

Advocate Report Highlights Importance of Registered Social Workers

On October 19, 2018, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, Daphne Penrose, MSW, RSW, released her report, [Documenting The Decline: The Dangerous Space Between Good Intentions and Meaningful Interventions](#). The report outlines the experience of Circling Star (spirit name), a youth who received services from various government systems, including child welfare, mental health, addictions, justice and education.

The report describes a disjointed, reactive system of services that provided inadequate assessment and support and absent or ineffective intervention that consistently fell short of minimum standards. Systems, agencies and/or service providers were identified as failing to report, assess and respond to child abuse, partner violence and suicidal ideation. Deficits in file recording, records management and information sharing were found to weaken the overall effectiveness of services. Qualification requirements for agency workers were described as inconsistently applied and training was found to be unevenly accessible and inadequately funded contributing to gaps in minimum service delivery.

The Advocate's recommendations in response to these findings include:

- improved coordination of services and sharing of information across systems
- evidence-based disciplinary alternatives in schools that phase out unnecessary exclusionary practices (i.e. suspensions, expulsions)
- improved access to and coordination of culturally safe, trauma-informed mental health services for youth
- development of a youth addiction action strategy to address the lack of effective substance use treatment services for youth
- improved communication and planned service delivery within the Department of Justice
- improved training for CFS workers and supervisors with respect to minimum standards and strict adherence to workforce qualifications standards to ensure quality case management across service providers

These findings and recommendations reinforce the necessity of professional regulation of social work in the province of Manitoba. In her report, Ms. Penrose appropriately refers to social service practitioners in general terms as many child and family services (CFS) workers, addictions services workers and probation officers are *not* Social Workers. [The Social Work Profession Act](#) (*"the Act"*) indicates that *"no person except a social worker who holds a current certificate of practice shall represent or hold out, expressly or by implication, that he or she is a practicing social worker or is entitled to engage in the practice of social work as a social worker"*.

The provincial government as an employer and funder does not currently require professional regulation for those qualified and eligible to be registered as Social Workers. In fact, many social service agencies, including government, have changed position titles of employees formerly known as "Social Workers" to "CFS Workers" or other variations of title in order to avoid regulation. This has resulted in public confusion and lack of trust regarding the qualifications and practice standards of unregistered practitioners providing service to vulnerable children and families.

The Workforce Qualifications identified in [Standard 1.8.1 of the Child and Family Services Standards](#)¹ indicates that hiring criteria for CFS workers includes a social work degree from an accredited university. Given their scope of practice, academic training and general representation, it is also clear that the public perceives CFS workers to be “Social Workers”. The public has a right to assume that when they receive services that are provided by a practitioner required to have a social work degree and functioning within the scope of social work practice, that the practitioner is registered and accountable to their professional regulatory body and to the public. It is not reasonable for government employees and public servants to operate outside the very regulatory framework of public protection and oversight that was established by the provincial government through its own Act. Despite claims of implementing all of the recommendations of the [Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry](#)² report, the government continues to ignore Commissioner Hughes’ recommendation that *The Social Work Profession Act* be amended to require anyone who practices social work in Manitoba, under any title, to be registered with the Manitoba College of Social Workers.

Registered Social Workers have met qualification standards and are required to adhere to recognized national and provincial standards of practice, ethical conduct and ongoing learning to maintain their registration. Better outcomes for families depend on working collaboratively, completing accurate, culturally sensitive risk assessments and understanding how to effectively develop and implement safety plans that mitigate risk and involve extended family and community. Given the critical role of social service workers to provide skilled assessment, planning and intervention with vulnerable populations, it is essential that Manitoba’s social service system include the skilled, regulated services of Registered Social Workers as qualified practitioners committed to achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

As highlighted by Ms. Penrose, “CFS workers have an obligation to deliver services that meet standards, supervisors have the responsibility to ensure their workers are meeting those expectations and so the chain of accountability connects, from agency, to authority, to CFS Division and ultimately, to the Minister of Families”. As an employer and funder of social services, the government has a responsibility to ensure quality services for children, youth and families in our province. The skilled, regulated services of professional, registered Social Workers is a key component of what has been missing in the social services system in Manitoba. It is time for government to address this gap.

In closing, the College acknowledges the many agencies that have demonstrated a commitment to safe, competent and ethical practice by requiring all eligible employees providing service within the scope of social work practice to be registered, regardless of position title. The College also commends the many individual Social Workers currently employed by government and other social service agencies that do not require registration who maintain their registration with the College in demonstration of their commitment to public accountability, ethics and excellence in social work.



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¹ Manitoba Government. Child and Family Services Standards Manual. Volume 1, Chapter 8

² The Legacy of Phoenix Sinclair: Achieving the Best for All Our Children. Hon. Ted Hughes, O.C., Q.C., LL.D. (Hon), Commissioner. December 2013