

# Remarks of Jan Reimer,

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### Remarks to the Ministerial Panel on Child Welfare

June 22, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Alongside neglect, domestic violence is the one of the largest contributory factors in cases dealt with by Children's Services, relating to 34% of cases— and we know that domestic violence is under-reported.

Here in Edmonton, the police respond to a domestic violence call on average every hour. Newspaper reports tell us that this is what happened in the case that generated this review:

Serenity's mother called police because she was assaulted; child welfare became involved.

I wonder if Serenity's case might have looked different if she and her Mother had been able to go to a well-funded second-stage women's shelter or find a long-term housing solution in which she could heal and recover from domestic abuse, with appropriate supports in place? Or perhaps she would have been one of the women reluctant to seek safety and supports in a woman's shelter because of her fears relating to child apprehension?

In many cases women stay in violent and abusive relationships just so they can remain with their kids. We have a huge problem to solve together. This is why your work here is so timely.

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters has 41 member organisations with 51 shelters across the province. Each day these Shelters support hundreds of women and children dealing with domestic violence.

Speaking to you today I want to bring the perspective of these shelters to bear on your work:

Firstly, by talking about the devastating impact that the current system and community support mechanisms have on the survivors of domestic violence— children and their mothers;

Secondly, by sharing experiences that demonstrate how we can make a difference when we take a different approach to our work; and

Finally, to place some recommendations on the table which we believe can lay the groundwork to support generations of children to come.

Everyone here shares a common concern: how do we ensure that Alberta's children are protected and given the resources they require to flourish in our society?

We already have legislation designed to hold the protection of the child at a higher level of duty than any other— requiring anyone in the community with a suspicion of harm to a child to report their suspicions. *So why is the system still not working?*

Last year, ACWS conducted regional and provincial consultations with representatives from Women's Shelters, Police, Children's Services, the Justice System and community agencies focusing on how to keep women and children safe. We also conducted an extensive literature review of academic work in the field. Last week, in preparation for this meeting, we conducted a focus group with 25 shelter directors from every part of the Province.

From these processes we learned that systems are most effective at keeping women and children safe when they are able to:

- Employ a woman-focused, trauma and violence informed approach, that believes and supports Mothers;
- Hold abusers accountable for their criminal behaviours and for the impact they have upon children who are also in the relationship;
- Institutionalize cooperation across government departments, with women's shelters and other community service partners involved at the system and local levels.

In essence, what emerged from our wide-ranging consultations was the need for an evidence-based understanding of how systems can, and must, change their approaches to service delivery in order to keep women and children safe.

Since 1983, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters and our member organizations have shifted from a place where we sought to keep women safe, and children simply came with their mothers. While children's safety and well-being is still inextricably tied to that of their mothers, today's shelters welcome as many children as they do women and sheltering services include trauma and violence informed programs for children, child-counselling services and childcare.

Although Women's Shelters have engaged with Children's Services for many years, we are still operating in a context where mothers are often blamed when their children witness their abuse. This is why women are often reluctant to seek help from police and other agencies.

Many stories we heard illustrated this but I would like to share just one with you today:

A Shelter Director spoke of a resident of the shelter who had fled from a relationship of physical and emotional abuse. In this case, the woman's husband admitted to the abuse and to the physical abuse of their two children. Yet, despite this, Children's Services organized a plan that kept the children in the family home with their abusive father, with supervision from his family. On alternate weeks, the woman's family was required to drive from 3 hours away to stay in the home with her and her children during her week of care.

This plan was a real struggle for the woman who did not have as much family support as her husband. When she eventually filed for divorce, she was told that she would need to have supervised care of the children in the family home while her abusive husband was given full, unsupervised access to the children.

So many questions arise from this one story:

- How is it in the best interests of the children to stay with the father who abused them, while being separated from their mother?
- Why was the abusive father allowed to stay in the family home while the woman sought refuge in a shelter?

Sadly, stories like this are all too common. They occur because of a mindset that misunderstands abuse as something between two equal partners when we know abuse is what happens when one partner uses physical and emotional power to control the other.

Numerous offences under the criminal code constitute domestic violence: assault; kidnapping and forcible confinement, sexual assault, disobeying court orders, criminal harassment and stalking, uttering threats, making indecent and harassing phone calls, trespass, mischief; failure to provide necessities of life, theft, extortion, forgery, fraud.

