

First Session – Forty-Third Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
Standing Committee
on
Legislative Affairs

Chairperson
Mr. Tyler Blashko
Constituency of Lagimodière

Vol. LXXVIII No. 5 - 8 a.m., Friday, May 3, 2024

ISSN 1708-668X

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Third Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ALTOMARE, Nello, Hon.	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma, Hon.	Union Station	NDP
BALCAEN, Wayne	Brandon West	PC
BEREZA, Jeff	Portage la Prairie	PC
BLASHKO, Tyler	Lagimodière	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian, Hon.	Keewatinook	NDP
BYRAM, Jodie	Agassiz	PC
CABLE, Renée, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
CHEN, Jennifer	Fort Richmond	NDP
COOK, Kathleen	Roblin	PC
CROSS, Billie	Seine River	NDP
DELA CRUZ, Jelynn	Radisson	NDP
DEVGAN, JD	McPhillips	NDP
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
HIEBERT, Carrie	Morden-Winkler	PC
JACKSON, Grant	Spruce Woods	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
KENNEDY, Nellie	Assiniboia	NDP
KHAN, Obby	Fort Whyte	PC
KINEW, Wab, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
KING, Trevor	Lakeside	PC
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom, Hon.	Flin Flon	NDP
LOISELLE, Robert	St. Boniface	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya, Hon.	Notre Dame	NDP
MOROZ, Mike	River Heights	NDP
MOSES, Jamie, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
MOYES, Mike	Riel	NDP
NARTH, Konrad	La Vérendrye	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa, Hon.	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
OXENHAM, Logan	Kirkfield Park	NDP
PANKRATZ, David	Waverley	NDP
PERCHOTTE, Richard	Selkirk	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REDHEAD, Eric	Thompson	NDP
SALA, Adrien, Hon.	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHMIDT, Tracy, Hon.	Rossmere	NDP
SCHOTT, Rachelle	Kildonan-River East	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SIMARD, Glen, Hon.	Brandon East	NDP
SMITH, Bernadette, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
STONE, Lauren	Midland	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	NDP
WHARTON, Jeff	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt, Hon.	Concordia	NDP
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC
<i>Vacant</i>	Tuxedo	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

Friday, May 3, 2024

TIME – 8 a.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Tyler Blashko (Lagimodière)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Logan Oxenham (Kirkfield Park)

ATTENDANCE – 6 QUORUM – 4

Members of the committee present:

Hon. Min. Fontaine

*Mr. Blashko, Mrs. Hiebert, MLA Kennedy,
Mr. Oxenham, Mrs. Stone*

APPEARING:

Cindy Lamoureux, MLA for Tyndall Park

PUBLIC PRESENTERS:

*Nettie Lambert, private citizen
Tamara Thomson, private citizen
Ray Lambert, private citizen
Sariviea Ellsworth, private citizen
Jennifer Friesen, private citizen
Jamie Pfau, private citizen
Kevin Pfau, private citizen
Brittany Bannerman, private citizen
Julie-Ann Rich, private citizen
Pat Yakielashek, private citizen*

WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS:

*Mackenzie Winiasz, private citizen
Deborah Flynn, private citizen
Bodi Milljour, private citizen
Phoenix Bishop, private citizen
Tara Summerfield, private citizen
Marina Twoheart, private citizen
Shanlee Scott, Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc.
Barbara Parke, private citizen
Michelle Ans, private citizen
Mary Jane McCallum, Senator, Senate of Canada*

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

*The Advocate for Children and Youth Act
(Public Presentations)*

* * *

Clerk Assistant (Ms. Katerina Tefft): Good morning. Will the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs please come to order.

Before we begin, I would like to inform the committee that I have received a letter from Mr. Blashko resigning as Vice-Chairperson of this committee.

Our first item of business is the election of a Chairperson. Are there any nominations?

Hon. Nahanni Fontaine (Minister of Families): I'd like to nominate MLA Blashko as Chair.

Clerk Assistant: Mr. Blashko has been nominated. Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, Mr. Blashko, will you please take the Chair.

The Chairperson: Our next item of business is the election of a Vice-Chairperson. Are there any nominations?

MLA Fontaine: I'd like to nominate MLA Oxenham as Vice-Chair.

The Chairperson: MLA Oxenham has been nominated. Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, MLA Oxenham is elected Vice-Chairperson.

This meeting has been called to continue consideration of the five-year review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act. As a reminder, on March 4, 2024, the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs agreed to the following:

THAT, as per section 40 of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs conduct a comprehensive review of the act as follows:

- (a) The committee will firstly call the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth as a witness to provide her recommendations and answer questions.
- (b) The committee will secondly hear public presentations on the act. Any member of the public may register and registrations will be accepted for 10 days after the committee

report of this meeting is presented to the House. Public presentations will be up to 10 minutes long, followed by up to five minutes for questions and answers with MLAs.

- (c) Written submissions to the committee from members of the public will be accepted until the committee has completed hearing public presentations.
- (d) After the Standing Committee has completed steps (a) through (c), a committee report will be presented to the House that contains all recommendations from the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, a list of all public presenters and all written submissions received.

Furthermore, on April 26, 2024, the committee also agreed to the following:

THAT the deadline for written submissions to the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act from members of the public be extended to 4:30 p.m. on May 24, 2024, with the understanding that this would delay the presentation of the committee's final report to the House.

Accordingly, this meeting has been called to hear public presentations.

I would like to inform all in attendance of the provisions in our rules regarding the hour of adjournment. A standing committee must not sit past midnight to hear public presentations, except by unanimous consent of the committee.

Here are the public presentation guidelines: so prior to proceeding with public presentations, I would like to advise members of the public regarding the process for speaking in the committee. A time limit of 10 minutes has been allotted for presentations, with another five minutes allotted for questions from committee members. Questions shall not exceed 30 seconds in length, with no limit for answers.

If a presenter is not in attendance when their name is called, they will be dropped to the bottom of the list. If the presenter is not in attendance when their name is called a second time, they will be removed from the presenters list.

The proceedings of our meetings are recorded in order to provide a verbatim transcript. Each time someone wishes to speak, whether it be an MLA or a presenter, I first have to say the person's name. This is

the signal for the Hansard recorder to turn the microphones on and off.

On the topic of determining the order of presentations, I will note that we do have out-of-town presenters in attendance, some of whom are in person and some of whom are virtual.

With this consideration in mind, in what order does the committee wish to hear the presentations?

MLA Fontaine: As is practice, out-of-town presenters can go first.

The Chairperson: I see—it has been proposed that out-of-town presenters can present first.

Is the committee in agreement? [*Agreed*]

So with that, out-of-town presenters will present first.

Thank you for your patience. We will now proceed with public presentations.

So I will now call on Ms. Val Chivers.

Ms. Val Chivers?

Okay, so she'll be dropped to the bottom of the list. She'll have an opportunity later.

Ms. Natasha Soucie?

No? Okay. Ms. Natasha Soucie will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Tamara Thomson?

Tamara Thomson will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Mrs. Nettie Lambert? Mrs. Nettie Lambert, please proceed with your presentation.

Nettie Lambert (Private Citizen): To the members of the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs: Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns. My name is Nettie Lambert. Together with my husband, Ray, we have been foster parents for—with Métis for 17 years. Over the years, we have had 12 foster children, two of which are still with us.

Most of these children came to us at birth. As new foster parents, we were never told we could ask for additional resources, support monies, respite funding or a service fee. We had been fostering for three years when a worker asked us why we never had a break or submitted paperwork for reimbursement. This should be part of all foster parent orientation and training.

Our first foster child came to us at birth. Our licence was still in the mail. She was a sweet child. When she was 18 months old, her worker asked us if we would like to adopt her. Our answer was, of course. She then said they would see if there was any bio family first. Within one month, she was moved to bio family. We will never try for adoption again. Our foster children can adopt us when they are of age.

I work closely with bio families for the boys in our home to ensure they stay connected as well as learn their culture. JB has regular visits with his kokum, mosôm, bio mom, sister and brother, as well as multiple cousins.

J has visits with his younger brother R, who, until August 2022, was in our care until a placement breakdown. Placement breakdown is every foster parent's worst nightmare. R came to us at birth because we had his older brother. At the tender age of three, he started acting up aggressively in daycare. He was asked to leave the daycare.

* (08:10)

Two years later, he started kindergarten, and he destroyed the classrooms repeatedly over the years into grade 4. He hit his peers to the point where the children were afraid of him. He was also hitting the teachers and EAs. During the second half of grade 4, the school division stepped in after a teacher went on stress leave for abuse. The division decided to put pay for R to attend Marymount the following year.

Throughout the years, I had advocated for R, as well as our family, to get better supports in place. The pleas for foster—for support went unheard. R was happier at Marymount because they were equipped to handle high-needs children.

During this period, R was diagnosed with FASD and severe behavioural issues. The home environment continued to deteriorate. R started taking things that did not belong to him, including going through cars and taking any money he could find. He ran away multiple times, and the RCMP needed to be called. All our sharps needed to be locked up as he repeatedly threatened anybody close to him that would—he would cut off their heads and watch them die.

In early August 2022, R broke into his friend's house and stole all his toys and all the money he could find, which was approximately \$200. Police were once again called, and they were the ones who told us that, at the age of nine, this was just the start and that we should get more support or have him removed.

With supports still not forthcoming, we made the difficult decision to have him removed. He stayed at the next house for only 10 short days before threatening the adults in that home. They called the police, and R threatened them, who then called for backup. Four officers restrained him and took him to Winnipeg from Selkirk. He is now under new direction in a group home in Winnipeg.

At the age of 12, he is refusing to attend school. We have had difficulty planning visits, as there are not enough support workers that CFS can hire. I suggested they could hire me to watch the two boys have their visit once a month to maintain their relationship. Metis CFS has declined this offer.

JB is with another agency. For years, he was approved for 15 hours a week of a support. That agency hires their support workers, and they would get a new one after only a few sessions. Then years passed with no new support workers at—JB's workers kept changing. When JB threatened to commit suicide at school, we finally received funding for a counsellor as well as a support worker.

Although some weeks, we only see his support worker for three hours, it is that—better than what we were getting. Every time he has support hours, we, as foster parents, are expected to send money to cover entrance fees for activities and/or food. This uses up most of, if not all of, the basic daily maintenance for that day, which is only \$22.11.

Throughout my experience with the child-welfare system, I have been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care. During my tenure as a specialized home, I have been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the Province of Manitoba has for foster parents.

Furthermore, it has been beyond disheartening to learn about the many unnecessary tragedies that have taken place as a direct result of an underfunded child-welfare system. A 17-year-old child, Myah-Lee, was murdered. She was murdered while in the care of Child and Family Services. The agency ignored many warnings from Myah-Lee's birth family regarding the violence of the person who eventually murdered their loved one. In a separate incident, a 14-year-old girl was murdered in downtown Winnipeg almost immediately after being released from custody.

These children were murdered because there are no placement options for vulnerable children. This is a symptom of a system being so underfunded that

foster parents are forced to shut down their homes. This not only leaves children vulnerable, but it provides opportunities for non-profit agencies to take advantage of the system. As a recent example, Spirit Rising House was owned and operated as for-a-profit company who was providing marijuana to children in their homes for several years without any accountability.

We have heard Minister Fontaine and Premier Kinew discuss their focus on reunifications. We, as foster parents, vehemently support successful reunification. Supporting successful reunification requires time and space to build capacity and for families and communities to heal.

This takes time. With 10,000 children and youth in care, 90 per cent of them being Indigenous, reunification does not happen overnight. We are concerned about what is happening in CFS today, tomorrow and the near future.

We are concerned about the welfare of the children we all care about and have cared for for years. Being so heavily involved in the child-welfare system as foster parents, we have solutions.

Proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care: an immediate increase in support for foster parents; an increase in the basic maintenance and fee-for-service rates and a pre-service foster parent training program; consistency across all four authorities; consistent fees for service according to a levelling system; front-line workers being required to have social work degrees who are registered, and open and honest communications with foster parents; prevent unnecessary child apprehensions; prioritize a collaborative working environment that encourages preventative support instead of apprehending children; and preventing unnecessary apprehensions will lessen the burden on child welfare workers, who often have well beyond the recommended number of cases.

These solutions are just a few of the recommendations cited in multiple reports from the Auditor General, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth and the Canadian association of worker-social workers.

Based on research, community leaders and recommendations, we know what has to be done. We truly hope this government is willing to make the necessary changes to promote positive outcomes for children in care.

Respectfully, Nettie Lambert.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Do members of the committee have questions for the presenter?

MLA Fontaine: Good morning. Miigwech for your presentation and, more importantly, for all of the work and dedication and commitment that you have put in the last many, many years in respect of foster parents and foster parenting. I've said it before previously, that is doing very sacred work. So I lift you up for that work and I say miigwech to you for that work.

