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Standing Committee

on

Legislative Affairs

Chairperson
Mr. Logan Oxenham
Constituency of Kirkfield Park



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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Third Legislature

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS
Tuesday, December 10, 2024

TIME – 1 p.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Logan Oxenham
(Kirkfield Park)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Tyler Blashko
(Lagimodière)

ATTENDANCE – 6 **QUORUM** – 4

Members of the committee present:

Hon. Min. Fontaine

*Mr. Blashko, MLA Compton, Mmes. Cook,
Hiebert, Mr. Oxenham*

APPEARING:

*Sherry Gott, Manitoba Advocate for Children and
Youth*

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

*Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for
Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending
March 31, 2024*

* * *

Clerk Assistant (Ms. Katerina Tefft): Good afternoon. Will the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs please come to order.

Before the committee can proceed with the business before it, it must elect a Chairperson.

Are there any nominations?

Hon. Nahanni Fontaine (Minister of Families): I nominate MLA Oxenham.

Clerk Assistant: Mr. Oxenham has been nominated.

Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, Mr. Oxenham, will you please take the Chair.

The Chairperson: Good morning. Our next item of business is the election of a Vice-Chairperson.

Are there any nominations?

MLA Fontaine: I nominate MLA Blashko.

The Chairperson: MLA Blashko has been nominated.

Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, MLA Blashko is elected Vice-Chairperson.

This meeting has been called to consider the Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

Before we begin, I would like to remind everyone that questions and comments must be put through the Chair using third person as opposed to directly to members and representatives.

Are there any suggestions from the committee as to how long we should sit this afternoon?

MLA Fontaine: I suggest we sit for two hours, with the question to be put on the reports at that point.

The Chairperson: It is suggested that we sit for two hours, with the question put on the report at that point.

Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Does the honourable minister wish to make an opening statement, and would she please introduce the officials in attendance?

MLA Fontaine: Yes, hold on.

I'm going to try my best. Well, we have the Manitoba—am I introducing the Advocate? Oh, okay.

No, I need a—sorry, a little break, sorry.

Can you please—I need—okay, miigwech, I apologize.

Okay, so we have Sherry Gott, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth; Karlee Evans, deputy Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth; Kelly Gossfeld, Indigenous deputy Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth; and Alison Carrey? *[interjection]* Bilous? Okay, sorry, it's not here. So Alison Carrey Bilous, senior policy analyst for the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth.

We have Jennifer Chartrand, the special assistant to myself. We have Tina Moody. We have Heidi Wurmman. We have Catherine Gates, and we have Alex Krosney and Nicholas Harder.

Did I say that right? Okay, excellent.

The Chairperson: Does the honourable minister wish to make an opening statement?

MLA Fontaine: Good afternoon, everyone. It's good to see folks again from the—from MACY. I'm pleased to be here for the presentation of the Manitoba Advocate, children and youth's 2023-24 annual report.

The role of the Advocate was created to ensure the voices of young people are heard across our province and to promote their needs.

I'd like to say miigwech to the Advocate and her team for sharing the stories of some of our province's most vulnerable citizens. MACY's annual report shows their dedication to their advocacy on behalf of children and youth and other important work that guides and improves services.

A profound miigwech to the work that you do. I know that it is incredible work and it's difficult work and it's hard medicine that you folks do. So I just want to acknowledge and say miigwech for that.

And I also just want to acknowledge and say miigwech for the collaboration. I know that since I've been in this role for, I'm going to say 15 months, I feel like our offices have had a good working relationship, and I really do appreciate a more collaborative working relationship to really—to do what's on—you know, in—what's best for Manitoba youth.

We've certainly been listening to the Advocate's concerns, particularly when it comes to gaps in mental health and addiction supports, which we know has been widening for years. We take these comments very seriously.

I've been working closely with all my colleagues at the reformed Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet, which members and the Advocate will know was re-established immediately upon assuming government. In particular, I worked closely with Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness (Ms. Smith), and looking at rapidly expanding supports for children and youth experiencing addictions and mental health crisis.

We've been working hard to strengthen supports for children and youth in care, particularly those exiting care who are at risk of homelessness and addictions.

And we've also been working to strengthen information-sharing practices between law enforcement,

RCMP, educators and social workers to better protect children and youth in care.

* (13:10)

Our government is also launching a five-year review of the protecting and supporting children act, one of the main legislative tools keeping children and youth safe in Manitoba. I believe maybe this is actually the first time that I'm announcing it, although we've been working on it for a while now.

It's long past time for this review. The former PC government never looked at it during their seven and a half years, despite it's legislative requirement to review it every five years. So we're doing that right now.

I appreciate the findings of this report; that validates the direction that government, in partnership with community, is taking. And while much has been done, we know that more needs to happen to ensure children and youth can live fulfilling and safe and joyful lives that they are entitled to as Manitobans.

Our government is committed to working across our departments and with MACY, other partners and other governments, to strengthen prevention, intervention and youth-focused strategies, and we will work together for the provision of culturally safe youth-centred and trauma-informed care, aligned with best practices. And that's our greatest asset.

In closing, again, I just want to say a profound miigwech to the Advocate for her leadership, her phenomenal leadership since she's been in this role, and for her team in doing what is, again, really, really important work.

Miigwech.

The Chairperson: We thank the honourable minister.

Does the critic for the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mrs. Carrie Hiebert (Morden-Winkler): First of all I just want to be—I just want to say thank you for everybody to—being here today. It's really an important committee meeting, and I'm honoured to be able to sit here and be part of this.

Thank you to the MACY, to the Advocate and to all of you that support MACY in our community and in our province. It's such an important job that you do and it's—I'm sure many days it's a hard job for you, and I really—even just reading through the report, it's just—it's very touching and moving, and the things that are

happening to our children, the most vulnerable in our province.

And I just want to say thank you very much for putting yourself in a position like this, where you have situations daily, I'm sure, that you go through that are very difficult for you. So thank you so much for what you do. It's so important to all of us and especially to the children that you serve and take care of, so—the most vulnerable in our province, the most vulnerable in all of our lives is our children and our youth and our young adults.

Working to—for a—like, to help alleviate the addictions, come up with solutions. Mental health is something that we know is a really big issue for children, especially young teens with suicide rates that are happening, and the safety of our children and our youth is so important. So thank you very much for what you do. MACY is something that just is so invaluable to all of us. We could never do what—like, what—without you in this role, so thank you very much.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you today to—I'm looking forward to hearing about the things that are happening and things that we can improve on, because I think there's always more to do, and very willing to hear and ask questions about concerns and things that we can just continue to work towards making life easier and better and—you know, for our young people in our province.

So thank you.

The Chairperson: We thank the member.

Do the representatives from the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth wish to make an opening statement?

