

# Simons: Do province's admissions signal a child welfare revolution?

BY PAULA SIMONS, EDMONTON JOURNAL    JANUARY 9, 2014



Human Services Minister Manmeet Bhullar speaks about the next steps for improving the child welfare system on Wednesday, Jan. 8, 2013.

**Photograph by:** Bruce Edwards, Edmonton Journal

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EDMONTON - Four years ago, my colleague Karen Kleiss asked a simple question.

How many children in Alberta had died, either while in foster care or after they had come to the attention of the child welfare system?

No one in the Alberta government would tell her. No one, it eventually emerged, could tell her. The government not only refused to release the data, citing its own sweeping confidentiality rules. It wasn't actually tracking the numbers.

Last year, after an arduous legal battle, the province finally released a limited number of heavily redacted documents to the Edmonton Journal: the death records of all the children who had died in foster care between 1999 and June 2013. The number, 145, seemed shocking enough, given the province had only made official public note of 56 of those deaths.

But Wednesday, some six weeks after the joint Edmonton Journal/Calgary Herald Fatal Care series was published, the province finally responded to the second half of Karen's request. It finally revealed its total number of deaths of children who were "known to Human Services": children whose homes

were under active investigation, children who weren't in care but who had open child welfare files, children who had been in care but whose files had been closed, children who didn't have open files but whose siblings or teenage parents did, teens and young adults who died soon after "aging out" of the child welfare system. These were all kids and youth, that is, who had some kind of previous or ongoing contact with Alberta's child welfare system.

The true total is a kick to the gut, the kind that leaves you winded: 741 deaths between Jan. 1, 1999 and Sept. 30, 2013, including the 145 fatalities the Journal reported late last year.

That means 596 children and youth whose deaths were never before officially acknowledged or counted in any annual report or child welfare study.

Some died very public deaths, as high-profile murder victims. Some died quietly, of completely natural causes or simple accidents. But because the province wasn't counting or analyzing those deaths, it wasn't formulating public policy to prevent more deaths in the future. There's no way to know how many of those children might still be alive if their files hadn't been closed, if they'd been taken into care sooner.

Yet horrifying as that revelation is, the very fact the government made it is cause for hope.

For years, the province had insisted this information must be kept secret. The previous minister, David Hancock, had called the number of unacknowledged deaths statistically insignificant, and derided the Journal/Herald series, saying its revelations were "not news."

At his first major press conference as minister of human services, Manmeet Bhullar set an extraordinarily different tone. His voice breaking at times, he stressed that these 741 victims weren't numbers but real children. He vowed to continue to make the data public and to turn the death records over to outside academic experts to analyze for trends and patterns.

"I strongly believe that better and more data leads to better decision-making" said Bhullar.

His philosophy?

"Put it out. Be honest," he said. "So I'm putting it out there. Make it available. Learn from it."

Bhullar is promising a comprehensive, transparent roundtable on child welfare reform, to be live-streamed online. He's appointed a blue-ribbon panel of experts to comb through hundreds of long-ignored recommendations from children's advocates and fatality inquiries, and cherry pick the best. He's pledged a review of the province's draconian Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, which cloaks child welfare cases in an absurd and dangerous degree of secrecy.

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

After the years of secrecy, obfuscation and refusal to acknowledge the truth, Bhullar's attitude is as refreshing as it is promising. If he actually follows through, it could mark a radical, revolutionary shift in the way the province cares for children at risk and make Alberta a national leader in child welfare reform. Bhullar, 33, doesn't have Hancock's political experience or intellectual gravitas. But as a

member of the digital generation, he seems to have a better grasp of the power of data and the limitations of privacy for its own sake.

It remains to be seen whether Bhullar's round table will be anything more than political theatre. But for the first time we can finally see the problem. Now perhaps we can begin to solve it.

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