In respect of the MACY legislation, are there particular legislative changes that you would like to see to the MACY act?

N. Lambert: Sorry. That's a good question. I'm super, super nervous being up here.

I'm not exactly sure how I would answer. The biggest thing would be our maintenance rate. I would like to see that addressed as soon as possible. At \$22.11, it's just not doable for most of us anymore to continue taking children in. As a matter of fact, my husband and I, we've closed our home to taking in any more children.

The Chairperson: And just a reminder to the committee, it's 30 seconds for questions, but there's no time limit for responses.

Mrs. Lauren Stone (Midland): Thank you, and thank you for coming here and for making that presentation, and to everyone who has come here this morning, 8 a.m.

I know as foster parents, it's a challenge to get here for this time with school starts and daycare drop-offs and things like that, and perhaps the minister can take that into consideration for the future.

You know, I just want to thank you for coming and making your presentation today, and it's very brave of you to speak up. And I know for everyone here today and also for those who are tuning in online, you're fearful for the children in your care. And so just thank you for taking the time and for speaking up.

You asked—you mentioned in your presentation about—

The Chairperson: Sorry, Ms. Stone. Your time is up.

I don't know—you're welcome to respond if you like, Ms. Nettie Lambert.

N. Lambert: Thank you. Thank you. Yes.

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): Thank you, Ms. Lambert, for your presentation and for coming

out this morning, and I just echo the thoughts that my colleagues have shared. It takes incredible courage to come out and be able to speak, and for the work that you've done with 12 foster children is incredible work. And I want to thank you, truly, for that work.

I appreciate the proposed solutions that you have brought forward. And my question for you is, as a foster parent, what is your relationship like with MACY, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth? Do you speak with them frequently? Do you receive literature from them? Just—if there is a relationship, what is it like? *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Sorry, Ms. Lambert. I just need to recognize you so that the Hansard can get the mic going.

N. Lambert: So our 15-year-old, after he said that he would commit suicide at school, like, over the week-end while at home, and he wouldn't be back at school the next week.

* (08:20)

That's when we contacted the child advocate, and they're the ones that helped us make sure that counselling and a support worker were put back in place. Since then—this was early February—since then, we have gone through three new support workers, and they've last—this last one has had—her fourth visit is today.

MLA Fontaine: I do want to just say that I really do appreciate—I've been in this role for six months, and I want to acknowledge and tell you that I've—I appreciate you sharing in respect of knowing what resources are actually available, and that certainly authorities probably need to do a better job at disseminating what those resources are.

So I want you to know that I've heard that, and I appreciate that.

The Chairperson: Ms. Lambert, if you'd care to respond?

N. Lambert: Yes. So when we were fostering for three years and didn't realize that there was respite and support available to us 17 years ago, and then it wasn't until I made the decision to go to every single training that Métis offered, and then people started—because we were in a group, other foster parents were like, well, what do you mean you don't get this? What do you mean you don't get that?

And it's not until we jelled as a group, and then I became one of the peer supporters for K-F-F-M-N,

which is the Manitoba Foster Family Network. And there, again, we—I was doing the presentation, I was doing the training. So many things, we need to work together as foster families so that we can get things moving, so other foster families will sign up.

There's so many children in care that are in group homes that don't need to be in group homes.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Mrs. Lambert; your time has expired. Yes. But thank you. We really appreciate all your contributions.

MLA Fontaine: Is there leave of the committee—we know that there's a sweet little baby here, and we all—well, those of us that have babies, we know how that is. And so is there leave to allow Mrs. Tamara Thomson to go next, just recognizing she has a little one with her?

The Chairperson: It's been proposed that Tamara Thomson go next. Is that—what's the will of the committee? *[Agreed]*

Tamara Thomson (Private Citizen): I should've taken a breath before this. Hi.

Before I even start, I want to say thank you for seeing us today. It's actually kind of funny; I question why we didn't come directly to you initially. But we got here, and that's all that matters. And I think that everybody here—should've brought Kleenex; oh, there's some—I think everybody here just wants the best for our kids.

My husband and I have been fostering for 14 years. We've had six kids come into our home and three are still there, and we also have a bonus older baby who never resided in our home other than when we shelter her when she needs it. She was also a kid who went through the system. And she was a kid who was failed.

I don't know what I want to see changed in the MACY act, but what I do want is to be able to support kids as long as they need us, and not have a timeline of 18 years old for certain types of therapies to end, or the ability to access supports.

I'm one of the lucky ones. We're a specialized home. We started off in a program that is no longer here, and switched to our kids' agency and now we're on with another one. During that time, I've seen some pretty great stuff and pretty crappy stuff.

Over the years, I've been suggested—I love how I bring stuff, but I'm not reading it—over the years, it's been suggested that we write our own program and go direct to the Province. And I was even told to look up

Spirit Rising as a model of—from a lot of people in positions of authority, with knowledge. And what I'm going to say about that is, I don't know what happened there, and I also don't know what happened with our agency, the uppers who I guess screwed things up.

But what I do know is when there is knee-jerk reactions, kids get hurt. Social workers and professionals will sit around a table and agree to things that, given that certain specific child or youth, and the issues they're dealing with, it makes sense for them.

And then all of a sudden, when stuff starts to fall, everybody backs away and said, but I didn't put it in writing. And that happened to me recently. A request was made for my daughter. Just try not to go too personal. And the moment I asked for it in writing I was told no, because the supervisor wouldn't support it. And I realized that I would have hung for that had I proceeded with what everybody, all the knowledgeable people with letters behind their names, agreed to at the table. But I was cautious and I didn't.

When kids are moved from situations which, yes, maybe that needs to happen, some real heavy thinking and planning needs to go in place. And so I hope that, in future, maybe we can do things like look at changing management, stepping in and keeping those things in place, but the powers that be that make the decisions, maybe there's more influence needed from government at that time.

But I question how many of the kids that have been moved have been re-traumatized once again. Because, our kids, it's easier to flip a table and say F you then it is to say I don't understand this, or I don't understand my feelings that are going on inside because people don't hear me.

Just recently my daughter has decided to give up on accessing her funds that she was supposed to access, her age-of-majority money, her CTB money. She was like, I just don't care any more. She turned 18, it was supposed to be a celebration. She's graduating, it was supposed to be a huge celebration.

And I find out that, after months of talking about it, now the family's not being supported to—the family that we love, like we—I love this family, too, like a ridiculous amount, and to be told that the family isn't going to be brought down for my daughter's grad, the first grad in her family—no transportation, no accommodations and she would have to pay out of her child tax benefit money, the plates for her family's dinner. And there's no way I would let that happen.

So now, a month and a half before she's supposed to graduate, I'm trying to figure out how to create something different, something that honours her. Because quite honestly, the education system doesn't respect or honour my children. The medical system isn't helping my children. When I look through MACY I seen, like, homelessness and all the different things that it's supposed to be responsible for, for advocating for.

Every area in our life has been impacted, specifically amongst the last four years. As a group, foster parents—well, I shouldn't speak for anybody else, because I've aligned myself with people before and been burnt. Our family took the whole COVID thing really hard, and we didn't have extra supports. As a matter of fact, most of our supports were taken away. Kids with extra needs, extra support needs needed in school, went from being at school every day to four hours a week for one—or sorry, four hours a day for one, one hour a week for another and nothing at all for my other daughter.

It's been suggested when I've called MACY and the Northern Authority and different places, you know, do your own program, or go for guardianship. That would be awesome.

* (08:30)

I would love to get the F out of my mother. I'd like to take the F out of my name—sorry. I just want to be a mom. I don't want to be a foster mom; I just want to be a mom because, as a foster parent, we are, like, a sub-class; like, we are money-grubbing; we are, like, all these really gross things that we're labelled with.

But I don't see the difference between me and a social worker. If I had the money or if I had the brain—because not that I'm stupid, but I have ADHD—and so this is amazing that I got up at 5:00 from—picked up and got here. I'm proud of myself for that alone.

But if I could have, I would have been a social worker, but I chose to have the kids come into my home, and for that reason it's like there's something wrong that we would want to be able to be compensated for that. I was just told—I was—I've been just falling apart lately—a hot mess. I realize I went from venting to trauma-dumping, and I hope to God to get to advocacy because I'm just tired of this. I've lost friends; I've lost family; I've lost a lot of respect for people. But it doesn't matter because the kids matter first and foremost.

We bought a farm a year and a half ago because we wanted to have a place where we could support our kids so that they could try their own little businesses,

work for us, so that we know that if somebody is rude to them in our store I could be like, hey, listen here, this is my kid, you don't talk like that. Right? And we fought. Like, I've been shamed for trying to open a business. Last year I was trying to open it. We had no support to speak of. And I was shamed for trying to do something. A worker recently told me that I should stop complaining and talking about our future plans. And all I could think is, but that's my—that's the kids' plan.

We bought our home so that my daughter, who—I wanted to bring her today. She's the most beautiful little girl. She's in a wheelchair. She doesn't talk. I didn't want her to go into a facility. I don't ever want her to be in a place where kids are screaming or yelling because they're dealing with their own trauma, and she is just traumatized over and over again. I wanted to create our farm as like this wheelchair-accessible fun place where families can come with their kids and they can have a full-on meltdown and it would be like, gotcha mom, like you go take a breather; I can step in.

My husband and I, we bought a tiny home for our girl here because we really want her to come live on our property. Being a kid in care, she didn't get the proper age-of-majority planning. She didn't get—I don't think she had proper assessments, and so now she's a young mom with two little beautiful babies who I love so much, and we're not allowed to have her on our property because of licensing.

So the problem is that even though you can have a family, even with CFS families not allowed to be together. I want to support them. I want to see them in the morning. I want the little guy to run in and give me a big hug in the morning. I want for them what I wanted for myself. The trauma that we endure as foster parents over and over again, even if we've done all of our work, which I've done a crap ton of work. I've spent thousands of hours and dollars on trying to work on this.

But when you see those things happening over and over again, it's a constant hit, and all those childhood traumas just bubble back up again.

I ask for you guys to look at things different. I ask for you to be—allow creativity in a system that's really rigid and tight and makes no sense. I'd like consistency among agencies. I feel guilt because I get extra, but I also know that if I didn't have that extra, I couldn't provide for my kids.

I just—please work with us. Let us help our kids and their families, even if that means that they'll live with me.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your presentation.

Do members of the committee have questions for the presenter?

MLA Fontaine: So first, miigwech for being here. I know that was probably a lot of work to get here, and so I really do appreciate you coming to share and so heartfelt, sharing everything that you've been journeying through. I lift you up for that really important work.

And I really appreciate, you know, the—in respect of the discussion on aging out of care. And so there are supports and agreements for folks aging out of care—sorry—have you done any of those? Thirty seconds is not a lot of—

The Chairperson: Sorry, Ms.—do you prefer Ms., Mrs. Tamara? [*interjection*] Okay.

T. Thomson: You would think that with all the things that are available, it should be easy, but it's a gong show. Fifteen and a half is when they're supposed to start doing the prep. My daughter started at 17 and a half. Consistently, things were shuffled and passed off. A lot of the—there was about \$1,100 that I was owed and the workers had switched. And my—when I'm talking to them about things, I'm like, oh, but I emailed about this. Stuff doesn't get passed on.

And even if, like, so you're talking about, like, aging out. If a kid takes himself off an AYA, they're done. And the reality is, is that at 18 I probably would have said take a hike too. Right? There's no recourse. And even all of these things that they say there are, I phoned MACY, I phoned the Northern Authority. I drove in. I saw somebody speaking in the Northern Authority conference. I drove from Seven Sisters just to shake somebody's hand to say thank you for helping me years ago.

Yes, you'd think it would be easier, but unfortunately, Ms. Fontaine, it is not easy at all. And what's even harder is trying to advocate for a child that's out of care, that nobody wants to give you their history, and you know that they need you. And there's no case management systems out there.

The Chairperson: Are there other questions from the committee?

Mrs. Carrie Hiebert (Morden-Winkler): Thank you so much for presenting today and for making the time and the effort and getting up early. I, like, I've been a foster parent, as well, and I grew up in a foster—my parents fostered, as well, so I've had that my whole

life. And it's a big thing, it's, like, your heart. So thank you.

My question about—you had mentioned that you need a specific kind of licensing or something for your adult child to come and stay and live on your property. Just, I just—question about what kind of—can you give us more information about that? *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Ms. Tamara Thomson.

T. Thomson: I even took my medication. My impulse control is not working today.

Yes, she—you know, a lot of us who have come through from hard places have some extra challenges. And so when you start dealing with the fallout of being a kid in care, and maybe that is addictions or, you know, other things that you have going on, all of a sudden there's barriers. And the reality is most of our families have not been—like, most of our families have been affected.

