're also bringing the child welfare background and criminal record checks for residential caregivers in-house; these will no longer be done by the contracted agency. A lack of documentation and follow-up stops now. The accountability has to rest with the ministry, just as parents are responsible for choosing who they let care for their children.

As well, each and every one of the more than 7,000 kids in ministry care *must* have a care plan in place. Full stop. No exceptions. It's part of a social worker's job. We've added 200 more staff and made workload changes to ensure they have time to do those plans and keep them up-to-date.

Indigenous kids must know their culture. It's the law according to our *Child Family and Community Service Act*. Key to knowing who they are and where they came from is a cultural plan. There is no excuse for us not having one for each and every Indigenous child or youth in our care. Today, I'm announcing \$2.7 million in funding to establish specific criteria that must be included in the cultural planning for all Indigenous children in our care.

Financial oversight of residential resources is also being tightened up. Our contract management needs a major renovation.

Our chief financial officer and his staff out of Victoria will be overseeing more audits, and will be out in our regional offices to train on-the-ground staff in better contract management. Further, we will work with the Auditor General's office which has signalled its intent to audit MCFD's oversight of contracted services for at-risk children and youth.

As you can tell, we have a lot of work to do. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that a lot of work has been to-date as well. In the past three years, we've:

- Banned the non-emergency use of hotels as placements for youth in care and clearly outlined the approval, tracking, monitoring, oversight and

reporting process for hotel stays.

- Raised the standard to require that contracted caregivers be vetted on par with foster parents.
- Standardized a process for auditing and reviewing staffed residential resources.
- Hired 200 new frontline staff, with another 100 on the way by the end of fiscal 2017/18.
- Introduced a centralized services hub that will host screening functions – criminal record checks and child welfare background checks – for all ministry and contracted caregivers.
- Begun quality assurance auditing more areas of ministry operation more frequently.
- Hired eight new dedicated quality assurance staff with another 13 to be hired over the next two years.

I recognize much of this comes too late for the young man at the centre of this report.

I accept that the ministry and I, as Minister, can't change his history or go back and seize the opportunities to help him that were lost.

What I can offer is change to the system: more social workers, strengthened oversight and increased accountability.

That's what we have been doing and what we will continue to do under my watch.

Because, again – as the RCY himself said: “When tragedy occurs, it is our responsibility as a society to learn lessons and make the changes required to prevent similar occurrences”

Thank you. I will now take your questions.

Feb. 3, 2017

MEDIA ADVISORY – Ministry of Children and Family Development

VANCOUVER – Children and Family Development Minister Stephanie Cadieux will be holding a media availability to respond to the Representative for Children and Youth's latest investigative report.

Event Date: Monday, Feb. 6, 2017

Time: 11:15 a.m.

Location:

**Pan Pacific Hotel, Pacific Rim 1
#300-999 Canada Place
Vancouver**

Call-in info:

**604 681-0260 (Vancouver)
1 877 353-9184 (rest of Canada and USA)**

Participant Pass Code: 99553#

Contact:

**Government Communications and Public Engagement
Ministry of Children and Family Development
250 356-1639**