Ms. Sherry Gott (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth): Thank you. Ekosi. Kinanâskomitinanaw. *[Thank you. I'm grateful for all of you.]*

Wapiski Asineesis Eskwe' nit-isinihkason. *[My spirit name is White Little Stones Woman who carries an Arrow.]*

Wapistan Tootem. Akas Takonow Sapataweyak ne-na -oche. *[I am from the Marten Clan, Sapataweyak Cree Nation.]*

Good morning—or, good afternoon, I guess. I'd like to thank the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs for the opportunity to appear today. My name is Sherry Gott. I am the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, known as MACY.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that the mandate of MACY extends across the province of Manitoba. Our offices are located on Treaty 1 and Treaty 5 territories. We live and work on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anishinewuk, Cree, Dakota, Dene peoples, and we also live on the national homeland of the Red River Métis. We acknowledge that the northern Manitoba includes lands that were and are the ancestral lands of the Inuit.

We are here today to discuss the contents of our annual report, 2023-24, which was released on October 30, 2024. Before I provide more details, I would like to introduce our two deputy—it's been done already—the deputy advocates and the senior policy analyst were introduced by the minister. Thank you.

At MACY, children's rights are at the forefront of everything we do. Our work is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, known as UNCRC. This is recognized in our legislation, The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, or ACYA, which was proclaimed in 2018.

For the past six years, we have been advocating in the following eight domain areas: Child and Family Services, adoption, disabilities, mental health, youth addictions, youth education, youth justice and victim support services, which includes domestic violence and sexual exploitation.

As the annual report highlights, our office responded to 2,837 requests for advocacy services in the last fiscal year, an increase of 11 per cent from the year before. Seventy-four per cent of these requests are resolved at the intake level by empowering resources of referral and youth to be their own self-advocates.

We opened 629 ongoing advocacy cases where the source of referrals enquiry required long-term support or more complex interventions. The children and youth represented in those cases experienced systemic concerns related to victimization, mental health, school absenteeism, domestic violence, disability and substance misuse.

On average, advocacy cases remained open for five months. In total, 82 per cent of the children and youth we supported through advocacy services were Indigenous. The systemic advocacy specialist focused on strategic response planning and stakeholder engagement in critical areas such as youth addiction services, support for children and youth with learning

disabilities, assistance for youth in custody and the prevention of youth homelessness.

In the last fiscal year, we received 237 formal child-death notifications and there were 90 child-death reviews completed, a 23 per cent increase over the previous fiscal year. These reviews identified systemic concerns that are highlighted in the annual report.

For example, my office noted an alarming increase in the number of homicide deaths of young people. Last fiscal year, we lost 14 children, youth and young adults to homicide. This represents a 56 per cent increase, compared to the average of the previous five years.

One of the purposes of child-death reviews is to identify and analyze reoccurring circumstances and trends in order to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of reviewable services. A reoccurring trend we are concerned about and monitoring is caregiver needs and well-being. Over the last year, our office reviewed a number of cases where caregiver mental health and/or addictions directly impacted the safety of children, and in some instances resulted in the child's death.

When caregivers do not get the support and resources they need, parenting capacity is impacted. While I have been vocal about the need for a youth-specific mental health and addictions strategy, the importance of a strategy that encompasses the needs of all Manitobans cannot be overstated.

Another ongoing concern that we see across all programs in my office is the need for specialized placements and facilities for youth presenting with a complex trauma and needs. These young people are among some of the most vulnerable citizens in Manitoba and are at highest risk of harm or death.

Despite efforts by service providers to advocate for these young people, a serious gap in specialized services exists in our province. These—this leaves families and service providers with a difficult decision of whether to seek specialized placement resources outside of Manitoba or remain in the province where resources have been proven to be ineffective at meeting their needs. Urgent attention is needed to develop culturally safe, specialized placements for exceptionally vulnerable youth presenting with the highest needs.

Last fiscal year, we had a major operational change on July 1, 2023, in fulfillment of the vision of the late commissioner Ted Hughes in the Phoenix

Sinclair inquiry. The serious injury reporting regulation alongside section 21 of the ACYA came into force in Manitoba.

This new legislation has made it a mandatory requirement for any service provider that provides reviewable services to report any injury that meets the definition of a serious injury to MACY's new program. It also includes provisions to track, review, investigate and/or release special reports about serious injuries sustained by children, youth and young adults.

* (13:20)

Analysis of serious injury referrals has already provided helpful information on reoccurring trends and themes, risk factors and systemic issues impacting young people, work that is informing evidence-based recommendations for improved public services and well-being of people in—young people in Manitoba.

As noted in the annual report, the first nine months of this new program focused on building its core components, establishing procedures and raising awareness among service providers.

Act—as reviewable services are made aware of their duty to report serious injuries, under this change to our legislation, we are receiving an increased—increasing referrals. Indeed, we are busier than we have ever been as an office.

A few trends have emerged over the first nine months of the serious injury program. In total, we received 184 serious injury referrals, of which 111 were in scope for a review. Eighty-nine per cent of the completed reviews were for an Indigenous child, youth or young adult. More than 60 per cent of the injuries required hospitalization or health-care-facility admissions.

The top risk factor for serious injury was substance misuse. As for the types of injuries most commonly reported, two themes emerged based on the known reports: sexual assaults in which the offender is known to the person and penetrating wounds, gunshots and stabbings.

In light of the initial reporting data and given this new program, MACY is aware of under-reporting. As such, we will be doing a strategic outreach to ensure serious injuries to children, youth and young adults receiving services from CFS agencies, youth justice and all youth mental health and youth addictions programs are being reported.

This past year, Youth Engagement Coordinators carried out a diverse range of public education,

engagement and outreach initiatives throughout the province. The youth engagement team connected with 89 youth-serving organizations to promote child and youth rights and raise awareness of MACY. This work allowed them to reach 1,394 youth, including 50 outreach initiatives where their primary audience was youth. The youth engagement team also continued to work on a peer-to-peer research project and completed one mural focused on UNCRC rights.

Last year, the public education team released a six-part video series—you can find that on our website—and they focused on youth addictions, youth mental health, disabilities, youth justice and victim supports. These videos are—featured voice-overs from Youth Engagement Coordinators and members of the Youth Ambassador Advisory Squad. The goals of these videos was to help young people understand how MACY can help and to deliver the message in youth-friendly format. All the videos are available on our YouTube channel.

The public education team also supported I Love to Read Month and a number of public-facing events. Additional examples are outlined on page 36 and 37 of our annual report.

The research team and—of special reports that MACY facilitates, collaborates on and conducts highly quality research projects in order to inform policy decisions and improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of designated services provided to children and youth. This past year, they participated in meaningful consultations, two projects integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge systems and conducted numerous interviews with young people.

They also did research to support the Advocate's statements of concern on youth suicide and worked in collaboration with staff across the office in writing and launching of the special report, *Memengwaa Wiidoodaageewin, the Butterfly Project: Honouring Eishia Hudson*.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Gott.

Is there leave for Ms. Gott to finish her statement?
[Agreed]

Go ahead, Ms. Gott.