But the reason is, is because—well, there's no reason. Honestly, it's licensing. It's saying that one can be and one can't be. I do have to have a dual licence for my daughter who just turned 18. That hasn't happened yet, but even if I was to push and get everything to help the one person I'm trying to help right now, I also want to help the brother, when he's ready, and the sister. And so if I have to fight every time, I'm tired. Like, I'm a hot mess lately. I'm swearing at meetings, I look like this coming here today. Like, it's hard. It's really hard.

And if somebody knows a way, like, my God, tell me, because I would do anything for these kids.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you so much for your presentation.

And I just—it's more of a comment more than anything, but for reminding us and continuously throughout your presentation bringing it back to the children. That is ultimately why we are all here, why we hopefully can all work together. And I agree with you. I think we need to do more to work with foster parents here in the province of Manitoba.

I liked when you said, like, the F and the mom and can we separate that to some extent. And your farm, it's a beautiful image, the idea of having more and more children being able to go out to—and have those sort of experiences growing up, where you can get the support you need—

The Chairperson: Sorry, your time has expired.

But you are welcome to respond if you'd like for 13 seconds, Ms. Thomson.

T. Thomson: I really hope, I—no matter what, we're going ahead. We're opening our business next Friday. Whatever it's going to look like, it's going to look like. We'll get there.

Are you Ms. Lathlin? Are you Amanda? No. Where's Amanda? Is she here? No. I wanted to thank her for her bravery, for her comments.

* (08:40)

The Chairperson: We appreciate you for your presentation. Thank you so much.

Our next presenter will be Mr. Ray Lambert.

Ray Lambert (Private Citizen): Good morning. To the members of the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns.

My name is Ray Lambert. I've been a foster parent for 17 years. My wife Nettie and I started fostering in 2007, shortly after Nettie was diagnosed with a medical condition that would no longer allow us, or allow her, to become pregnant. We were devastated in knowing that our additional love in our hearts for a larger family couldn't fill that void.

Shortly after her diagnosis, we were watching the news on TV and there was a story about the need for more foster parents. So we looked at each other as were sitting on the couch. It was like a light bulb went on. We knew the timing of the news story was a sign, so we immediately contacted Métis CFS to inquire and quickly became foster parents.

I've been a member of the NDP in good standing for 24 years. I chose to join and continue to be a member because the NDP has historically been the party that fights for the little guy and is usually in line with what I believe is right.

When concerning the issue regarding foster parents, I feel the NDP is a bit off the mark. NDP claims that all Manitobans deserve to make a living wage and they demonstrated this by—with the announcement of the minimum wage increase, which will commence in October. My wife and I are licensed as specialised foster home, which means one of us cannot be working. Essentially, being a foster parent is a full-time job for one of us.

So a basic rate of \$22.11 is nowhere near a living wage. The wage that I make is barely enough to sup-

port my family as is. With inflation hitting us at unprecedented levels, we're losing more and more money every year. The rates that foster parents receive should at the very least keep up with inflation. We feel no appreciation for the important work that we do.

Recent comments made by Minister Fontaine in stating that foster parents are removing children from their parents as a form of white colonization, I feel were hurtful and insulting.

First of all, it's the Province, not the foster parents who makes a decision to place a child in foster care. Secondly, I'm not white, as Minister Fontaine implied of all foster parents. I'm proud to be Métis.

Many of us foster parents are also Indigenous. I feel that it was rude and wrong to racially profile all foster parents as white colonizers. Perhaps this government should consider sending Minister Fontaine for some kind of cultural sensitivity training.

The vast majority of foster parents love the children in our care and we try our best to keep the children connected to their tribal roots. Throughout my experience with the child-welfare system, I've been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care.

During my tenure, I've been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the Province of Manitoba provided for foster parents. Furthermore, it's beyond disheartening to learn about the many unnecessary tragedies that have taken place as a direct result of an underfunded child-welfare system. A 17-year-old child, Myah-Lee, was murdered—she was murdered while in the care of child family services. The agency ignored many warnings from her, her family, regarding the violence of the person who eventually murdered their loved one.

In a separate incident, a 14-year-old girl was murdered in downtown Winnipeg almost immediately after being released from custody. These children were murdered because there are no placement options for vulnerable children. This is a symptom of a system being so underfunded that foster parents are forced to shut down their homes.

This not only leaves children vulnerable, but it provides opportunities for profit agencies to take advantage of the system. As a recent example, Spirit Rising House was owned and operated for a profit company who was providing marijuana to children in their homes for several years without any accountability.

We've heard Minister Fontaine and Premier Kinew discuss their focus on reunifications. We as foster parents support successful reunification. Supporting successful reunifications requires time and space to build capacity and for families to—and communities to heal. This takes time. With a—10,000 children and youth in care, unification does not happen overnight. We are concerned about what is happening in CFS today, tomorrow and in the near future. We are concerned about the welfare of children we all care about and have cared for years.

Being so heavily involved in the child-welfare system as a foster parent, we have solutions. Proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care include: an immediate increase in support for foster parents; an increase in basic maintenance and fees for service rates; a pre-service foster parent training program; consistency across all four authorities; consistent fees for service according to level system—levelling system; front-line workers being required to have social work degrees who are registered, and open and honest communication with foster parents; and prevent unnecessary child apprehensions. Also prioritize a collaborative working environment that encourages preventive support instead of apprehending children. And preventing unnecessary apprehensions will lesson the burden on child-welfare workers who often have well beyond the recommended number of cases.

These solutions are just a few of the recommendations that have been cited in multiple reports from the Auditor General, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Based on research, community leaders and recommendations, we know what has to be done. We truly hope this government is willing to make the changes necessary to promote positive outcomes for our children.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your presentation.

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for your presentation.

In respect of the legislative review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, what specific recommendations do you have in respect of legislative changes towards the MACY act?

R. Lambert: Well, my answer's not going to be any different than what my wife spoke about earlier: basic

rate, proper training, proper supports. It's—these—many of these things are kind of elusive to us. Some things are in place, but ability to access them are almost virtually impossible.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there other questions?

Mrs. Stone: Thank you, Ray, for your presentation.

And, you know, I just want to say that what you're doing as a foster parent is incredibly important and you have a very important voice, you know, for yourself and then the children in care, as that's the priority, and you deserve to be heard.

You know, I fully agree with you. The cost of living right now, it is impossible to keep up with as a parent and, you know, everything from baby formula to a new pair of shoes, and, you know, those are just the basics.

So thank you for speaking up, and appreciate you coming today and making this presentation.

The Chairperson: While there wasn't a question, you're welcome to respond, Mr. Lambert.

R. Lambert: Thank you for your support.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you for your presentation, as well as your wife, and for sharing a little bit about how you came to become foster parents. Those personal experiences, I believe, go a very far way here in committee, so thank you for sharing that.

And I strongly agree that foster parents have not been properly recognized or acknowledged over the last few decades; this goes back a long way. We haven't been talking about foster parents enough and the work that they have done and contributed here to Manitoba. So thank you for everything that you've done and continue to do, and we're going to try our best to better advocate for you.

R. Lambert: Thank you very much.

MLA Nellie Kennedy (Assiniboia): I just would like to say to you and to you—

The Chairperson: Oh, sorry. I forgot. You have to ask for leave.

MLA Kennedy: May I have leave to make a comment?

The Chairperson: Leave is granted.

MLA Kennedy: I just wanted to say to you and your wife that—it's more of a comment—just how incredible of a job you are doing and taking children into your

care to helping them to reach their full potential and loving them and advocating for them; I think that it's really commendable.

And I know that foster parents, in particular, have a special place in my heart because I know that you are doing it simply because you care about children and you care about the outcome that, you know, they can have in this world. And so I thank you very much.

* (08:50)

R. Lambert: Thanks again.

The Chairperson: Are there any other questions from the committee?

Mr. Logan Oxenham (Kirkfield Park): Do—can I have leave to ask a question, please?

The Chairperson: Is there leave for Mr. Oxenham? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Oxenham: I just wanted to also commend you and your partner on the incredible work that you're doing raising kids in our beautiful province.

And I guess my question is: Did you have any dealings with MACY, and if you have, have you found them accessible?

R. Lambert: Well, as far as one-on-one, my wife, general, takes care of those things. She's the one who stays at home full-time with the children, and I go to work. So she takes care of all those things. So that would be a better question asked directly to her; unfortunately she's already been up.

The Chairperson: Thanks.

Any final questions from the committee?

Thank you so much for your presentation.

Next up we will have Mrs. Sariviea Ellsworth.

Sariviea Ellsworth (Private Citizen): I said that I wasn't going to get personal today. My husband and I have been foster parents in Thompson for the last 15 years. We've had the unique pleasure of working with three of the four authorities as we're, as well, specialized foster parents, and I can tell you the differences between agency and agency authority, and even down to social workers—social worker—result in very different outcomes for the children in regards to what support resources they can access.

Over the years, I have witnessed the foster-care system in crisis mode. It's gotten worse.

And Mrs.—Minister—Ms. Fontaine, you talked about in great detail. I'm very excited about these changes, and I know they need to happen. Jurisdiction needs to be handed back to Indigenous communities for those families who are directly involved with the child-welfare system.

However, we are in need of support right now as I think about the children, the young girl who died, who was 14. My mom looked after her. We had to send her down south because there was no supports in Thompson.

I've had so many children in my care, over 30, who have had—been sent down to Winnipeg, as we don't have the supports in the North. It's a two-year wait-list to get into mental health, three years for pediatrics. It's heartbreaking because I've seen so many children who are hurting, who are just—they're trying to survive. They are not thriving, Ms. Fontaine, at least not in Thompson.

We want—as foster parents, we want to be involved in these changes. We want to be heard. We have—we're the ones with the kids. I have two children in my home right now who have not seen their social worker in the last year. We are the ones who have the information; they are the ones who are writing in CFSIS. They get to provide all the documentation. But how do you provide documentation when you don't see the kids?

So these are my suggestions. First is we need quality staff working in all areas of CFS. It's no secret that every staffed branch in CFS is understaffed and often by staff who are not formally educated. Every inquiry into the CFS system has noted this concern. Many of the staff I interact with don't have formal education or BSWs, whether it's social work or even in child development. This includes foster parents, group home workers, respite workers and case managers. Living in northern Manitoba, we can't come down here for school because we'd be leaving the agencies with absolutely no money.

I am fortunate enough to work for an agency that it's mandatory to have training, CPR, suicide intervention, cultural awareness training—those are mandatory—plus an additional 20 hours a year.

But that's not the case for other foster parents. I started fostering when I was 19 years old. We did respite for my husband's aunt, and one weekend I went in to pick up my paycheque, and they said, hey, we just had two kids apprehended. Can you guys take these kids

for the weekend? They stayed two years. I had to quit my job because I couldn't do it.

So, yes, I've been at home. And I've also—I got my B.S.W., so I took advantage of the ACCESS program that we have in Manitoba through the University of Winnipeg. But the training's not enough. We want more training in Manitoba, we want it in Thompson and we want an M.S.W.

I think that the training, whether it's for foster parents or social workers, it can make a difference in northern Manitoba, so we don't have to send the kids down here. It's heartbreaking to see kids have to come down here. And, of course, with jurisdiction changes, we need more qualified staff in these Indigenous organizations in Thompson. It just makes sense. But we're not getting anywhere, despite advocacy efforts.

The second need is the follow-up on basic medical and mental health care for all children who are experiencing foster care in Manitoba. We have extremely high numbers of placement breakdowns, which often leads children to missing appointments with follow-up and care providers. Many of the children in my care, as well as a few friends of mine—and they're all—kind of get to know each other—they have not had basic medical, dental and mental health care met, despite having been in previous foster 'parent' placements before reaching our home.

For instance, I've had a child who hadn't been to a dentist in seven years, despite being in care his entire life, who needed every single tooth in his mouth extracted or capped. I have had—we've had children who have missed surgery for hearing loss; a child with a major seizure disorder that was not disclosed that could've resulted in death, that missed three neuro appointments; children with suspensions at school that when he went and got his eyes checked, the optometrist joked that he was almost blind. He was seven years old.

Children with homicidal, suicidal thoughts and even suicide attempts that had never been disclosed to the foster parent who meant—who missed that two-year mental health appointment, so guess what? She's down on a wait-list again. Children with neurological disorders who had been discharged from pediatrics and not on required medication for over four years, due to missed appointments.

The list goes on. It's pure neglect, and it's completely unacceptable when your children miss those kind of appointments. It's due to understaffed agencies

and high caseloads of 50-plus children. The workers can't keep up.

And third is that children who are experiencing foster care are in need of additional services and financial support, whether they're living in a foster home, group home or kinship arrangement. We, as foster parents and kinship caregivers, are the ones who are on the front lines assisting these kids and their families, and yet we haven't had a raise in over 12 years. With the cost of living and the pandemic, we have to close our doors. And it—there's so many homes that are needed.