*We know that 7 in 10 people who experience family violence are women and girls.*

The impact of Domestic Violence on children is enormous. The violence becomes stored as trauma in their bodies and prevents them from learning, from playing and from

living a full and rounded life, sowing the seeds for many problems in future years– all of which also have a social cost.

41% of children in shelter are known to have either previous or current child welfare involvement. They enter Alberta's women's shelters with a range of issues that impact their mental health.

Most commonly they exhibit a range of acting out behaviours including aggression, separation anxiety and poor social interactions. For some, these behaviours diminish to an extent after a period of time in shelter, but for others more significant intervention is needed. Many children have symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders.

During our focus group with Shelter Director's many of them reported how women were forced to go to couple's counselling or mediation with their abuser before they could get custody of their children.

Can you imagine a Judge ordering an elderly man who has been robbed and beaten to sit down and engage in counselling with the perpetrator of the crime? We would not tolerate it if the parents of someone who died from a Fentanyl overdose were compelled by a court order to sit down with the person who had sold their child the very drugs that killed them and tell them to work it all out. And there would, understandably, be an outcry if the victim of a drunk driver had her driving licence removed?

And yet, we hear stories every day indicating that victims are not believed and not protected.

*We have tolerated this for too long and the time is long past for change.*

Distinguished members of the Panel:

I want to take a few moments to reflect on some of that work and of the possibilities that do exist to transform the safety of our children.

In the past number of years ACWS has conducted a number of projects that examine best practices for keeping women and children safe. In 2012 we co-created a program called 'Walking the Path Together' with five women's shelters located on-reserve. The program was designed to be in harmony with the gifts, history and vision of First Nations peoples.

The project took place over the span of five years. This careful, child-centred, and culturally sensitive approach was essential in creating the successes of the project.

Over two years we reached out to 300 Indigenous children, including 67 six and seven year olds, and their siblings. The results of this work were remarkable:

- 82 children were prevented from entering government care;

- 24 of the primary caregivers returned to school or became employed;
- Exposure to violence was reduced for half of the six and seven year old participants;
- 70% of the caregivers were ready to take action, seek help and stay safe.

Overall the Social Return on Investment was calculated at \$5.42 for every \$1 invested. This approach offers the Province the potential for a massive saving. The project demonstrated that when we take real care, when we invest time in deep reflection and meaningful partnership and when we place women and children at the heart of our efforts then we can have an impact. But this approach is some distance away from where we find ourselves today.

In order to help us move there together I have some recommendations to make to the Committee:

1. Child intervention should be guided by fundamental approaches that are:
  - a. Decolonized;
  - b. Woman-centred;
  - c. Human rights based;
  - d. Trauma and violence informed; and
  - e. Domestic violence aware.

We must put in place supports for the Mother to enhance her existing child protection strategies rather than placing the Mother under threat of child apprehension.

2. Recognize the value of provincial and regional co-ordinating bodies which include representatives from both government and community. Successful co-ordination is grounded in active protocols that staff are aware of and which are living documents.
3. Standardized training on the impact of domestic violence for all child welfare workers, which along with a gendered analysis, must include the experiences and knowledge of staff from Women's Shelters who are on the front line of child protection services.
4. We must recognise past mistakes, create the space to prevent past mistakes becoming future reality and, in so doing, examine the extent to which Children's Services are at all equipped to deal with cases of child neglect in an Indigenous context.

5. We must take immediate action to drastically increase funding which goes to Indigenous children's services, including schools, shelters and other social supports. Year after year, government after government, we implore the federal government to increase funding for our sisters delivering shelter programs on-reserve who are always in a perennial state of trying to catch-up with funding levels off reserve. This has created a two-tier system.

Eighteen years ago I was involved on a provincial committee examining the growth in child welfare cases. The resulting report, called *Connecting the Dots* examined many of the same issues you are examining today. And yet, here we are, with many of the same issues still on our doorstep. When we de-fund successful programs, when we underfund the education of children on-reserve, when we neglect the very rights that make us human then we are sowing the seeds of difficulty, and financial cost, for generations to come.

Good intentions are insufficient: we need to understand the failure of society and the structures that have brought us to this place and be willing to overhaul those structures in partnership with community groups and other experts in the field.

A balanced society will create the right conditions for a balanced budget. If balancing the books comes at the cost of programs that can support our children in realizing their common dreams, then we are simply moving the costs to future generations and denying them the right to a better future and to bigger dreams.

Thank you.

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