Ms. Gott: This past year, the quality assurance team continued its important work, including the monitoring of progress and made—and implementing recommendations issued by our office.

Our annual compliance report is a vital tool to hold government departments accountable for ensuring they are consistently working to improve programs and services for young people. Titled, *Moving the Dial on Children's Rights in Manitoba*, last year's report reviewed the overall progress in recommendations implementation since the publication of MACY's first compliance report in 2020, as well as the degree to which process has been able to advance children's rights in the province.

The report found that there is a discrepancy in overall progress reported on paper and lived realities and experiences of young people and their families. Thus, to help ensure this process is more effective in moving the dial to advance children's rights, we are in the process of reviewing and developing an improved recommendation monitoring framework.

Finally, March 2024, the process of reviewing the ACYA was—formally began. For the last two years, a legislative review committee internal to MACY has been conducting jurisdictional scans, conducting research and meeting with stakeholders to understand the current barriers to services for young people in Manitoba and how the ACYA may be amended to address those barriers.

The internal committee's consultations, internal discussions and general lessons learned over the last six years led us to develop 13 recommendations for proposed amendments which were submitted to the Standing Committee on Leg. Affairs. These recommendations focus on addressing the following areas: narrowing service gaps for children, youth and young adults through the expansion of definition of designated and reviewable services as well as clarifying the definition of serious injury; advancing human rights and reconciliation; and reviewing the ACYA at regular intervals.

We look forward to the—to following the next steps in a legislative process as defined by our legislation and to working with the committee in a collaborative way with shared goals of strengthening our legislation to ensure that all children, youth and young adults in Manitoba have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

In conclusion, the MACY team is honoured to carry out the work of respecting, protecting, honouring and fulfilling the rights of children, youth and young adults across Manitoba. We recognize both the privilege and responsibility of doing this important, sacred work. In doing so, we are guided by our values of

child-centred advocacy, accountability, integrity, relationality, social justice and collaboration.

We thank you for your continued collaboration with our office and look forward to another year in service of young people across Manitoba.

Ekosi. Thank you for your time and attention.

I now welcome questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Gott.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mrs. Hiebert: I'd like to thank the Advocate for that amazing report with so much of the good—really good information in there for us to hear and listen to. So thank you very much for putting that together.

A few questions. Just—I guess one of the things—what were the main advocacy issues raised by the 2,837 service requests this year? So what would be the main issues that you found were a real trend?

Floor Comment: So there's many factors. There's an ebb and flow of, you know, service requests. So what we'd like to do is credit our public education team and outreach efforts—

The Chairperson: Ms. Gott, my apologies. We did not recognize you in time, so I'm just going to recognize you again.

Okay, Ms. Gott. Go ahead.

Ms. Gott: Thank you. Sorry.

So there is a natural ebb and flow with service requests depending on many factors. And so one of the things is—that we know is that the children and youth contact us to help them navigate the systems that they need to navigate.

And there's co-occurring issues—complex issues that are on the rise in the areas of mental health and addictions. There's also service providers and families that are experiencing more barriers attempting to access adequate services.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Gott.

Mrs. Hiebert: One of the questions I would have—you had—the Chair—the Advocate had mentioned about the six-part video series that they have on their website. This has been a tool that has brought more children and youth to the Advocate—if that's been something—and is there a follow-up.

Is there a way to track how many are using that tool on the website? Just a question—that.

Ms. Gott: Yes. According to the analytics, it shows positive engagement with the videos and posts about the videos.

* (13:30)

So comments included appreciation of the youth-friendly format we used and hearing the youth voices, the voice-overs of the youth. And there's only one tactic of the team, and we'd like to do more education and—of this kind—but this requires funding, of course.

And so we also received qualitative feedback of the videos.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: Question about the videos. That sounds like such a great tool there for kids and for youth to have a tangible thing to see and to watch.

Is there a way that the information on these videos gets out, specifically, right now, or is it just word of mouth? Or how is that getting put out there right now if there's a lack of funding for the education part?

Ms. Gott: So we're trying to carry out an outreach strategy at this point, which includes the community. And so we are using social media to provide that public education through those videos, and as mentioned, we are using our YouTube channel to provide that information.

We also shared it among service providers and also internally to share with the clients that we service.

Mrs. Hiebert: I have a couple of questions in regards to the child-death review and the *[inaudible]* investigations. Like, the Advocate had brought that up, and I can't imagine having to service all these situations as a team that you guys have—that they have at—in MACY. So thank you very much again for what you do. Working with these vulnerable children and families is such an important job.

How has MACY responded to the sharp increase in homicide cases this year?

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that question.

So when I talked about the stats, there was a 56 per cent increase from last fiscal year. It's actually compared—it's a comparison to the average over the past five years.

And so there is no straightforward solution, right? So—but we are looking at reviewing those child deaths after the criminal proceedings are done. So we have to

get permission from the justice to review those deaths, and so it's—I'm looking forward to getting the public safety strategy on the table and see with respect to youth specifically.

And I think there needs to be more done with regards to mental health and addictions and those areas.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: Thank you very much to the Advocate for those—answering that question.

I—my question would be as well as having families and homes where that—where there's a death or a relationship in some way that has affected the family, how are the homicide and suicide deaths of youth being addressed in the provincial youth justice, mental health and child-welfare systems?

When something like this happens, there's an investigation happening, but where does the Advocate come in to see if there's any other situations in the home that might be of danger or any other children have been involved or anything like that?

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Ms. Gott: Just one minute.

The Chairperson: Okay.

Ms. Gott: Sorry.

I guess—our role is to advocate for children, so when we see that there is other children in the home, we would direct those inquiries to the CFS agency that's involved and they would follow up.

But I think that question should be answered by the minister, not myself, because we do the advocacy work.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Does the minister have a response?

MLA Fontaine: I think she has to ask the question.

The Chairperson: Could Mrs. Hiebert please repeat the question? Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: If the minister would like to just elaborate to what was already mentioned by the Advocate, just the question of, if there's a situation in the home where there's other children involved or there's been a death or something's happened, what is the Advocate's place there to help with those children?

And then I guess the minister, if she could just let me know if there's other steps that are taken to protect those children that are involved in the—like, the justice, mental health or the child-welfare systems in that regard?

The Chairperson: Thank you.

MLA Fontaine: If I understand the correction—or, the question correctly, of course, the first response is by CFS agencies, right? As soon as there is something that occurs to the nature that you're talking about, of course, CFS is, in most cases, already responded, and if they haven't already responded, they are that first line of responding, in concert with Justice as well. And, certainly, Justice's role is if there are victims in a particular situation.

Again, I think the question is very, very, very broad, right? Like, there's a myriad of different things and scenarios that we could be talking about. But I think the crux of what you're asking is—and, again, that first line of protection is with child-welfare agencies, which, in many respects are the—in a crisis like that in—and, again, a myriad of scenarios that could be—we could be talking about, they are that first line and probably in the best situation to address that as well. And, then, of course, with Justice looking at Victim Services.