Every agency in Thompson is recruiting foster parents. They are begging; they are actually offering Visa gift cards to go and apply. Yes, that's how bad it is. Children are actually being placed in overused places of safety and in hotels. I know one lady, right now, she's in a hotel; she's been there for a week. And another young lady who has been moved every two weeks because of new rules that you can't be in a place of safety for longer than two weeks, so she's been moved every two weeks for the last two months, with no placement for either of these girls in sight.

I have a very good friend who works placement desk, and she's called me crying multiple times since Christmas because she's so overwhelmed. Every Monday, she has a dozen kids to place, sending them down here. I know of at least two dozen children that—this month alone—that's been sent south. We are in desperate need of more foster parents, but we just can't keep up. So children are being placed in group homes or in places of safety by inexperienced support staff. And trust me, they're paying out an hourly rate around the clock for that, at 16 bucks an hour versus the \$22.11 a day that we get.

Group homes, places of safety and hotel staff cannot provide the same level of care as a foster parent. Just last month, I had two children who were previously placed in my home who are now living down here, one of whom who lives in a foster home and one who lives in a group home. The young man who's living in a foster home was wearing his beautiful FXR jacket and SOREL boots, while his older brother who was living in a group home was wearing the same jacket I saw him in two years ago, two sizes too small and a giant hole in his armpit.

This is where foster parents make a difference. They fund the extra that they provide above that bare minimum. And any day, I would love the opportunity to go through the financials with anybody, because foster parents are not in this job for money. Of course we've heard the horror stories of bad foster parents,

and with any line of work, there's going to be bad seeds. Not all foster parents even provide the bare minimum that is required.

* (09:00)

Many times, if not a hundred per cent of the times, I've had children moved into my home, they bring a trash bag or the little blue Walmart bag full of clothes, too small or dirty, despite having lived in previous placement for years or even their entire life.

I've had grandparents of other kids, of whom I provide respite or emergency support to, cry to me because they can't reach their social workers and they have no clue how to access MACY. This is again due to the lack of involvement of overworked social workers who can 'chot'—not check in on the kids.

We need oversights—the funds that are already receiving, to ensure it's actually being spent on the kids. It should be just standard to supply receipts for things such as sports activities and clothing.

So I ask you committee, think about what you provide your own children. What does it cost to supply the bare minimum to meet their needs? We all know it's \$17,000; that's what the Government of Canada has put out. Kids in care deserve better than the minimum. They deserve better.

Thank you. I'm sorry for crying. I'm just—it's been a rough 15 years.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your contributions, Mrs. Ellwood [*phonetic*].

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for your presentation this morning and for everything that you shared.

And as I said previously to some of the previous presenters, certainly, again, as I'm learning in this role, there's a disconnect between what are the resources that are available and the dissemination of that to foster parents.

And certainly I've heard, loud and clear, the role that foster parents play, and the need that they have to be able to co-ordinate and work with authorities and agencies.

So again I say miigwech for sharing that—

The Chairperson: Sorry, minister.

Welcome a response from Ms. Ellsworth, if you'd like.

S. Ellsworth: Thank you, Ms. Fontaine. I know you're actively trying to make these changes.

Mrs. Hiebert: Thank you so much for taking time to come share with us. You have such an important perspective, and your advocacy is just—just keep it like you're doing. Thank you.

I'm—anyway, I'm almost in tears too. I understand how you—I understand a lot of what you're talking about, and, yes.

My question is about the—you made the comment about kids that are doing, like, attempting suicide or have those issues. Can you explain how long it takes for them, specifically if a child comes to you and says I want to do this?

Can you explain that, and how MACY can better—

The Chairperson: Sorry, the member's time has expired, but we welcome a response.

Mrs. Lambert. Or, sorry, Ms. Ellsworth.

S. Ellsworth: A child who is experiencing suicidal thoughts or even homicidal thoughts, it's very difficult in Thompson to access supports. We do have a facility called Hope North, and that is a facility that, if a child is in immediate danger, they can support, and they connect to resources in town.

However, in my experience, there's two ways to get a child support. That's either through the mental health system or through pediatrics. Mental health: currently, we only have in Thompson, Manitoba two mental health child and adolescent workers. So that's not enough. We service almost 50,000 in Thompson, so it's ridiculous. And then through there they could see, like, a psychologist, psychiatrist or then pediatrics.

Pediatrics was backed up over COVID. However, they have hired a bunch of new pediatricians who are coming in and flying in, so they're hoping to get that wait-list down. I had a child who had been placed with me since 2021. Her brother actually committed murder while he was in our care as well, and she only saw pediatrics for medication at Christmas.

So two and a half years, during everything that she was going through, we could not access support for her; and she was suicidal, she was depressed. We all knew it, but we could not get her on meds 'til December, just this last year.

So, yes, it's impossible. We have only one registered therapist in Thompson. We also have no psychology degree or any, like, type of program in Thompson. So, many of the social workers, the teachers, anybody that

we have up north—because when you live in the North, you stay in the North—we can't access that education to even get more people hired to actually stay.

Things even like a speech therapist. My mom has a daughter, a foster daughter, who is actually the daughter of one of our CLDS clients, so it's a very unique situation. She has gone through six speech therapists, and she's only five and she can't access that.

So it's all types of care that it's impossible to receive in Thompson, So it's not just social work, like, the CFS system; it's all the other systems that we also need to be improving for these kids so they don't have to be sent down here. Because it doesn't work, as we've seen with, you know, that 14-year-old who, unfortunately, was murdered.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Mrs. Ellsworth, for your presentation and for coming in from Thompson and beginning as a foster parent at 19 years old. That is incredible to be able to take on.

Some of the stats you shared are very horrific. No dental care, for example, for seven years.

I was wondering, just near the end of your speech you talked about the funds and how they're being used amongst children in care.

Can you speak a little bit more about where funds are not being spent on children?

S. Ellsworth: In my experience, for most agencies, because, again, I've had that unique perspective of working with the three authorities and all of the agencies in Thompson, that there isn't a standard for social workers to check in on which kids are actually—like, the basic maintenance is very little. We know that. But even that's not being spent on certain kids and we can see it, because there's no follow-up.

When I say, like, I haven't seen a kid's worker in a year, that's quite standard. I know people that haven't seen their kids in two years—

The Chairperson: Sorry, Ms. Ellsworth. The question period has concluded.

But we appreciate all your contributions.

Floor Comment: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

We next have Jennifer Friesen, who's joining us virtually.

So I'd invite Jennifer to join the call and unmute herself.

Jennifer Friesen (Private Citizen): Good morning. Thank you for allowing me to join you via Zoom. And thank you to all of the panelists that are here listening.

I became a foster parent almost 30 years ago because I wanted to make a difference for kids. I went through some hard times as a child myself, and I wanted to make a difference, because I think sometimes those of us who lived through it—we have a different perspective, and it can be helpful.

So I became a foster parent along with my husband about 30 years ago, and the first many years were wonderful. Not that it wasn't tough. The challenges of fostering are tough. Seeing what kids go through is tough. But, in general, it went really well.

And then in 2013, things changed for us. And I basically would chalk that up to one social worker, who I guess didn't like us and absolutely turned our worlds upside down.

We had three children in our placement at the time. One had been in our home for 12 years, arriving at three days old. The other two had been in our home for six years, one arriving at four days old and the other one at two and a half weeks old. And with one hour's notice, they were picked up, and we were not told why. And your world just absolutely falls apart because by that point, they are your own kids. You don't know—I mean, it was traumatizing.

Since then, at that point, as foster parents, our only option was to apply for the foster parent appeal process, which we did. Because all three—which I didn't mention—all three of the children were very high needs, having been exposed to alcohol and drugs in utero, one of them with severe psychiatric issues. And that was the 12-year-old.

So we applied for the appeal process, which the agency wouldn't engage. We tried reaching out to other resources, children's advocate being one of them. And there was just nothing anybody could do.

* (09:10)

So knowing that the children were very high needs, we reached out and got a lawyer, because we knew that these kids would just end up being bounced around in the system. But the only way that we could get into court as foster parents was that we had to apply for either adoption or legal guardianship, which had not been our intentions, but we did. We applied for both.

The first time we saw a judge for just a first consult—now, what it's called slips my mind—she told

the agency that they didn't have a case and that she was very concerned about what the removal—why the removal happened and asked the agency to reconsider having removed the children, which they refused. So a pretrial was set.

And only after we got a lawyer were we able to find out why the children had been removed from our care, and it was a lie. The reason, the accusation wasn't true, and the agency knew that it wasn't true. And when we got to pretrial, they, themselves, provided the evidence to prove that it wasn't true.

At the pretrial, the agency said they had changed their mind and that they would return the children. And so the judge cancelled the pretrial, asked my husband and I to leave the room and gave the agency an earful, telling them that she personally hadn't slept for three nights after reading our file. We were threatened by the agency in our process. They tried to black-mail us.

So as I said, the children were—the agency said they would return the children, but then they didn't. They refused. And so we had to continue again, and we ended up with another pretrial where the agency tried to put together a whole list of rules for us that would be the conditions that they would return the children on.

But the judge saw through that list and recognized that it was a set-up to remove the children again and changed almost all the wording in the court document to return the children, including that there was workers that were specified that they were no longer allowed to have any access to our file.

The children were returned after three and a half months. They are now aged 22 and the youngest is almost 17. I asked one of them, if they had a chance, if I should speak, and they said, yes, absolutely.

But I've had a hard time preparing because I live in fear of the agencies, of the social workers. I cannot tell you how many times my blood runs cold when I see my phone ring. Some workers are wonderful, but some are not. And they threaten, and they are rude. And there's no accountability.

We didn't want to adopt the children. We know that that's—I mean, we would love to adopt them, don't get me wrong. We want permanency for these children, but that wasn't our plan. We understand the painful history of adoption in the Indigenous heritage. I am Indigenous, and I'm proud of it. But in the court process and in dealing with the agencies, I'm not

Indigenous enough, I'm not—I don't count. I've been accused of trying to steal the children.

When I asked one of the 16-year-olds what they would want to say—have said—and this is after only one removal for three and a half months. He said, I want them to know that I never feel safe. As long as I'm a foster child, I never feel safe. And I think that's a story for most of the foster kids. They never know, when they go to school, where they're going to go home to at the end of the day.

I have a friend who's fostered a child and that ate—they had a three-year-old child placed with them. They were the child's 12th placement. And that was because of how many times reunification had been attempted. That isn't right either.

I don't have all kinds of amazing answers on how to fix the system. What I do know is that we need to work together, and my heart and prayers go out to all of you who are involved in trying to fix the system. And I just—I will continue to be thinking of you, and if—we're closing our home because of the—I need—we need time to heal from—the last 11 years have just been really traumatizing. I guess what I didn't say is that our court—our case is still open before the courts. That is the only way that it seemed that we can keep these kids in our home and safe.

And at one of the pretrials, we reached out and talked to one of the executive directors and said, how can we—we told him, our goal is not to adopt or to take these kids away. What we are asking for is a plan so that these kids feel safe.

And the executive director just said, you know what? That's not our mandate to keep the kids in care, and we will be looking every few months to see if there's any family members that are stable enough to take the children.

But that's not what the kids want. That's not stability. They don't have connections or contact with family members. We are their family. We're all that they know. And as much as reunification and contact with culture is really important, safety has to come first. And that has to also mean felt safety for the kids. The kids need to feel safe. When they don't feel safe—

The Chairperson: Thank you so much, Jennifer. Your 10-minute presentation has concluded, but we do have a question period.

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: Where is the camera? Which one is it? This one? Okay.

Oh, I just wanted to say miigwech for coming this morning and sharing and sharing your journey.

And I want you to know that I hear you when you say that you live in fear, and I'm sorry for that. That's something that many of us that grew up in the system understand as well. So I acknowledge you and I just want you to know that you are heard this morning, and I say miigwech for your work.

The Chairperson: Jennifer Friesen, you're welcome to respond if you'd like.

J. Friesen: Thank you, that's very much appreciated, and I appreciate your work as well.

Mrs. Stone: Thank you, Jennifer, for taking the time to talk to us today.

And, wow, my heart is beating really hard for you and what you've experienced over the past, you know, longer than a decade. And, you know, I just want to say that you're not alone, and we hear from a lot of foster parents that are living in fear. You know, fear from punishment or repercussions from various people within the system. And I just want to thank you just so much for taking the time today and sharing your personal story and experience.

The Chairperson: Ms. Friesen, you're welcome to respond if you'd like.

