

Children under government care are dying

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By Dr. Gordon Guyatt

(Spectator headline: Casualties of government cutbacks)

On September 7, 1996, 16 year old James Lonee was beaten to death by another youth inmate while confined in a segregation cell in a detention centre in Guelph.

On June 17, 1998, 13 year old Stephanie Jobin died of suffocation while she was being physically restrained by a two workers at her Brampton group home.

On July 2, 2001, 14 year old Paola Rosales hanged herself in a detention centre in Milton. Paola had been living in a foster home until shortly before her death.

These 3 were among the approximately 17,000 Ontario children and youth in foster homes, group homes, mental health centres and young offender institutions for whom the government is, in effect, the responsible parent.

They are among the 7 children under government care who have died questionable deaths since the Conservatives took office in 1995. There were no such deaths in the prior 18 years.

Five of the 7 deaths led to inquests that have made a total of 286 recommendations intended to prevent further deaths. Rather than addressing the problems that led to these tragedies, the Ontario government is doing its best to make sure the public doesn't hear about the problems.

For the last 13 years Judy Finlay has been Chief of the Advocacy Office. Finlay's office is charged with ensuring the government fulfils its responsibilities to the children under its care. Historically, the Advocacy Office, which is located within the Ministry of Community, Family and Children's Services, has enjoyed an arms-length relationship with the Ministry of Health.

That relationship is under threat. Finlay reports that the government is demanding that she present a plan of the issues she wants to tackle. They are insisting on final say in possible investigations that might implicate the government. Government officials would sign off on any reports or press releases from her office.

The Tories have a lot to hush up. In June of this year, Matthew Geigen-Miller, representing a group called Defence for Children International, released a report that documented the failings of the government in protecting the youngsters under its care.

The Child Advocate's \$1 million budget has remained static even as her caseload has doubled. There are just 11 advocates to deal with 4,000 cases of questionable treatment every year.

That staffing level, which Geigen-Miller describes as “dangerously low”, ranks last in the six provinces with available information. Newfoundland has four times as many advocates per child as Ontario.

The report was particularly critical of restrictions on the Advocacy Office’s ability to communicate with children in care, or with the public. The Advocacy Office is not allowed a dedicated website, cannot make annual public reports, has no staff dedicated to communication, and cannot distribute material alerting children that help is available.

In terms of communication, Ontario ranks last among the eight provinces with advocacy offices.

The most critical of the communication problems are restrictions on production of brochures and posters telling children that they can contact the Advocacy Office.

Ms. Finlay, the report tells us, “has testified under oath that the government has stopped permitting the Advocacy Office to produce these materials. On this point the government is not only significantly out of step with the norms of operation of Advocacy Offices within Canada, it is in contravention of its own law.”

Treatment of children under government care is a health issue. Neglect in foster homes threatens children’s mental and physical health. Use of physical restraint and force in group homes and mental health facilities

can cause serious injury. As the five coroner's inquest juries pointed out, the Ontario deaths represent the worst consequences of maltreatment that children in foster and institutional care regularly suffer.

Geigen-Miller's report recommends that Ms. Finlay receive more resources and that the Child Advocate, like the provincial Auditor, become an independent officer of the legislature.

Don't hold your breath. The Tory provincial government isn't known for its generosity to vulnerable and voiceless groups. Poverty, homelessness, and hunger have negative health consequences. The Conservatives have cut welfare payments and done little to address the crisis in low-income housing. The results include increasing dependence on temporary shelters and food banks.

The Tories are effective in silencing critical voices that advocate for the vulnerable. In June of 2001, the publicly elected boards of the 43 Ontario Community Care Access Centers banded together to tell the province that without funding increases, major cuts in home care were inevitable.

The funding increases didn't come through, and home care recipients saw major service cuts. The government abolished the elected boards and replaced them with their own appointed representatives. The boards have been quiet since.

Can the Tories change their approach, and support a stronger, more independent Advocacy Office? Or will it take a new government to ensure that vulnerable children in government care don't disappear from view?