The Chairperson: Thank you, honourable Minister.

Mrs. Hiebert: In that regard, with the last question that I just asked, so if there was a situation—if the minister wants to answer this—if there was a situation where there was mental health in the home or in a situation close to the family, then would they—the agency, then, been—be, I guess, would the Child and Family Services or the agency call and ask for specific help with the mental health side of it? Like, what's the support there?

MLA Fontaine: If the system is operating the way it's intended to operate, right, you'll have—no matter what the scenario is, you know, addictions or mental health or, you know, IPV, whatever it is, CFS agencies have those experts that will take that—will take a holistic of view on what needs to be occurred with the family, with the children that are in the home—are the children apprehended?

So there's a whole host of things, but, again, you know, if it is working the way that it is intended to work, then CFS will be addressing those, whether or not it's addictions or mental health.

Mrs. Hiebert: This—like, for the Advocate: Are there specific communities where children—where child deaths are more frequent? Is—how is MACY responding to that?

Ms. Gott: First of all, I want to acknowledge that one child death is too many. You know, I would like to see the number continue to decrease. It can be achieved through strategies, policies and community supports that are responsive to the needs of those young people.

* (13:40)

And there is no specific area that we see a concentration of children dying. So, you know, you receive those daily—on a daily basis, a child-death report; it could be anywhere in Manitoba. So—but I really want to acknowledge those children that have passed on, definitely. It's sad when we hear of a child death, right?

So we—but we continue to monitor the trends, of course, according to our—what we've reported in our annual report.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: That's very true. One death is too many, and to—for us all to do and get together and be a team and work to see what we can do to keep that—this—so this doesn't happen to any child or youth is so important. So thank you for bringing that up and saying that.

What is the support—what support is being provided to families and children who have lost or had a child that passed away in their family? What does—what supports do you have for that?

Ms. Gott: I guess I want to highlight that, you know, children dying disproportionately are Indigenous. They're over-represented in that area also. And I think our role at the Advocate's office is to ensure that we provide those referrals, those supports of any crisis line or mental health supports to provide support to that family that have experienced a loss.

So our role is to do that and ensure that those supports are provided to the family, including the children that are in the family setting.

So thanks.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): I just have a couple of process questions.

So on page 43 of the report, you note that there will be changes forthcoming to how MACY monitors compliance with recommendations.

And I guess my first question is: What was the impetus for that change?

Ms. Gott: Thank you for those questions.

One of the things that we noticed, you know, progress wasn't being made at the ground level, so—and we found that the recommendation model that was developed through the previous advocates was very intense; the work of that recommendation monitoring and answering to our recommendation was very intense work.

So with our new way of looking at things and when we release our new compliance model, it's more collaborative and it's more Indigenous ways of looking at monitoring and recommendations and compliance.

So we want to ensure that it's a more collaborative way of doing work, rather than being intense. And, you know, ensuring that the recommendations are being met to support families, especially the children.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for that answer.

I guess my next question would be: Will there still be a compliance report issued annually with the new model?

Ms. Gott: As I mentioned to you, we are working on a new compliance model, so there will be a compliance review coming out some time in the next year. So we currently are working with the MACY-RAP table, which consists of deputy ministers, to work on a process and look at more—in a collaborative way through reconciliation processes too.

So I think that, you know, we're looking forward to releasing that some time in the new year. This year, sorry.

Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: As you mentioned in your opening comments, I think, you know, monitoring compliance with recommendations is a really important accountability mechanism for government, and I think one of the important functions of the MACY office is to issue these recommendations based on your expertise and in your investigations, and to monitor whether government is actually implementing them.

And if I understood your answer to my first question correctly, it is—and I'm sure it is—quite a lot of work to monitor compliance with those recommendations.

Does your—does the office of the advocate need additional resources to monitor compliance? Would that help with this important accountability function?

Floor Comment: Yes.

The Chairperson: Ms. Gott.

Ms. Gott: Sorry, I couldn't help myself there.

Yes, of course. Any kind of support, you know, to ensure that children's rights are being met. Any kind of—you know, we want to get away from—a less colonial approach to monitoring and stuff like that. Realities on the ground reveal young people and their families aren't seeing lasting improvements, so any time that there's support in the areas of more staffing, it's certainly welcomed, right.

So because our report, compliance reports, are quite expansive and there's a lot of work involved. I have currently two policy analysts that do that work, and it's quite a process to go through whatever comes in from each department when we make recommendations. So, you know, there's a lot of work involved in that area.

So thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Just a friendly reminder before recognizing Mrs. Cook, just that folks—folks, reminder to the committee that questions and answers must be put through the Chair.

Thank you so much.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for the reminder.

This is a fairly direct, kind of blunt question, and I apologize in advance for that. But is the Advocate concerned that compliance with their recommendations might suffer if the compliance model shifts to one that is less, I guess—that holds the government to account?

Is the Advocate concerned that shifts in the compliance model might be less effective in holding the government accountable, is my question.

Floor Comment: Thank you for that question.

I think one of the things is that we're more concerned about the impact that it's making on the ground and so—

The Chairperson: Ms. Gott. My apologies, once again we didn't recognize you in time.

Ms. Gott, go ahead. Thank you.

Ms. Gott: Thank you.

I think one of the things that is important to note is that the realities on the ground for the children and youth, we're not seeing lasting improvements.

* (13:50)

So I think it's really important to ensure that, you know, we continue to call on government to improve services for children, youth and young adults in the system. And it's more than a checkbox system, right.

So we have those meaningful conversations in a collaborative way, and we've been working—you know, working diligently at developing a model that will work for our children and youth and young adults.

So I think, you know, we can't make those comparisons at this point. So—and like I said, we've engaged in productive conversation from program to program and to other deputy ministers to make this work so we can make those lasting impacts for the children and youth.

Mrs. Cook: Continuing with sort of process questions, I'm just wondering if the Advocate can provide an update from her perspective on the status of the recommendations from the review of the act. And I know it's under way; this is still a work in progress.

But the Advocate mentions in the report that they expect to put forward a status update, I think, in the near future, and I'm just wondering if the Advocate can provide us with a bit of an update today on the status of those recommendations and how they feel implementation is going.

Ms. Gott: Like I said in my opening statement, we are waiting, you know, to work in a collaborative way to make sure that we make those recommended changes to the act that will support young people and adults.

We have a meeting in the new year with a team from the Province to review our recommendations that we made—the 13 recommendations we made—and also to review their recommendations to make sure they're in line with each other.

And we want to ensure that, you know, like I said, I'm here to advocate for children, youth and young families, and we want to make sure that they are provided the best service.

Mrs. Cook: I have a few questions about the serious injury investigations, because it's new. So I'm just wondering if the Advocate could walk us through what a serious injury investigation entails—like, what the process is on their end and the outcomes of those investigations.

I'm wondering whether specific recommendations will be developed as a result of those investigations or whether they're more globally folded into the recommendations that the office produces already.