J. Friesen: Thank you for that.

The fear—I didn't—I had signed up to speak today, but the fear was so intense that I wrote nothing. I battled with even joining Zoom, because I'm afraid of retribution if the agencies find out, and with us still having an ongoing court case in order to keep the kids safe. So the fear is intense.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Jennifer, for sharing this here this morning. And this comment is for you as well as every foster parent who has already presented here this morning, and I suspect we'll have a few more foster parents yet.

We have heard hundreds of stories over the last six months of the fear that really is endured within—whether that's coming from agencies or even specific individuals. We have heard first-hand testimony over the last few months where people have been specifically told not to even speak at this committee.

* (09:20)

So I want to thank you for sharing, and please know you have parliamentary privilege within this committee—

The Chairperson: Sorry, your time has expired.

But Ms. Friesen, you are welcome to respond if you'd like.

J. Friesen: Thank you, I appreciate that.

The Chairperson: Are there other questions from the committee?

With that, we really appreciate your contribution. Thank you for joining us.

Next on our list was Ms. Michelle Ans, who has let us know that she's done a written submission. So we'll move on to Ms. Linda Adolphe.

Ms. Linda Adolphe?

We will come back to her—we'll drop her to the bottom, and she'll have another opportunity.

We will go back—that concludes our out-of-town presenters, so we'll go back to the top of the list. We'll go back to the top of the list, which is Ms. Jamie Pfau.

Jamie Pfau (Private Citizen): Good morning to the members of the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Jamie Pfau, and I have been a foster parent for 13 years and I've helped to raise eight children. And I would just like to say, I feel like 13 years is a long time, but as we've heard from my fellow foster parents today, that I'm one of the youngest or the least-tenured foster parents.

My partner and I were both working with youth who had fallen through the cracks of the system, and so for us it was an easy choice to become very young treatment foster parents. We were the proud new foster parents of two high-needs boys; however, within a year, we experienced our first placement breakdown. This is when my recognition of system issues really came into focus.

A year later, I began my education journey. All of my education and research has focused on parenting, foster parenting, child welfare and promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care. After 11 years, I am still on this education journey, and next year, I will graduate with my Ph.D. in community health sciences.

I say this because I have the unique dual positionality of both raising children in care, while also becoming a leading expert in child-welfare research in Manitoba. I've had the privilege of speaking with hundreds of foster parents in our province. I've heard

stories of placement breakdowns, devastating outcomes, poorly planned and failed reunification attempts, problematic child-welfare professionals and a lack of all types of support for foster parents are the general themes of this research. The desperation, heartbreak, dedication and fierce need for advocacy coming from the voices of foster parents here today and throughout my tenure is palpable. For these reasons, I felt compelled to speak today.

I have received responses from both the Premier (Mr. Kinew) and Minister of Families (MLA Fontaine). I was thanked for the hard work I am doing to represent foster parents. I was told all foster parents in Manitoba are deeply appreciated for their critical and sacred role. At the very same time these sentences were being typed, the child-welfare budget was decreased and funds were frozen.

My colleagues have already mentioned the recent tragedies of Myah-Lee and the 14-year-old girl who was murdered in downtown Winnipeg after being released from custody. Again, this is a system—a symptom of a system being so underfunded that foster parents are forced to shut down their homes.

In another recent example, a youth living in a group home caused life-changing injuries with a machete while robbing a woman who was simply waiting for a bus.

It is no wonder, then, why the criminal justice system, including our very own chief of police and judges in the legal system, have been outspoken about their harsh critiques of child welfare. It is clear that more support, not less, is needed.

Despite the recent tragedies, the Minister of Families has stated that most children in care are thriving. As a researcher and a foster parent, I can share some statistics.

First, the majority of Winnipeg's homeless population were once wards of the state. Furthermore, children in care in Manitoba are more likely to be accused of a crime than graduate from high school before their 21st birthday.

In addition, placement breakdowns in Manitoba have been highlighted by MACY as a growing concern. A review found that approximately 300 children in care moved homes a minimum of seven times within one year. And we've heard a lot of that here today as well. Perhaps most devastating, the same study found that two children moved more than 100 times within a year.

Placement breakdowns are a critical factor when it comes to long-term outcomes for children in care. Local research has found a correlation between homelessness, criminal justice involvement, disordered attachment, poor educational outcomes and even premature death when children in care experience multiple placement breakdowns, which is the reality of children in care in Manitoba.

I share these details specifically in relation to reunifications. Through my experience as a child-welfare researcher and foster parent, I have encountered multiple failed reunifications. Generally, these family reunifications failed because of insufficient time and planning, lack of capacity and a lack of communication.

I have had a birth mom tell me she had no warning when her three children were returned to her just a few days before Christmas. I've had birth parents tell me they know they are not capable and not healed and they are not able to raise their children, but want to be involved in their child's lives, but are blocked by that opportunity from CFS.

I've had birth families state they felt like they were set up to fail. I've also heard from children in care, who have stated their voices were ignored, that they did not get a choice in where they lived. And if they stated they wanted to remain in their long-term foster home, they were not listened to.

What happened to the best interests of the child? I have witnessed children who are returned to birth families who are very quickly sent back to foster care and were unable to return to their previous foster home.

I say all this to voice my concern among many who have shared their concerns, that these statistics and the reality of child welfare in Manitoba is in crisis.

I would like to take this time to thank MLA Lathlin for her courage to speak her truth about the reality of child welfare in this province. To remove any governing body that provides oversight is dangerous. It puts vulnerable children even more at risk.

This is why we are all here today. It is all about the children. Despite the fear—the real fear—foster parents have, we have been told that if we go to the media, if we show up at the Legislative Building, if we voice our concerns, we risk having our children removed from our homes. It is why folks who signed up to speak are not here today.

I am also afraid of the timeline this government has in mind for a new child-welfare system. It is no secret that Manitoba has the highest rate of children in care in the world. Our rate is approximately three times

higher than the national average, but from a global perspective, this rate is off the charts. It is 50 times higher than Germany, 20 times higher than Japan, 10 times higher than Australia and even five times higher than the United States.

I speak of this because bill C-92 has rolled out for five years and only one of Manitoba's communities has become self-governing. To me this is good news. Big changes should take time. They should be well-planned out, especially when vulnerable children are involved. But with 9,000 children in care, this will take a lot of time and planning. It will not and should not happen overnight.

For my role as a researcher I have had the privilege of speaking with some leaders at the Peguis First Nation child-welfare office. They still have foster parents. They still have non-kinship and borrowed foster homes from other agencies. If there was enough customary and kinship-care placements, they would be utilized.

But the fact is, there are not enough kinship homes for 9,000 children in care. Peguis still has children in care, but they are doing something that is so important: they are preventing more child apprehensions that are unnecessary.

I share this information for two reasons: (1) Manitoba's child-welfare system can begin doing this work in a good way and start preventing unnecessary apprehensions. If we put the focus on prevention by promoting capacity for birth families, this is the most profound way to decolonize child welfare. This is currently not taking place; (2) if within five years one community has become self-governing, why are we not focusing on improving the child-welfare system right now?

* (09:30)

The majority of foster parents, including myself, vehemently support decolonizing child welfare. This can start today. The research is there.

In order to support children in care, we must support foster parents to provide stable placements, informed parenting and to build capacity to respond to the needs of the children in care.

This is currently not taking place. I would like to end by saying I'm here today for the very sacred love of my children and I—that I've helped to raise, and for the better tomorrows that I hope they experience. This is both up to me, as their caregiver, and this government.

Manitoba's foster parents are the least supported in the country, both in terms of service fee and access to training and support. I strongly recommend we mandate a foster parent training program, increase financial support and implement a foster-parent advocate.

Research shows that when foster parents are supported, this is truly when children can thrive. By ignoring us, you're ignoring children in care.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: So just a couple of comments.

(1) I just want to correct the record. There was not a decrease in 2024 budget to CFS.

And, (2) I think that if there is—if you are being told that folks are being threatened by agencies or that their children are going to be taken away, then I would probably submit that you have a duty then to report it to the department so that I can look into—if that is in fact foster parents are getting threatened, then I would want to know that as minister. So I will—if you—we will expect that information.

Thank you, miigwech.

The Chairperson: You're welcome to respond, Ms. Pfau.

J. Pfau: That's great. If I could be in touch with someone who could have a chain of communication that would be—absolutely.

Mrs. Stone: Thank you, Jamie, for your remarks and then for all the advocacy that you've done in this area. And, you know, I want to reiterate a comment I'd made earlier that you have an important voice. You deserve to be heard. The children in care deserve to be heard.

And so I guess my question to you is, you know, do you feel like you're being heard? Have you been consulted with being an expert in this field by this government?

J. Pfau: Thank you for the question.

I have had a meeting with Minister Fontaine, and I truly appreciated the time that I was able to have to speak with her and her staff. I would open that I would be happy to share the information of over a decade of research, but also, you know, having 13 years and tenure as a foster parent.

I do feel like my position is quite unique and that most foster parents are not getting their Ph.Ds. and

most Ph.D. students are not foster parents. So I welcome the opportunity to collaborate and I mirror the sentiments that most folks have said here today. It's going to take all of us. It takes a village to raise children and it will take that same village to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care.

Thank you.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Ms. Pfau, for your presentation.

And just two very quick things. This was tabled in the House inside the Legislature. Your facts are correct. The budget, it was in fact cut.

I just want you to speak a little bit more to the importance of qualified workers. What would make people better qualified and therefore children safer?

J. Pfau: I was so close to not doing that. Thank you for the question.

Yes, so, in terms of qualified workers, I feel like Manitoba is one of the only jurisdictions in the world that allows front-line child-welfare professionals to not be licensed social workers. And so, it—that's two-fold, right? First, they don't have the basic understanding of the oppression and the colonization and what that has to do with child welfare, so they're coming from an uninformed and possibly harmful perspective.

And, second, when they do act in a disingenuous way, they're not held accountable by any other governing body because they are not licensed social workers. They would not be registered with the Canadian Association of Social Workers, so there's no real way to hold them accountable, except to go to their supervisors, and maybe even their supervisors and their managers. But oftentimes, those emails, I can speak from personal experience, go unanswered.

So, if—for—in terms of the MACY legislation, I would, first of all, really love to see a mandate that all front-line child-welfare workers in Manitoba become licensed social workers, and I would also like to see, you know, a foster parent advocate because MACY is great. I love—I've worked with MACY, both from a research standpoint, but also from a foster parent, and they provide wonderful advocacy.

Of course, because their name, MACY, Advocate for Children and Youth, their main focus is children and youth. And so when foster parents have an issue with a social worker or they haven't heard from their social worker in months or years, we are told to have our children phone MACY. However, I mean, for

example, my eight-year-old son is non-verbal, so he cannot make that call himself.

And so I would just say a foster parent advocate would work to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care, because what is good for foster parents is good for children.

The Chairperson: Are there any other questions from the committee?

Well, thank you so much for your presentation. We appreciate it.

Our next presenter is Mr. Kevin Pfau.

Kevin Pfau (Private Citizen): Hello. Let me first start by saying, not a great public speaker. But, hello, my name is Kevin Pfau. Thank you for having our group here today, where we can express our concerns being foster parents with child welfare in Manitoba.

My wife and I have been treatment foster parents since 2011. I have been the primary caregiver for our home since 2015. Prior to and during this time, I have experienced cuts to service for youth in care.

One that was significant and would have a large impact on all children in care was removing the social recreation funding. At the time, we had children in music classes, art classes, football, hockey, gymnastics and parkour training. The funding was minimal for the time and did not cover most athletic costs. However, it was very useful for the children, as we were able—more able to afford their athletic and recreational activities.

Obviously, once the cut came, we continued with the children's athletic and recreational goals. Sport and expressive art were so healing for the children we care for. It was the time of the week they looked forward to, even the teenagers. We looked forward to it as well. We were lucky enough to have savings from other sources of income, and used them to continue these activities.

I could only imagine how many children missed out on these highly positive activities that have a lifetime impact on a person. I spoke with foster families in our program who said they were now unable to support the children being in sports, as the cost was too high.

I'm sure several of us here today have fond memories of sports and activities, and can reflect on how these experiences shaped us positively in adulthood. To celebrate something positive in a child's life whose

experienced so much trauma and has so many obstacles is truly profound.

A second change that impacted foster parents more so than children was the block funding model. It impacted our respite funds. Prior to the change, you could save up your respite and be able to go on a short vacation while having a skilled respite person in the home. The new model came—became one where if you don't use it, you lose it. In our program, several parents were upset about this. It creates challenges.

For example, I received a call January 30 this year from my mother saying my dad was quite ill. He was diagnosed with cancer, and we should come to Alberta right away. We organized ourselves and went to Alberta to spend time with my father and my family. We did not have enough respite funds to stay there for long. We had respite in our home and spent time with my father in his dying days. He died on Valentine's Day.

