

The Honourable Lisa Macleod  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services and Minister Responsible for Women's Issues  
Hepburn Block 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
80 Grosvenor Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
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September 30, 2018

Dear Minister Macleod,

On September 25<sup>th</sup> 2018, the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario released a report detailing the experiences of twelve extremely vulnerable children and youth who died while in residential placements between January 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 and July 31<sup>st</sup> 2017. In response to the report, CMHO recognizes the non-negotiable role that Indigenous partners must have in leading the response to the panel's findings and fully supports the call to action issued by Alvin Fiddler, Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), which endorses the establishment of a committee ensuring that the recommendations contained in the expert panel report are addressed and implemented.

The expert panel report, which investigates the circumstances surrounding the deaths, reveals a lack of crucial linkages between the child welfare sector and the child and youth mental health (CYMH) sector. A common theme that emerges out of the stories of these twelve young people is the numerous failures by the system to identify and diagnose escalating mental health challenges and a subsequent failure to access crucial treatment.

In addition to struggling with severe mental health challenges which were often the result of unaddressed trauma, these children and youth were from marginalized and racialized populations. Eight of the young people were Indigenous, there were also Black and LGBTQI2S youth represented among the twelve. The expert panel investigating the deaths found that at no point were their unique needs incorporated into their service delivery or care.

The mental health challenges of these youth were often symptomatic of more complex overarching barriers to quality of life that are sadly all too common in the lives of marginalized and racialized people. These barriers include poverty, racial bias in the delivery of care and treatment, and the devaluing of cultural practice in delivery of care and treatment. In the case of the eight Indigenous youth, these barriers were further compounded by inter-generational trauma that can be traced back to the residential school system.

The expert panel reported several key findings with respect to mental health treatment and care, including concerns regarding the availability of long term and intensive mental health care and the striking inequities in mental health care availability in northern First Nations communities. They also identified a range of specific areas for improvement with respect to CYMH services, including:

- The development of wholistic, team-based and preventative screening and assessment tools at the local community level to enhance relevance, cultural appropriateness and effectiveness
- Mental health care practice that considers the whole child (ie. physical, emotional, spiritual and mental) in relation to their environment (family, extended community, etc.)
- Requirement for extra support from hospitals to de-escalate and ensure appropriate follow-up care when a young person is in crisis, even if the young person does not need to be admitted to the hospital

Through a partnership between the CYMH sector, child welfare sector and Indigenous leaders, CMHO recognizes the need for meaningful and decisive action in addressing these failures. An action committee would serve as the necessary first step, solutions developed must include:

- Indigenous leadership in identifying areas for service expansion in northern First Nations communities and in addressing the deficit of culturally responsive mental health treatment and care for Indigenous children and youth
- The development of standardized processes and lines of communication which link the CYMH and child welfare sectors, allowing for early identification of mental health illnesses and the timely provision of responsive treatment and care
- The incorporation of emotionally, culturally, and spiritually responsive care into any engagement between children and youth in Ontario's care and service providers
- The establishment of family-focused interventions which address the broader determinants of mental wellness and family stability
- The implementation of mandatory follow-up processes which link hospitals, community centers, residential treatment centers, and private residential placements-- the goal being to prevent the risk of 'revolving door' syndrome and deterioration of mental health.

CMHO recognizes that in order to repair a fragmented and complex system, there must exist strong subject matter expertise, sustained effort and political will, and the development of practical solutions. Specific areas that CMHO has prioritized for years and which require immediate attention include: the establishment and strengthening of linkages between the child welfare and CYMH sectors, expansion and quality improvement in intensive treatment service delivery (specifically residential centers), and the incorporation of identity and cultural practices into responsive mental health care and treatment. A strengthened partnership between, and improved capacity within, the child welfare and CYMH sectors would facilitate early identification and delivery of responsive care to vulnerable children and youth with mental health challenges.

CMHO also recognizes the progress made as a result of Ontario's Blueprint for Building a New System of Licensed Residential Services but echoes the panel's concerns about the scope and pace of this progress. The need for significant and meaningful improvement in residential treatment services is urgent. The same failed processes and systems that resulted in the deaths of these twelve young people are still in place at this moment and equally vulnerable children and youth in Ontario's care are still slipping through the cracks.

With a focus on systems design thinking and the support of partners and agencies in both the child welfare and CYMH systems, CMHO is positioned to foster meaningful dialogue and positive change that heeds the painful lessons contained in the stories of these twelve young people. As noted earlier, CMHO recognizes the non-negotiable role that Indigenous partners must have in leading the response to the panel's findings and fully supports the call to action issued by Alvin Fiddler, Grand Chief of NAN which endorses the establishment of a committee ensuring that the recommendations contained in the expert panel report are addressed and implemented.

Sincerely,



Kim Moran  
CEO  
Children's Mental Health Ontario

- cc. The Honourable Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health and Long-Term Care  
The Honourable Lisa Thompson, Minister of Education  
The Honourable Greg Rickford, Minister of Energy, Mines, Northern Development and Indigenous Affairs  
Helen Angus, Deputy Minister of Health and Long-Term Care  
Janet Menard, Deputy Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education  
Deborah Richardson, Deputy Minister of Indigenous Affairs