Just talk a little bit about that.

Ms. Gott: So as I said, you know, the serious injury legislation was enacted 17 months ago in—July 1st of 2023. So we know that they're under—there's some serious injury reports that are under-reported, and so we will continue to see a rise in those reports when we continue to educate the public about their responsibilities of reporting those serious injuries to us.

And we haven't done our full report yet; we are continuing to review those serious injuries. And in the coming months, we will be releasing a special report on what we've seen on the ground and what we would like to see and making recommendations for changes in the areas of the definitions, because we know that the serious injury definition is very vague. So we've had to work with each department to try and determine how we define serious injury.

So right now, we're—in terms of referrals, there is a backlog because it's—the numbers are growing. And so we continue to try our best to meet, you know, that. It takes four to six months to complete a review because we have to get files of those—if they were children in care or children that were attached to youth justice, mental health, addictions; we have to get those files and whatever reports we get, we have to review and analyze.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: The Advocate mentioned under-reporting potentially, if I heard that correctly, by service providers, and I know the report talks about the importance of consistency and reliability in reporting.

So what, in the Advocate's view, needs to take place in order to improve reporting among service providers? Is it just an education issue? Who needs to be providing that education? If you could talk about that a little bit.

Thank you.

Ms. Gott: Yes, we need—you know, again, I'm going to say that we do need more funding to meet our public education needs in this area and other areas of our office, of course.

But I think one of the things, with regard to under-reporting, we need to go out and educate the public about their responsibilities of reporting to our office because it is in legislation that any serious injury to a child, it needs be reported to our office.

This way we can track and monitor the trends that are happening in this area of the work that we do.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: I want to talk a little bit about substance misuse, as it was, I think, the top risk factor in injuries—I'm going to try and find the right page of the report, I apologize, give me one second. Yes, top 10 risk factors present in a reported injured person's life, on page 29 of the report, is substance misuse.

And then, when we look at child deaths, I noticed that overdoses are—correct me if I'm wrong—reported as undetermined cause. Suspected overdose, I guess, is determined by the Chief Medical Examiner.

So I'm just wondering if overdose deaths need to be their own separate category. I'm wondering if that would draw more attention to the issue or if that's even possible. I—and please correct me if I'm wrong, if they're not actually folded into the deaths under undetermined cause, I just—I—it's clearly a real problem and I just wondered if the Advocate has any thoughts or suggestions, recommendations on that.

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that question.

I think one of the things that needs to be highlighted is that the OCME themselves and their expertise, they actually categorize those deaths themselves. So, it is not up to us. We do the review and the determination is usually made by the OCME's office, of the manner of death.

Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: Just a couple of questions for the Advocate about the addictions part, about what we—are—you go through and what kind of things are happening.

How does the Advocate think that the youth addictions strategy has been going so far? How has that been?

Ms. Gott: I—as I said in my opening remarks, we have been waiting for a youth addictions strategy to be

developed. We have been asking for quite some time but I also know that in our—we just released a report on youth addictions, by the way, just a couple of weeks ago.

Was well received by the public and by other systems, so we want that report to be used as a tool for any service provider that comes across that report that we released.

* (14:00)

And so we are still waiting for a report—a youth addictions strategy to address the mental health needs and addictions and the misuse of substances of the youth. So I know there's something in the works at this point, but I don't know how that looks at this point.

Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: My question would be to the Advocate, if this is something that she believes is—there's progress happening with the current government, if this is something that's being taken seriously and that—if that's been progressing for the youth addictions strategy.

Ms. Gott: Yes, we've had several meetings with the minister to talk about the youth addictions strategy. And I also know that there is some youth involved and they are working on a suicide strategy, but those go hand in hand, right?

So—and I think that, you know, I'm looking forward to receiving that report and that strategy, hopefully soon.

Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: The Advocate had mentioned in her opening remarks about not having adequate services in Manitoba and having to go outside of the province to seek services for youth and children.

Just if she could just elaborate on that for me. What kind of services are not available, and what are they going outside the province for, exactly?

Ms. Gott: So my answer to that is that, you know, we have—we come across youth in the system that have a myriad of issues, right, so—that can't be addressed in Manitoba.

And so what we found particularly—you know, I don't want to reveal anything, but I want to say that there was a youth in Manitoba that needed help in the areas of mental health, addictions, sexual exploitation, and there was no services in Manitoba to meet her needs. So she was sent out of province.

And—but I think that the first step should have been to contact the provincial placement desk to see if there was any services in Manitoba, but we also know that there is a lack of services for children with those kind of needs.

Mrs. Hiebert: I'd just like to ask the Advocate: What would be the services that she would suggest would be something very important to have available close to home in Manitoba?

Ms. Gott: I am recommending that we have services to address mental health, youth addictions, sexual exploitation. And I think that, you know, and I have mentioned this when I met with the minister to look at Tracia's Trust and how that could impact service delivery in Manitoba for children with those co-occurring complex needs.

Mrs. Hiebert: So just to ask further questions about that to the Advocate.

So we have services specifically for, like, somebody—a child or youth who's having issues with mental health, but are we needing specific kind of services that are not available to certain kids or teenagers that—or youth that need help? Or is it the myriad—like, where—if a youth if experiencing all of those at the same time, is that what we don't have services for?

My question would just be, like, in what area, specifically. When the Advocate mentions that we need services for addictions, for mental health, is there a specific service that we don't offer, or do we just not have services in general for any of those?

Ms. Gott: So what I'm saying is that I think we need specialized, holistic, wraparound placements for children, youth and young adults that are experience co-occurring mental health issues.

Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: Maybe this is a better question to the minister than to the Advocate, but can we—is it possible to quantify how many such specialized placements we have, or how many we might need? What is the level of need?

The Chairperson: I would ask the member to ask specifically a question. Who are you asking the question to? *[interjection]* The honourable minister.

MLA Fontaine: What I will say while some of my folks are trying to get that information on that last question, is, you know, what the Advocate has identified in respect of really, really complex needs.

There are some—and again, I don't like this language of, like, cases or—but there are some—for lack of a better word, there are some cases that are so complex.

So you have a vulnerable, incredibly at-risk youth, who's got mental health—very, very serious mental health issues, coupled with addictions, coupled with the sexual exploitation. They are preyed upon; they are absolutely preyed upon in our community.

And actually, that segment of, like, the sexual exploitation of our children has gotten even worse since COVID. I think that everybody around the table knows that COVID did something, and all of these different things—IPV, gender-based violence, all of these things—grew exponentially. So you have these really, really complex cases of children, just babies really, that need very specialized supports.

And what I'll share with the members—and the Advocate and I have talked about this several times now—I'll go back to 2000, 2008. At the time, that was the renewal of Tracia's Trust. So what Tracia's Trust is now, its current iteration, was this whole provincial exercise undertaken by, at the time, my predecessor, former minister Gord Mackintosh.