I am thankful we could spend time with him, but also came home to financial burden, as we did not have enough respite funds to cover our stay in Alberta. I had to pay respite providers out of pocket for this, even though we frequently do not use all of our respite hours. It was very stressful to have this financial burden on top of the other costs one has when travelling for these situations.

However, there are reasons why we are less able to use all of our respite hours. Respite providers are a key and very important function of foster homes. They prevent burnout if they can be utilized properly and there are sufficient hours for the home. In our case, we've been asking for new respite providers for approximately eight years. We have utilized, ourselves, online ads with Indeed, placed ads at universities and colleges, posted ads on social media and asked people to spread the word.

There are two issues with respite. First, many homes are not given enough hours for them to be the best parents possible. Raising children who have experienced trauma and may have certain diagnoses such as FASD or are on the autism spectrum is very rewarding, but can be very difficult. These homes with low amounts of respite are causing foster parents to burn out. They are not the best they can be to meet the needs of the children in their home, and some of them are closing their homes.

The second issue with respite is the wage for respite providers. Even though most providers are paid more per hour than the foster parents, the wage is too low. It is unattractive.

* (09:40)

We have found through the applicants to our personal ads there is a lot of interest to do respite, but the applicants say the wage is too low. It is \$12 to \$15 per hour in our home. Now that the minimum wage will be \$15—is \$15 and will be higher in October—for much easier jobs than caring for a level 5 child on the autism spectrum, we cannot recruit respite providers.

Another recurring issue we have experienced as foster parents is an overall lack of support for the children we care for. An example is therapy. Some of the children we have cared for long term have been diagnosed with FASD, non-verbal learning disorder, PTSD, ADHD, depression and anxiety.

We have been so vocal about our children in our home needing access to therapists and cultural supports. These requests were ignored, delayed and unmet.

It is very difficult to describe the frustration a parent feels when the agency mandated to provide care for this child has not acted in the child's best interests. Watching the children struggle, knowing what they need to heal, not being able to provide it, is one of the most challenging parts of fostering.

We even asked if we could pay for therapy ourselves, but were denied. One of our children waited over a year for therapy. Another child waited over a year for a medication review that was eventually denied.

These stories are not unique. I urge the current government to invite foster parents to sit at the table and they will understand how prevalent these examples of neglect by agencies truly are.

Recent media releases have made it clear that Manitoba's foster parents are the lowest paid in the country. It is clear we are not raising children with intense trauma and complex needs for the money. I could pump gas two hours a day, four days a week, and make more than the average foster parent in Manitoba. We do this because we see a need, because we care, because we want to make a difference in the vulnerable lives of children who have been apprehended. We open our homes and do everything we can to make children feel welcome, safe and cared for.

Foster parents are so disenfranchised that even an NDP MLA with this government could not get her social worker to return a call. This is a clear example of the reality of child welfare in this province. And without a governing body for oversight, my primary emotion is fear for the children.

The best interests of the child are currently not being met in this province. I believe MACY has recommended this before, but this is yet another example of why we need social workers who are registered and licenced with the Canadian Association of Social Workers. This way when a front-line child welfare worker acts inappropriately, they can be held accountable. We as foster parents need an advocate. In this current system, in crisis, we need more oversight and accountability, not less.

That is it.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much.

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for your presentation. You did very, very good.

I'm curious—the social recreation fund—you said that it ended. What year did it end and also, what were some of the dollar amounts that you were able to access in that?

K. Pfau: Miigwech, thank you for the question.

I can't recall the exact year, but I think it was around the '14–2014, 2015 time. And it was about—it was \$500 per child for the year. But it's—you would use it for things such as purchasing them a bike, you could use it for that. But it was also meant for sports, any activities, and, I mean, every child's in hockey or football or even soccer. It would exceed that cost easily in the year.

Mrs. Stone: Thank you, Kevin, for your presentation, taking the time to come talk to us this morning.

You spoke about therapy and supports during your presentation, so I'm just curious if you could expand a little bit as to, you know, what supports are lacking from that angle.

K. Pfau: Thank you for the question.

I would say the access to the supports is what's lacking. A unique situation for us is we're in a program where the program has its own psychiatrist and we're not able to access any other type of assessment for our children. And there's a long wait-list to see him.

One of our children was struggling substantially and in several people's opinion who were in the program, the psychiatrist was—he was older and he was kind of old school and it wasn't the best. And we had a meeting with him, and our child was having really intense problems. And he suggested putting her on melatonin, which is an herb that maybe helps you

sleep. But we knew it was totally irrelevant, and we couldn't go anywhere else to get a second opinion. So that's an example of how the support is there, but it's not really accessible.

Another example is, a child we have currently is really struggling at school and at home, and it's the same situation, where we have to get—we can't go to MATC or anything like that; we have to go through this tunnel to a certain staff member that our program provides. And had to advocate quite a bit to say we would like to use a different professional and had the school get on our side, and the social worker did grant us the ability to get a different assessment.

But it's really only because it's like an extreme time of need, so I would say they're there, but they're not accessible, and you have to go through these certain channels. You can't take a different avenue. Like, when we wanted to—we were like in a crisis. We were like, we'll just pay for therapy; we'll pay for whatever. And they were like, well you can't, so just, you know.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Pfau, for your presentation.

Would you recommend that MACY look to report further on issues that foster parents face, and if so, could you speak a little to how this could affect children in care?

K. Pfau: Yes, I think—I'm looking for more action based on the reports. There's a decline of caregivers, respite and available homes for children in care, and I think they need to issue more reports or have it be more public. Like, it's—even as a foster parent, I wasn't sure of MACY's powers and supports and actions I could take through them, and I think the public is not really aware of, like, the excellent data you have in your reports. It's not really getting out to, maybe, like sway people's opinions or a vote or something, you know.

So I think that how would that affect children in care, it's just that that data's not getting out. It's not maybe being in public as much as it should, and then it's causing the reduction of quality care for the children, where less people are being foster parents and there's less places for them to go.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Are there any other questions from the committee?

With that, thank you so much. We appreciate it.

Our next presenter is Mr. Jean Choiselat. Monsieur Choiselat? Monsieur Choiselat will be put to the bottom of the list. He'll have another opportunity.

Is there a Brittany Bannerman?

Before Brittany comes up, for those who have just joined us, the meeting has been—this meeting has been called to continue the consideration of the five-year review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, and that is the act that lays out the framework for MACY, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth.

So with that, Brittany Bannerman.

Brittany Bannerman (Private Citizen): Hi, bonjour and miigwech for taking the time to listen to me today.

In my grade 12 year, like most students in our province, one of my many assignments was to write an essay about what I was going to do after graduation. I expressed in that essay that no matter what jobs I held outside of my home, the most important thing I was going to do with my life was foster children in our province with exceptional needs.

I wanted to care and provide for these children and some of our most vulnerable. Eleven years post graduation, I'm a foster parent alongside my husband for nearly four years. Prior to this, I provided respite care to children of exceptional needs for nearly eight years.

I've gone as far as going back to school to procure my health-care aide certification, on my own funding, to be able to provide a higher level of care for these children due to lack of training provided for people in our province providing this care.

I have seen and experienced the child-welfare system in all facets. Four years ago when the single-envelope system came into place, children with exceptional needs were not planned for or cared for. This has still not changed. I had planned to provide this level of care until I was physically unable to do so. If Manitoba does not make crucial changes needed for our system, it is unclear that I will be able to provide that care in our province.

My husband and I have openly discussed moving out of province so I can continue to provide this crucial level of care.

* (09:50)

Foster parents in Manitoba are often villainized for providing necessary care on budgets that do not meet the cost of living. Foster parents, in general, support reunification and would love to support

biological families. Instead, our agencies often keep us separate. Keeping us separated keeps us strangers. It doesn't allow us to form our proper relations.

We have agencies that host cultural trainings and events only inviting biological families. This doesn't cause harm to me as an Indigenous foster parent, but it does cause harm to the children who then lack access to these events' gatherings for something entirely out of their control. It's not their fault that they live in a foster home.

I have heard our minister and our Premier (Mr. Kinew) discuss their focus on reunification, and I, as an Indigenous woman, daughter of a '60s sweep survivor, wholeheartedly support reunification. I have personally supported reunification from my own home. Families and communities need time and space to build capacity and heal. We are only the second generation of healing, and we know it's going to take a long time for all of the healing to happen.

I recognize our child-welfare system is a colonial system not built by our peoples, but with nearly 10,000 children and youth in care, I am concerned about our system today, tomorrow and in the near future.

All of us in this room are concerned about child welfare in our province. Being so heavily involved in the system, I have spent a lot of time thinking about what could be done differently and how to better support Manitobans.

A few of my proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for our children and youth in care would be an immediate increase in supports for foster parents, kinship placements and customary-care providers. This can be achieved by creating a pre-service training program. Manitoba is one of the only jurisdictions nationwide that does not have a mandatory training program.

This training program could easily be adapted from those our neighbouring provinces have in place. However, a key element to a successful training program in Manitoba would include Indigenous cultural training as well as a list of Indigenous resources for our children and youth. This program and resource guide could easily be created by including the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and organizations such as Shawenim, who already connect Indigenous children and youth with cultural direction.

This cultural training program shouldn't be made with the intent that we, as Indigenous peoples, have to educate others, but with the belief and knowledge that

we, as Indigenous peoples, are responsible for educating our children, and without our children, our beliefs, practices and traditions will be lost. Connecting our children with their culture and improving access to resources will increase positive outcomes for our children.

Mandatory training being provided would increase the number of long-term placements and reduce placement breakdowns, which are traumatic for children in care. This has the ability to decrease the number of children and youth in group homes and temporary care, or even hospitals and institutional settings. An increase in the basic maintenance and fee for service rates. Sorry.

I welcome any member of the House to explain to me how you can provide a home, food, clothing and extracurricular activities on \$22 to \$27 a day. The fact is you can't.

Children and youth in care are being apprehended from dangerous and traumatic situations to be forced to live in poverty. Increasing the per diem rate would allow us to provide the necessary care that we all know these children deserve. The national average per diem rate is \$46 a day. An increase to national average would allow kinship, customary and foster parents across the province what they need to provide the care necessary and succeed. This isn't about monetizing children. This is about having the means to provide for them and their needs.

Consistency across all four authorities is desperately needed. The Province already requires authorities to use the child assessment form and the independent rate assessment panel. However, often, medical terminology is 'misundersood', and the child assessment forms are overlooked, and their independent rate assessment panels come in with supports and fee for service severely under what is required to care for these children, especially those with 'expetional' needs. This situation has been exasperated by the single-envelope system over the past four years. This can be easily remedied by creating a graph that displays each level on the child assessment form with the fee for service rates and supports suitable and our Province holding all four authorities to said graph unaccountable.

Children with 'exceshible' needs are often turned down for accurate fee for service and supports, which will cause unnecessary placement, breakdowns and trauma. I have personally watched children be removed from placements that they had been in since birth

simply because the agency refused to adequately support them with a whole of two hours' notice.

They were then placed in temporary care without long-term planning. Being in temporary care prevents children with exceptional needs from accessing life-changing services.

Has the committee considered how many children and youth in care are taking up valuable space in hospital, not because they need to be there for hospital-level care, but because there are no homes able to provide that level of medical care?

Preventing unnecessary child apprehensions by prioritizing a collaborative working environment that encourages preventative support instead of apprehending children, open communication between case-planning teams, caregivers and biological families. I, as a foster parent, have always opened communication up with biological families to children in my care. Often, agencies aren't happy with this. They tell me no, they tell me that I cannot have contact information, that I cannot have a way to share photos or videos of their children. These are things that biological families deserve. It is their right.

If the members of the committee believe it is so easy to provide care to our province's most vulnerable youth, I question why more of you have not opened your own homes to provide said care, especially our Indigenous members that recognize the importance of having our children in homes that support them on a cultural level. The answer is simple: it's not as easy as it seems.

I would like to stress that if kinship, customary care and foster providers decided that we could no longer do this with the current supports, our province would have nowhere to house or support thousands of children. Over the past four years since the single-envelope system came into place, more and more providers have closed their homes; been forced to downsize. Our children and youth deserve supports; is our government willing to provide for them?

The Chairperson: Thank you for that presentation.

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for your presentation. I'm going to go really fast because I only have 30 seconds.

So I want to lift you up and say miigwech for your heart medicine that you provide the care of our children.

Two things: Can you provide in a little bit more detail the single-block funding in—which was instituted

in 2019-2020 that you talk about, and the impact that it's had on you and the care that you're able to do?

And also, I don't think anybody around the table is saying that what you do is easy. I think we all recognize that it is incredibly difficult, and it is incredibly sacred work.

B. Bannerman: Hi. So when the single-envelope system came down, even when you're looking on our Government of Manitoba website, it explicitly states that children of high medical need and exceptional needs were not properly planned for in funding arrangements when that came down. Over the past four years, that still has not changed.

