

Alberta reveals hundreds more children died while receiving provincial care

Roundtable to review deaths in foster care

BY KAREN KLEISS, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 9, 2014



A father, who can only be identified as Merle, visits the grave site of his infant daughter at the Paul First Nation. She died while in foster care and the parents are suing the government for \$1 million.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser, Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - The Alberta government admitted for the first time Wednesday that 741 children and teens who were known to child welfare authorities have died since 1999.

Newly appointed Human Services Minister Manmeet Bhullar pledged to lift the veil of secrecy that has for decades protected Alberta's child welfare system from meaningful public scrutiny.

"This is a first step. I wanted to do it, get it out, get it open, and commit to a level of transparency we have not seen before, and then focus on every single child that we can do something better for," Bhullar said.

"We need this data to be public. We need data so we can address emerging issues and trends. We need data so that various government departments and agencies can come together and ensure that we're doing the best thing possible for the most vulnerable."

The release comes six weeks after the Edmonton Journal and Calgary Herald published a joint investigation that revealed 145 children died in care between January 1999 and June 2013.

The province on Wednesday released the total number of child welfare deaths between January 1999 and September 2013, including children who died in care (149), those who were receiving services at home with their families (84), children who were subject to a safety investigation when they died (41), young people who died after graduating from the system (50) and kids whose child welfare files were closed at the time of death (291).

The province also revealed that 60 children died during investigations that were started after they were injured in parental care, and 66 children died without ever having come to the attention of the minister — even though their siblings or parents were already involved with child welfare authorities.

Until Wednesday, the only information the Alberta government published about child welfare deaths was one or two paragraphs buried in each annual report. Between 1999 and 2013, those reports showed a total of 56 deaths.

Bhullar said the province has invited hundreds of organizations and individuals to take part in a two-day roundtable in Edmonton on Jan. 28 and 29. The event will consider ways to increase transparency, improve the child-death review system and make information about deaths public without compromising privacy rights. It will be live-streamed online.

The Journal-Herald investigation revealed that Alberta's child-death review system is rife with duplication and shrouded in secrecy; on Wednesday, Bhullar pledged to overhaul that system even if doing so means rewriting Alberta laws.

His goal, he said, is "to ensure that we develop the strongest most robust review in Canada, and use the best practices available."

Bhullar said he will co-chair the committee of Canadian Ministers Responsible for Social Services and will urge other provinces to release similar data and to create a national child-death review system.

"I think it is important that the scope of this roundtable include the death of every child in Alberta, not just those in the child intervention system," he said. "We need to learn from them, because we need to prevent as many as we can, across the board — not just with children who are in care."

Bhullar also promised to review a publication ban that prohibits families from speaking publicly about a child who has died in care, and bars news organizations from publishing names and photographs of those children.

"I must stress, I'm not a fan of the way the law sits today," Bhullar said.

The Journal-Herald investigation also revealed that dozens of fatality inquiries and internal Special Case Reviews have resulted in hundreds of recommendations, none of which have been tracked or monitored for implementation.

Acknowledging this, Bhullar said: "We don't need more reviews, we need to accelerate action on recommendations that have been identified without losing sight of what is most important."

He has appointed five people to sit on an "implementation team" that will review all of the

recommendations and create a priority list: Dr. Lionel Dibden — a highly respected Edmonton pediatrician and chair of Alberta's quality assurance council; McGill University social work professor Nico Trocme; Calgary deputy police chief Trevor Daroux; and Tim Richter, president and CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness.

Bhullar is awaiting confirmation from the fifth member, a judge.

In an interview with the Journal, Bhullar also committed to posting all of the recommendations online so the public can see what steps have been taken to implement them.

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