And so, under his direction, which I think it was called child and family services back then—I can't remember what the department was called—but again, my predecessor, he—him and his team undertook a review and an engagement across the province and then came up with Tracia's Trust.

At the time—and I was part of the Sexually Exploited Youth Community Coalition that was made up of 40 stakeholders from across the province at the time—Sage House, MKO, SCO, RCMP, WPS—everybody that you can imagine were a part of SEY, as it was called.

And from that group, former minister Gord Mackintosh established, like, an advisory group, so kind of like a sub-advisory group. And the question was posed at that time to this advisory group—and this advisory group was made up of elders and community activists and folks that are on the front lines—and the question was posed on dealing with these most complex cases. Do we as a province—and again, under Tracia's Trust, do we need to look at, again, very specialized placements? And at the time, what they were talking about was involuntary placements, right.

And so, at the time though, I was a part of that sub-advisory group, and the reaction at that time was visceral. It was that nobody in the province at the time wanted that. Nobody wanted that our youth, who have

such complex needs, you don't want to further institutionalize them. So at the time, the response was no.

And I think what's happened over the last many years, as we have seen these cases become more and more complex, and we've seen that if children don't get the placements and the supports that they need, they are very much at risk of death; and death in a myriad of different forms, right.

* (14:10)

And so, I think—you know, we know that BC just last month or, I can't remember—maybe in the last little bit—certainly in the last month—they just announced involuntary placements.

Now—so I think that there's kind of this movement across the country recognizing that there are—and sometimes it's adults. In this case, we're talking about youth with these really incredibly, incredibly complex needs that we need to be looking at maybe reimagining and reversioning what these specific placements can look like—not institutionalized—you know, let's be honest that the vast majority of the folks that we're talking about are Indigenous youth, right. So you don't want to further harm Indigenous youth that have already been harmed by multiple systems.

So I think that, you know—and I'm not speaking on behalf of the Advocate or the Advocate's team, but I think that those are some of the discussions I know that I as minister am having with my counterparts across the country because we're not the only jurisdiction that is dealing and faced with this scenario. This is a scenario that's going on across the country.

So all of that to say that at one point in 2007-2008, the reaction within the community was visceral. Like, absolutely not. You're not doing that. You're not institutionalizing our youth. We're not doing that, dah dah dah. Maybe things have shifted.

So it is certainly a conversation, but I think that what the Advocate has presented and her team has presented is something that our team is acutely aware of to ensure that we're responding, that those youth have the supports that they need.

And I'm just going to—just give me one minute here.

And so one of the things, also, that we're doing is HAH is also conducting a review of publicly funded substance use—substance use and addiction services for youth including partnering with Families and Justice to review services for youth with complex needs.

HAH is working with other departments—Shared Health, regional health authorities, education stakeholders, community-based organizations—on a series of youth initiatives, and the initiatives involve hiring more mental health professionals. Members opposite will know through the Chair that we've announced a hundred new health-care providers—health workers.

So we're working on reducing wait lists, ensuring crisis and early intervention services are available across Manitoba and supporting children and youth in their communities.

The other piece that I want to say to this is obviously, you know, specifically what the Advocate has raised in the report and certainly the questions that our colleagues are asking has only grown exponentially.

And the reality is that we had a previous government that really—for a lack of a better word—you know, really buried their head in the sand in respect of addressing and dealing with these complex needs. I think that the former government would have rather just put their head in the sand and just pretend like this isn't happening. And so now there's a lot of catch-up that we have to do.

So we—myself as Minister for Families, the ministers for HAH and Justice—now we are looking comprehensively and taking a whole-of-government approach and really, really—like, that's not just words when we say, taking a whole-of-government approach—like, we're really—our DMs are meeting every single week; we're meeting every single week to ensure that we have a comprehensive, robust response to what the Advocate has laid out in the report and to what the Advocate also deals with on a daily basis—her and her team and certainly us in Families as well.

Mrs. Cook: Just to reiterate my question, which was: How many of these specialized placements do we have available to children who need them, and how many—what is the level of need? How much do we need to increase that capacity in Manitoba?

Ms. Gott: Well, we see a lot of cases in Manitoba that we come across at our office that require—children that require support, or young adults or youth. And so—but, I must say that, you know, when I talked about that specific case, the minister did respond with regards to that. And not only that case, but there was other cases she responded to.

So, you know, these are really complex cases that we come across in advocacy and in serious injury. So I think, you know, at one point the province used to

have a sexually exploited youth specialized placement desk that was voluntary. So—this no longer exists, by the way.

So I think, you know, less—and more—I think we need more placements for those youth with co-occurring needs that suffer with addictions, mental health and sexual exploitation. We need a—specific placements for those kids and those young adults, because they are vulnerable and they are exploited to a point where, you know, they have nowhere else to go; they rely on their person that's exploiting them.

So—and I think any time there's any kind of support for a youth that's suffering all these myriad of issues, I think we really need to provide that support. I have no specific number in mind right now, but I think that any time there's a placement, it's a win for us, for that child. Right?

So thank you.

MLA Fontaine: So I was wholeheartedly planning on answering that question, as I had said when I started. My team was just getting that together.

So let me just—I just want to say a couple of things here. So the Department of Families works with over 20 community organizations that operate specialized placement resource programs for children and youth in care.

Right now, we have 185 facilities with over 663 beds. That's what we license. That includes, like, Ma Mawi and Neecheewam, Blue Thunderbird—which members opposite should know that I just supported with additional dollars to really support the work that they're doing; really, really good work for Blue Thunderbird.

We are presently working with a number of operators to look at the expansion of existing programs. We know, obviously, as I said in my previous question, that there are still additional supports, specialized supports, that we need, and we're currently doing that work.

Let me just say this, as well. One of the things that the Advocate has brought up and we have discussed, but I don't think I've actually shared just yet, but I'm going to announce it here, is we have discussed—the Advocate and I have discussed in previous opportunities about Tracia's Trust, so where is Tracia's Trust?

And I really want folks opposite to understand how important Tracia's Trust is to government strategy and policy. For instance, Tracia's Trust is the

impetus—and I was part of that when we did a path session on the creation of StreetReach.

StreetReach, as folks will know, go out and they work with the most vulnerable and sexually exploited youth. They're—they develop relationships and it's a connection to be able to ensure that they get the supports. That was done back in 2008 in this revisioning engagement process.

The other thing that came from Tracia's Trust was Hands of Mother Earth, HOME. So HOME is a placement that's outside the city, and that was the vision from Elder Mae Louise Campbell. Again, in that day that we did this path session, she said, you know, my dream is to have a home for sexually exploited young girls, that they can get outside the city and be away from the harms and the dangers that the city often poses.

And so Tracia's Trust has done really, really good work and has helped inform government strategy, path, vision, processes.

We are currently undertaking a new engagement of Tracia's Trust. So we are—my team is coming back with a plan on how we're going to do that engagement. So again, the last, kind of engagement was 2007-2008. We have—we're undertaking it—another one, again to see—again, that's many years ago, so where do we need to go? Things have changed. Numbers have grown. Again, from 2008 to 2024, that's a significant amount of years, right?