The level of care that I provide is a level of care for children that frequent the hospital, they frequent services such as speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, among others. Because they were not planned for, their fee for service have been cut. Their supports and their respite have been cut. And those things dramatically impact how these children are cared for.

I have personally witnessed two children be removed from a home that I had worked with them in since birth. They were simply removed because the agency and authority would not pay a proper fee for service or provide proper support or respite hours to them. They were removed with two hours' notice; it was a heartbreaking, horrible day for all of us. Three months later the agency came back to that foster parent and asked them to take these children back, again, for a not-proper fee for service.

Less than a month ago, finally, one of them was approved for a proper fee for service and supports. Unfortunately, it's too late for them to return to their original home. She has already brought in another placement. But it took eight months for him to get proper fee for service and supports that she had been fighting for, for over three years.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there other questions from the committee?

Mrs. Hiebert: First of all, thank you so much for all that you're doing for these kids. I understand your heart. I had a high-needs foster child, as well, in my home. So—and it's such an important thing that you're doing. So thank you so much.

* (10:00)

I just have a question about—you mentioned about our, like, the cultural activities or the cultural part of what you do as foster parents, and I believe it's really

important for us to have that connection with all these kids in care.

Can you explain when you said that foster parents are not being able to participate?

B. Bannerman: So, with my agency in particular, all of our cultural programs and all of our cultural trainings and events are ran through the family enhancement building.

Us, as foster parents, despite myself even being an Indigenous woman, I am not invited or welcome at any of those events. I do not get to take my kids to moccasin-making class; I do not get to take them to ribbon skirt class; I do not get to take them to their powwow practices. Nothing.

They are not invited simply because they are in a foster home instead of customary care or kinship care, despite even having an Indigenous foster parent.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Brittany, for your presentation. I've got two quick questions, if you can attempt to do both.

The first one is: we've heard others speak to it and you touched on it very briefly, this idea of keeping foster parents separated. Can you speak just a little bit to how that can affect children in care?

As well as one more quick question, is you also talked about medical terminology often being misunderstood, if you can elaborate on that, too.

The Chairperson: Brittany Bannerman, with 45 seconds.

B. Bannerman: Okay, so in regards to the medical terminology being misunderstood, agencies and authorities don't have a nurse or anybody with medical background going through the child assessment forms and evaluating them properly.

So then terminology for certain types of seizures or certain types of medical conditions is then overlooked and kids are denied their proper fee for service because they don't have somebody actually breaking down what they're reading. I've even had one woman at an authority tell me that she didn't bother to read the CAF; she just denied my application.

I'm not going to have time to touch on the other question, I'm sorry. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your presentation.

Next up, we have Ms. Julie-Ann Rich. *[interjection]*

Okay, Minister Fontaine.

MLA Fontaine: I apologize. I really have to go to the washroom. Can we take a five-minute break?

The Chairperson: A five-minute break has been requested.

We will—oh, sorry, is the committee—is that the will of the committee? *[Agreed]*

Okay, the committee will recess for five minutes.

The committee recessed at 10:03 a.m.

The committee resumed at 10:09 a.m.

The Chairperson: Will the committee come back to order.

We are hearing presenters on the—oh, trying to get us started—the consideration of the five-year review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, the legislation that provides the framework for MACY, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth.

And so with that, we are at Ms. Julie-Ann Rich.

Ms. Rich?

Julie-Ann Rich (Private Citizen): Bonjour, everybody, and thank you for allowing me to speak today. I'm sorry if I'm a little emotional because the family or the person that Brittany was speaking about was my home.

* (10:10)

So studies show that specialized medical homes result in positive outcomes for children with special health-care needs, including improved family-centred care, reduced health-care utilization, increased emotional attachment and improved skills as they age.

I took that paragraph from the website of a business here in Manitoba that farms medical fostering to agencies. These privatized and group-care facilities are growing, and institutional care of complex-needs children continues with government support, while level 5 caregivers like myself under agencies are denied proper fees for service or supports for children in our care.

At 30-year-old fee-for-service rates of between \$80 and \$120 per day, plus a basic rate of \$22.11, I knew when I became a high-needs foster that I would be using a good portion of my fee for service to support the children I foster, and I was okay with that. As I cannot hold another job—I'm a single medical foster—I needed to be sure that I could support myself and household and I needed to be able to pay for my

own benefits, including things like dental care, mental and physical therapies and to put some money away for retirement. We don't have EI, and we don't have CPP. I was okay with it, until three years ago, when I had my supports and fee for service cut unilaterally for all three level 5 children I had in my care.

The first newborn I brought home had a life expectancy of three years; the second, born with neurological defects. And although the needs of these children continued to grow and I had repeatedly asked for changes to my supports to make my life home—my home life more manageable, even though these requests had been made and support documents from medical professionals were provided, additional supports were denied.

A social worker told me: If you ask for more, you will probably receive less. And that's what happened during the pandemic—sorry, everybody—a 20 per cent cut to fee for service, a 70 per cent cut to respite and the removal of my singular weekend off per month. I would like to state that my family and my Métis community is in northwestern Ontario, so if I don't have a weekend off a month, I don't see my family. And that remained that way for—I had five days off in three years.

I spent the next two years fighting to have the situation rectified. I wanted to keep the children in the only home that they knew. I had good relationships with their birth families. I resubmitted CAF after CAF; I provided documentation from medical professionals and therapists; I wrote personal letters with details of care to agency and authority decision makers. Denial after denial. The situation came to a head when I spoke to the decision maker at my authority to be told I could either have a proper fee for service or I could have proper supports and that I would never be approved for both.

These children were receiving full one-to-one supports in a specialized daycare. I had done all the paperwork and intake meetings for Winnipeg 1, and they were both entering school with level 3 supports, one going to a particular school because it had a nurse, both nonverbal, both developmentally under the age of one year, and they will remain that way.

After two years of fighting for us and a final denial from my agency for level 5 supports, I asked for these children to be removed because I could no longer safely care for them in my home. I need you guys to understand I had removed every comfort of what a home is in my living room, my dining room. I went out of my way to limit restraints. It has never

been my belief that children with disabilities should be wrangled into playpens.

I was given two hours to get their life packed, and they were moved to temporary placements and then put on waiting lists for institutional care. After three months, my agency came back repeatedly asking me to have them returned, because those placements are very expensive; that's what I was told.

I went to the child advocate. I went to my MLA and I wrote letters to the Minister of Families and the Minister of Health. Child protective services was involved, thanks to the Minister of Families.

I applied to foster through the places where they were placed on waiting lists. And about the fifth time they came back to me about the second child with another offer that was not appropriate with supports that were ridiculous; I was informed that if I did not accept it, that child B was going to be removed from the St. Amant waiting list. And, to my knowledge, they remain in—that child remains in temporary placement. And because it's temporary, they're unable to access the school division programming for disabled children like them.

And the funding package for child A was approved after three years at the highest support levels. So I thank you for that. His foster parent, I'm sure, appreciates it. And as I said in my letter to you, it didn't matter to me whether the supports went to me or another foster parent, as long as that foster parent was properly supported and that child as well.

It was too late to be returned to my home as I had already accepted the placement of a terminally ill infant.

I am proud to be able to provide the level of care I do. I should not be made to feel shame for expecting a proper fee for service for providing nursing-level care. I should not be made to beg my authority to acknowledge child assessment formats or to have them listen to medical professionals. I should not have to go into privatized care or move to Ontario to continue doing what I love doing and am an exceptionally good foster caregiver.

The systemic issues that are bringing these types of children into care are not for me to fix. I am here to support and help all my relations and to do better for the next generations. I can't do that if I'm struggling to pay for my mortgage or to buy groceries.

I would like to reiterate the comments of other caregivers who expressed fear of their agencies. And,

add lastly that I kept spaces home in—open in my home for three months; one, because I needed a mental health break to recover from what had happened to me, and after three months I was ready to take children back into my home, and no placements were offered to me, except for the original children I had had in my care.

And when other children had come in that were medical fosters that should have been placed in a home like mine, one of them, I know for sure, went into institutionalized care instead. And she is finally coming to my home.

And the last child that I had in my care just turned four. She turned four today. And I will let you guys know that when they gave me those two hours' notice to remove those children, they took 60 per cent of my income in one fell swoop, leaving me to survive on 30 per cent of what I had previously, which does not cover even the basic bills for my home.

At the beginning of this month, I picked up my maintenance to find out that the last child in my care had been unlevelled 100 per cent, and I received \$700. And I'm to support my home with that.

If it wasn't for help of my friends, I would be in a position now where I'm possibly going to lose my home because even though I took a recent placement, it takes months for the rates to be put into place.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for that presentation.

Are there questions from the committee?

MLA Fontaine: I'm going to talk really fast so I can get everything in. So miigwech to you and I am so sorry for everything that you've journeyed through, and I lift you up for the work that you do and I see the really critical, important work that you do.

Can you please explain what years and why, again, is this single-block funding in respect of the 20 per cent decrease in fee for service and the 70 per cent for respite? Can you please walk us through that?

J.-A. Rich: Sorry, when I brought home my placements, I was given fee for service—can I say the number? Am I allowed to say that? Okay. I was given \$95-a-day fee for service plus the basic rate. And I was giving—given 30 hours of respite and one weekend off a month.

* (10:20)

I did not know support hours existed; I actually had repeatedly asked for changes to supports in my home because of how the children developed. Their needs—their medical needs—became behavioural needs along with medical needs. And had I known support hours had existed, I would have asked for those.

Now, I had three children who were immuno-compromised during the—like, they were immuno-compromised. I had to be very, very careful during the pandemic. Also, I knew they had no other placements and I, myself, have Crohn's disease, so I was also very, very careful.

I don't know if it was my lack of use of my supports during the pandemic in trying to be extra safe or they realized somewhere that that money could be saved if they cut the supports to my home. Because actually what I had been told was that I had been flagged for abuse of respite, and that's why my respite was cut to 10 hours of respite a week, no weekend off a month, I had 30 support hours per child that I could use and my fee for service was cut to \$75, even though the needs of the children had steadily increased, especially the two boy—sorry—the two children that left my home nine months ago.

Even contemplating having them come back, after knowing that myself, my staff, I went out of the way to hire people that understood the care needs of these children, because you just can't hire anybody, and I can tell you that it's very, very hard to find somebody who will accept \$15 or \$18 an hour to care for children that are spitting in their face or fecal spreading, or—it's disheartening to know that people can read the documentation and be able to ignore it.

And I can tell you that it's very obvious that that has been done, especially in the case of those two children, especially that first child, because the supports for him currently, as of two weeks ago, maximum \$120 a day plus one weekend a month plus 40 hours of support a week plus 30 hours of respite a week for his new foster parent. And that child should've never left my home. His mother even asked me, after he left, if I would adopt him. And if I had the money I probably would have.

Thank you.

Mrs. Stone: Thank you for sharing your personal experience and story, and I'm just really sorry to hear what you went through. It's very heartbreaking.

I—you had mentioned in your presentation that you reached out to the Advocate, and I'm just curious, you know, was—did, for you, that feel like a last resort,

that you felt like you had nowhere else to turn to? You know, did you feel that the Advocate was responsive enough to you and your needs? And if you could just talk to me about that process of when you did communicate.

J.-A. Rich: The Advocate was very helpful in my first contact with her, because child B, the second child in my care, had—sorry—a northern social worker, and had had three wellness checks in three years. That's why I ended up going to the authority—or, the Advocate originally.

And then when I reached out to the Advocate after the children had—removed from my care, they were as helpful as they can be. Their hands are kind of tied. The monetary things like that or lack of supports is not anything that they can really handle. I actually think that there should have been a human rights violation levelled against my agency regarding child B, if he was removed from the waiting list at St. Amant.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your presentation. We appreciate it.

Just a note for the committee, Ms. Linda Adolphe has let us know that she is unable to present this morning.

MLA Lamoureux: Can I ask for leave just so I can ask a question, as well, of our presenter?

The Chairperson: Sorry, can you say that again?

MLA Lamoureux: I'm seeking leave to ask a question to our last presenter.

The Chairperson: Is there leave to ask one more question? *[Agreed]*

Ms. Rich? *[interjection]* Right. MLA Lamoureux, yes. MLA Lamoureux.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chairperson, and thank you to the committee for allowing me leave as well.

Thank you for providing the level of care that you have been and just the tremendous sacrifice that you've made. I think it's such a testimony and so telling to all the work that foster parents are doing that often is not recognized. So thank you for sharing that with us.

You raised a really important point just about the systemic issues within. Could you elaborate a little bit on this?

J.-A. Rich: Well, the cost of living is really out of control. Everybody is struggling. We're having children apprehended, removed from poverty, placed into

placements with poverty. We have opioid epidemic. We have homeless issues. We have not done well by our First Nations people at all. Our—we've failed. We failed the families, and the only way that we can fix that is to allow foster families and birth families to have relationships.