* (14:20)

So I want to assure the committee and assure my colleagues opposite and—but more importantly, I want to ensure and advise the Advocate right here and now that we're engaging in a process of renewing and engagement for Tracia's Trust. And I, for one, as minister responsible, am really looking forward to that, and, of course, as I have said to the Advocate previously, the Advocate's office will be a part of that process.

Mrs. Hiebert: A quick—another quick question for the Advocate in regards to this. When working with a youth or a young adult, it—with these complex situations that are special and they need extra care, what is the communication?

For example, if there's a youth or a young person in a mental-health situation where they're, you know, getting treatment in a facility for their mental health—they've got addictions issues, and there's—where—who reaches out in those situations to the Advocate?

And does the Advocate have a say in what happens so that—let's say it's somebody who has just come out of care but they're still needing all of these wraparounds. They need the mental health; they need the help with addictions; they've gone through some trauma.

If that youth is being—done their treatment for the mental health part of it, but there still have all of these situations that need help with, where do these youth go? Who helps these youth and how does the Advocate find out about those youths specifically, rather than them getting, you know, let out of this care facility, or wherever they're being taken care of, and then they have no home; they've no roof over their head.

Who—where do—what happens in those situations, specifically, to that youth?

Ms. Gott: Most of the calls that we receive come from professions such as social workers or educators. So once we get those phone calls, our advocacy officers are engaged in, like, as part of that investigation, to find out who's involved with that youth. If there is an engagement with CFS, justice, mental health, addictions, we gather that information, and then we provide that advocacy support and make recommendation as to how we can continue to support that youth if they're in a facility.

So, because of our increase in our public-facing activities, we found that there's more professionals contacting us.

Mrs. Hiebert: Thank the Advocate for that answer. There's so much that needs to be done, and it's just amazing the things that they do for these young people—that your organization does.

One of the questions I do have is we talked about how there's a larger number of Indigenous children and youth that are in care or in situations that need the Advocate.

And so my question would be, because we know culture and where they're coming from and what the importance of family and their roots and their heritage and their culture are, how in—how does this—how do you engage those children with the cultural side of the supports that you give them?

Ms. Gott: Well, we know that Indigenous children are over-represented in all systems in Manitoba due to the legacy of colonization, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism. So our office has an elder in

residence. We also have an elders council. We also are currently looking for a knowledge keeper.

So—and we also have a youth engagement team—that our youth advisory ambassador squad, that's made up of Indigenous youth. So we have Indigenous representation of staff also. So, you know, there is—and our staff understand the legacy of colonization and intergenerational trauma and all that, and how the youth are impacted by all those things, the history.

So we try our best to be trauma informed, and we also provide—we offer ceremonies to children that we come—that work with us, and we offer, you know, the elder sits in youth and ambassador squad meetings.

We also invite the elder if a family wants to work with the knowledge keeper or the elder during a crisis, we invite to come with—they're invited to go into the home with the advocacy officer.

So we are trying our best to support families through their own lens, right. So we're not, you know, we don't come from a colonial view—way of doing things. We provide support as much as we can, especially when there's a request for elder presence.

Mrs. Hiebert: Further to that, how does the elders council influence the policy positions that you specifically—or that the MACY specifically interacts and implements?

Ms. Gott: We do have an elders council that's made up of representatives from retired social workers, retired educators, people that work in the community and represented with LGBTQ community. We also have elders that are previous social workers, so they—we meet with the elders on a quarterly basis under the Indigenous deputy advocate; she oversees the elders, and we—when we meet with them, we advise them of our, what our activities are, if we have special reports coming out. They are engaged in that process, and they advise us on what we do and how we should present ourselves with those reports.

They are very skilled and knowledgeable at what they do. They have, you know, their formal education, and they also have their walk in life, their—as elders. And we are very appreciative of their knowledge and the expertise that they bring to the table.

Mrs. Hiebert: Thank you for that—to the Advocate for that answer.

So what role does the Indigenous knowledge play in child-death reviews and the investigations themselves?

Ms. Gott: During our dispositions, where we actually review the child-death notifications and investigations, the elder is present, and we are very fortunate to have her—the elder present during these discussions because, as you know, it's a very sensitive topic, and the manner of death is discussed at that table. And we try really hard to support families and be trauma informed and respectful. You know, the teachings are applied when we have those discussions.

This is not something that we take very lightly. It impacts all of us and, you know, including the elder herself. So I think we have to be really careful when we are having those discussions, and very—you know, it's very serious to discuss those topics, and in—especially when we're talking about a child that has died, you know, and we're sitting at that—it's not taken very lightly, I must say that.

And any time, you know, when we released Eishia Hudson's report, we had the elders council involved right from the start, and they provided support to the family. And they held ceremonies, they lifted pipe with us, and ensured that we were also taken care of spiritually. So—and ensured that the families are taken care of in that manner also.

Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: That's great—that's so good to hear that you have that, that the 'advoc' and the office has that support, especially for—even for them themselves when they're going through these things, that they have that support. So that's really—and for the families.

It's a difficult situation, and I appreciate her—the Advocate sharing that; that that's what's happening there. That's very good.

* (14:30)

So how does MACY's advocacy approach differ in Indigenous children compared to non-Indigenous children? How does that look?

Ms. Gott: We treat children all the same. There is no specific way of practising.

You know, if children are asking for ceremonies, we provide that. If children are asking to sit with an elder and have an elder present, we make sure that's provided.

So all children are treated equally.

Mrs. Cook: I just wanted to talk about school absenteeism a little bit. It was mentioned in the report as one of the top six advocacy issues and one of the top risk factors for injured children.

So I have a couple of questions about this, but I guess I'll start with if the Advocate has a sense of what factors are at play in school absenteeism. Some of them are probably fairly obvious, but if the Advocate has any information she can share about what's behind these numbers.

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that question.

I think one of the things that needs to be considered is high wraparound, much like the COACH program that's currently in the school systems. The link provides that support, and I think, you know, with us, we've released several reports with regards to school absenteeism and the link with regards to mental health, trauma.

So I think, you know, we should continue to support COACH—that COACH program—because Eishia Hudson—the late Eishia Hudson—was supported through wraparound supports in the COACH program, but because she aged out of that program, she had nothing.

So we need to ensure that that program continues to be funded and continues to be supported.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you so much for that answer. You actually answered one of my next questions about sort of what needs to be done to address it.

You mentioned that Eishia had aged out of the program, so—not that I want to pre-empt any recommendations you might put out at some point in the future, but would you recommend that the age—the upper age limit on that program—be extended, or that it serve more kids in need in order to try and help them?

Is there a specific recommendation around that program?

Sorry—through the Chair.

Ms. Gott: We did make the recommendation in the Eishia Hudson report to expand the program and so—you know, and to ensure that ongoing funding and expand the age limit for that program. So yes, it's there.

Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: On a related note, with the Butterfly Project report, can the Advocate give us a sort of a status update on the recommendations? I think there were four recommendations from that report—if the Advocate could just let us know where things are at with those recommendations.

Ms. Gott: Because the report was released in this fiscal year, we haven't been—they're—the government is not required to report on it at this point yet, but it'll be coming with our new compliance report.

So it'll be coming.

Mrs. Cook: Just one more question on the school absenteeism: Has the Advocate office had any conversations with the Minister of Education or officials in the Education Department on this issue specifically?

Ms. Gott: Yes we have.

I know that, you know, at one point I was involved in a committee where we discussed how we can support youth to stay in school. And it was a committee that was developed by the previous government, so at this point I'm still waiting for somebody to carry on the work that was developed at that, and—at that table.

So there has been—you know, we've made several recommendations in other reports with regards to school absenteeism. So—and those reports are online: Circling Star comes in mind; Angel; Tina Fontaine report. Like, those reports have all those recommendations that we made with regards to school absenteeism.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for that, and I think that work is really important.

I know as an MLA, I've had calls from constituents who had children in high school that weren't in care, but were neurodivergent and really struggling in school and ended up dropping out of high school, unfortunately, and then they become vulnerable as a result of that. So I think it—you know, your—I will look at the recommendations put out by the office previously, because I think that's very important.

I had a question about the importance of parent and caregiver supports. You touched on it in your opening—the Advocate touched on it in her opening comments and in the report as well.

And I just wondered if the Advocate could provide more specifics about what the gaps are in supports to parents and caregivers, because I know that, whenever possible, the goal is always to keep families together. And what government needs to be doing to better provide those supports for families.

Ms. Gott: So in our boys report that we released a few years ago, we talked about the struggle with parental substance misuse. The boys that were involved in that report talked about the impact of parent substance

misuse, and it created a crisis within their family. They weren't able to go to school. There was issues with attendance and all that kind of stuff, and mental health.

So I think, you know, I would welcome you to review that report and you can, you know, review the recommendations that we made from that report. And the number of youth voices that were used and elders—there was elders involved also with that report; we made sure that the community was involved.

So it was a report that was put out a couple years ago.

Mrs. Hiebert: I know that in the past we've had conversations about the youth strategy for youth—sorry, can't speak here—the youth suicide prevention strategy and how there's been many recommendations made by the Advocate for—in the last bit.

* (14:40)

How does the—MACY track and address the trends and—to self harm and suicide attempts among youth and children?

Ms. Gott: With our legislation that was put—enacted on July 1, 2023, with our serious injury legislation, those trends are tracked through that. And any child death that has come to our attention, those are tracked—and we report those on our yearly—in our annual report.

So that's how we track them.

Mrs. Hiebert: Just going back to recommendations from the past, has the Advocate found that there's been forward moving on those recommendations that she's made in that regard, where youth suicide is in relation to that?

Ms. Gott: In 2023, we released a report, Moving the Dial on Children's Rights in Manitoba. And in the report, on page 6, we have highlighted the recommendation progress.

And so I think that, you know, there's four levels of—I hate using numbers because you can't quantify something like this, right? So—and I think one of the things that we need to look at is ensuring that the needs are met at the ground with these—with the youth.

Last year, we had the highest number of suicides in Manitoba, and we continue to monitor that, of course, for this year. And so when you look at this report, Moving the Dial, you'll see the progress that the government has made.

The Chairperson: Okay. Seeing no further questions—oh, okay. My apologies.

Mrs. Hiebert: I'm sorry. Just writing my note here.

To—further to that question, are there current numbers as to the current suicide deaths, specifically, so far this year? Are we—and what are those, and have you noticed a dip—a noticeable change this year in result of what's been implemented in the last little bit?

Ms. Gott: What I can say is that the numbers are lower this year at this point. But I can also say, on the serious injury side of our reporting, we're seeing an increase in attempts. So that—those numbers will be—I hate to say numbers—but we will be reporting on that in our next annual report release, which is next January, I guess.

Mrs. Hiebert: Just for the Advocate: If those numbers are higher, is there a need for more services for those children? What would—what does the Advocate, then, do at that point with—in situations when you have children and youth that are going through those things, and what is the process to help those children specifically?

Ms. Gott: I can say that we have been meeting with the minister, Minister Smith, on a regular basis to discuss this and our concern, and I know that she currently has a table of, I think, 20 people developing a youth suicide strategy, because I have been talking about this since I became the Advocate and the concern with respect to the number of suicides last year.

And so, you know, I appreciate the work that's being done in this area, and I hope that, you know, it'll support the youth and the young adults that are experiencing this—that epidemic.

Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: One more question just for the Advocate: Is there specific programming that you will—or, that the Advocate will automatically refer those youth to when that situation comes about?

Ms. Gott: So I guess, you know, one of the things is that we have said before is past suicide prevention is mental health promotion.

So one of the things that I've talked to the minister about is land-based programming for kids, because the more activities you provide youth, the more buy-in you'll get. So I think that, you know, supporting youth in that area is very important. So and that's—would be, you know, viewed as mental health promotion.

Mrs. Cook: I just want to say that I think the research team at the Advocate's office does incredible work.

And I just wondered if the Advocate could tell us what projects they have under way right now or what reports might be forthcoming within the next fiscal year that we should watch for.

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that. I'm sure my staff would appreciate that, to hear that, because some of them are listening in today.

And—but I can tell you that we have a strategic planning session coming up. And I met with my staff yesterday and the research team and the QA team. So we will be discussing our plan in the next few years, actually, two years, as to what we're going to be working on. So we're monitoring the trends in the system right now and reviewing that, and we will make a decision.

So there'll be something coming, but at this point, we're kind of not really—you know, we're—we know that the serious injury report is coming out in the new year, sometime in April, and the compliance, of course. But at this point, any kind of special reports, we're at the discussion table right now and doing proposals. I'm asking my staff to do proposals, and then as an executive team, we'll make a decision at that point.

Thank you.

Mrs. Hiebert: Just want to say thank you to the Advocate and her team and her staff for everything

that they do. It's just unexplainable how much appreciated it is.

And if there's one thing that, maybe, I haven't asked a question or my colleague hasn't asked a question about that she—that the Advocate would like to just share about something specific that's really been heavy on her or something that she really feels it important to speak about, if I could just give her that opportunity right now to share something specific like that.

Ms. Gott: I have a huge wish list. The one thing that I would like to see is that all children survive and thrive. And I know the Premier (Mr. Kinew) said, to their 18th birthday, but I think beyond that, right. Children need support and resources and they need to know that they're loved. I think that is one thing I must say.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Okay, seeing no further questions, I will now put the question on the report.

Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024—pass.

The hour being 2:50, what is the will of the committee?

An Honourable Member: Rise.

The Chairperson: Committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 2:50 p.m.

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