I just want to say that part of the systemic issue is the colonialization that remains in foster care. The only way that it's ever going to end is to tear it up, bridge the gap between foster parents and community. Allow us to have access to the other children from the community that are in care in our agencies. Why are we not having barbecues and including families? Why are we being told that birth families are horrible drug addicts and they have this and they have that?

You know what, the difference between me and one of those people is a matriarch that came into my life; that's the only thing that changed it for me. I'm a child of the system as well. My parents, generational trauma. The only way we're going to fix that is to put us back together, and the only way to do that is to actually put us together.

We've heard from everybody here today say that we believe that families, birth families, communities, foster parents, we need to be working as a group, and we can't do that if we're totally—we're villainized for stealing people's children. I'm not waiting here for children to go into hospital sick. That happens because people are not being helped. The system, it's failing all of us.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Our next presenter is Ms. Pat Yakielashek.

Pat Yakielashek (Private Citizen): Thank you. You got the name right.

Good morning. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns. My name is Pat Yakielashek. My husband and I became involved in child welfare by providing respite for the children my daughter and son-in-law helped to raise. We looked after these children like they were our own grandchildren. We developed strong bonds with each of them. We celebrated all of their successes, but also we sat and listened to some of their stories of trauma and heartache. Within a few years we were approached to become foster parents ourselves. This was a decision that we thought long and hard about. We know how tough it is.

I had raised three children of my own who became very successful members of the community.

We thought, we did well as parents, we can do this. We met our first foster daughter over eight years ago. It was clear from the beginning she was mentally unwell and had experienced significant trauma in her young life.

As foster parents, we were very unprepared for this. Most nights we had to take turns checking on her every 15 minutes to make sure she wasn't harming herself. The placement broke down after nine months. If we had been properly trained and prepared, we may have been able to have her stay. It was so traumatic for her as well as for us. We have so much guilt and sadness because she did not want to leave our home, but we knew that we could no longer keep her safe.

Training for all foster parents should be an absolute necessity as it is in every other province in this country. Fostering is absolutely not like raising your own children. These kids have lived through so many experiences that we know nothing about.

* (10:30)

Please, if nothing else, amend the legislation so that every foster parent can have consistent training before any child is placed in their homes.

A short while after she left, an 11-year-old boy came to us. He was shy and covered his face whenever he was uncomfortable. We fell in love with him immediately. We've been so fortunate to watch him slowly gain self-confidence and excel. He loves sports and has played football and rugby. He will be graduating this June and plans to further his education. He's the first one in his family to graduate.

He has been our only Indigenous child. We met some of his family during family visits. We invited them to come to his football games, school events, et cetera. Some of his family members joined us for events regularly. It was through this relationship that we have been able to participate in cultural events alongside our foster child and some of his birth family.

Despite this being healing for the family and our foster child, social workers tried to stop us from getting together, saying that it was not safe. This boy has only benefitted from being able to be part of his birth family as well as his foster family. In many cases, this can work and the child can be supported by two families. After all, it takes a village.

His family, by the way, spends Christmas with us and Easter and Thanksgiving, and they come out to the cabin, and it's great. We are definitely in favour of reunification when it is in the best interest for the child

and done slowly, not to add further trauma to these children.

Unfortunately, sometimes this can be very traumatic. We experienced this with this foster son. He hadn't seen his mom for six years. There were no phone calls, no contact. I had met her several times during family visits. There is no doubt whatsoever that she loved this boy deeply. We had heard from her family that she was doing well and living in Alberta, and that she was in recovery.

Our social was in contact with her worker in Alberta and confirmed that she was doing well. We planned for our foster son to reunite with his mom in Alberta. We flew him out to Calgary for a week. The visit was put off each day, and then the phone was no longer being answered. He never did get to see his mom, and still hasn't.

He was 16 at the time. This was so traumatic. It is hard to see a 16-year-old boy, who looks like a man, but is really just a child wanting his mom, just sit and cry.

I believe in reunification. I can't imagine one of my children being taken away from me and having no control over the situation. This would be my worst nightmare. All I am asking is that this be done slowly and carefully. Each of this—each of these children is in a different situation. I would love if birth families and foster families could get together on a regular basis so that children can become comfortable, and when the time came for reunification, the child doesn't experience more trauma being taken from another home.

When possible, I hope the foster family can continue seeing the children that were in their home. We're not the enemy. We are here to love and care for these children while their birth families are unable to.

My experience with fostering has been wonderful, and then not so wonderful. We are lacking funding. I personally have never had an increase. Everyone knows how much groceries, gas and housing have increased. We have used our own savings to pay for sports, gym, clothing, gifts, celebrations, holidays. We get \$60, I think, for Christmas for them; \$60 doesn't even cover a stocking.

Anyway, I do not understand why there isn't more money for things like sports, extracurriculars or anything else that a child might be interested in. These things are expensive, but also give kids so much enjoyment, self-confidence, team-building and something positive to look forward to. This keeps busy—

kids busy and off the street and, most importantly, out of trouble.

Please consider these kids when you are going through your budgets.

One of my goals when I became a foster parent was to make sure the children we help raise would be dressed like everyone else in school. We do not get a clothing allowance that allows for good quality, brand-name and popular clothing options. We buy these things out of pocket, because these kids are sometimes already labelled as foster kids. They don't need to be bullied because they're wearing the wrong clothes. They want to look and dress like everyone else.

We have two boys with us at this time. One turned 18 this year, and the second will be turning 18 soon. Funding gets cut immediately once they turn 18. Ours was cut by two thirds. This boy has not failed a grade. He is 18. He's still in school and will be graduating in June. We are still supporting him.

Does this mean that he doesn't eat as much? His clothes are now cheaper? The sports he plays are cheaper? The bus he takes is cheaper? He should be fully funded until he at least graduates. This is unfair for him, and this should be changed. All we want is positive outcomes for these kids that we care for.

These are just a couple of things that I have experienced. I could go on for hours.

In closing, I would like to ask you how many raises you guys have had since 2012. Can you name anyone in any profession that hasn't had any type of an increase in 12 years? I surely doubt it. These kids—these are the kids that the province has taken from their homes. The least the government could do is support them as they should be supported.

My husband and I are both retired now. We're living on pensions. We have one boy going into the C-D-L-S program in June, and as soon as the other one goes on his own way after school or whenever he decides to leave, we're closing our home because we can no longer afford it. We cannot take money out of our pensions to raise these kids.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your presentation and your contributions.

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for coming here and sharing and for the work that you do.

In respect of the young men that are still in your care, do you have an agreement with young adults,

because they're—once children are aging out of care—18 to 21—you can still apply and enter into AYAs.

I'm curious if there is—or, if you guys are in the process of that, or what is that—what's going on with that?
[interjection]

The Chairperson: Ms. Yakielashek.

P. Yakielashek: Sorry. I said I wasn't going to do that.

One of our kids is very high needs and he is going into the C-D-L-S program. The other one wants to go to university and he wants to stay with us, and he is in the—he is—he did get an extension of care. So it's \$850 a month for that, which doesn't provide a lot. It drops, so.

Mrs. Hiebert: Thank you very much for opening up your home and being a foster mom. It's such a great experience and it can be hard, but thank you for doing that.

You were just discussing—you were asking questions about consistent training for foster parents, and just, you know, being set up for success, and your first experience with your first placement of your child.

So, in that experience, what would you suggest would be a great way—or, what are the most important things? How did that fail for you, and how could you—that have been done better, so that we can set other parents up for success?

P. Yakielashek: There should be training on trauma to start with. These kids have all experienced trauma, every one of them. That is so important.

* (10:40)

The suicidal ideation is very important. To just know how to respond when someone says they want to die. You know, so many people think, oh well, you don't want to die, like, you're so pretty, and—like, it's so wrong. And we, ourselves, can sometimes do harm—more harm—to them just by not knowing what to do.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you so much for your presentation here this morning.

And I love the idea that you raised about family reunification being done in a healthy way. I think that's such a beautiful way to put it. And you talked about bringing families together and not necessarily rushing things, and I think we should be having more conversations about that, almost like brainstorming more on that.

I was wondering if you can speak specifically to the role of support workers in the idea of bringing families back together.

P. Yakielashek: Well, I think that the impression that you get as a foster parent is that you shouldn't be associating with the birth families, because they'll want to get stuff off of you or they're going to call you down or, you know—and, like, in my experience, it's been so good. His brothers come and spend weekends with us now. You know, like, it's just so good for them.

So I think that if you could start off slowly, where you have almost like a mediator to make sure that everybody gets along—because of course sometimes it's not going to work. But I think, on the whole, most foster parents want to talk with birth families. They—and we send pictures of all the kids. You know, like, stuff like that.

We—one of them has lots of relatives in BC, and, you know, I send them pictures constantly, and they are so appreciative. You know, so, if you can start off with just meeting and get rid of the we-want-to-steal-their-kids. We don't want to steal their kids. We're just here to take care of them while they can't. Because so many birth families hate CFS and everybody that works with them, and I don't blame them, you know?

So if you maybe could get rid of those thoughts where they think we want to keep their kids. And we're not the enemy.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much. We really appreciate your time.

Our next presenter is Mrs. Michelle Dueck. Okay. She will be moved to the bottom of the list and will have another opportunity.

Next is Mrs. Donna Preston. No? Okay. She will be moved to the bottom of the list as well.

Mr. Shane Lawson? Okay.

So we will now be entering people's second opportunity to present if they've arrived since we've started.

So I will be calling Mrs. Val Chivers, Ms. Natasha Soucie, Mr. Jean Choiselat, Ms. Michelle Dueck, Mrs. Donna Preston and Mr. Shane Lawson?

So, with that, that concludes our presenters.

The hour being 10:44, what is the will of the committee?

MLA Fontaine: Just before I read this motion, if I can just take the liberty—I just want to thank everybody that came out this morning to share and to present and to provide, again, really vulnerable and personal and

heartfelt journeys and experiences, and I suspect that I can speak on all of our behalves here at the table.

We do take everything that you said very seriously and we do lift you up. And we certainly appreciate the time and the words that you shared with us this morning. So I just want to say miigwech on behalf of the whole committee, if that's okay.

I move that, despite the motion passed on March 4, 2024, written submissions to the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act from members of the public be included in the Hansard transcript of this meeting instead of the committee report, with the understanding that both the Hansard transcript and the committee report will be available after May 24, 2024, deadline for written submissions.

The Chairperson: It has been moved by Minister Fontaine that, despite the motion passed on March 4, 2024, written submissions to the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act from members of the public be included in the Hansard transcript of this meeting instead of the committee report, with the understanding that both the Hansard transcript and the committee report will be available after the May 24, 2024, deadline for written submissions.

The motion is in order.

The floor is open for questions.

MLA Fontaine: I'm just going to say that I believe this to be just an administrative processes; that's all it is.

The Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

The Chairperson: The question before the committee is as follows: That, despite the motion passed on March 4, 2024, written submissions to the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act from members of the public be included in the Hansard transcript of this meeting instead of the committee report, with the understanding that both the Hansard transcript and the committee report will be available after the March—sorry, the May 24, 2024, deadline for written submissions.

Shall the motion pass? *[Agreed]*

The motion is accordingly passed.

The hour being 10:47, what is the will of the committee?

An Honourable Member: Rise.

The Chairperson: Committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 10:47 a.m.

WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

To the Members of the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns. My name is Mackenzie Winiasz. I have been a respite provider for the past 3 years and prior to that I watch my Nana foster for most of my childhood and youth. For years now I have watched Manitoba fail our children in care. It is imperative that Manitoba make changes now before these problems escalate further.

Throughout my experience with the child welfare system, I have been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care. During my tenure, I have been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the Province of Manitoba has provided for foster parents.

Furthermore, it has been beyond disheartening to learn about the many unnecessary tragedies that have taken place as a direct result of an underfunded child welfare system. A 17-year-old child, Myah-Lee was murdered. She was murdered while in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). The agency ignored many warnings from Myah-Lee's birth family regarding the violence of the person who eventually murdered their loved one. In a separate incident, a 14-year-old girl was murdered in downtown Winnipeg, almost immediately after being released from custody.

These children were murdered because there are no placement options for vulnerable children. This is a symptom of a system being so underfunded, that foster parents are forced to shut down their homes. This not only leaves children vulnerable, but it provides opportunities for for-profit agencies to take advantage of the system. As a recent example, Spirit Rising House was owned and operated as a for-profit company who was providing marijuana to children in their homes for several years, without any accountability.

We have heard Minister Fontaine and Premier Kinew discuss their focus on reunifications. We, as [foster parents/respite providers/family members of foster parents, etc] vehemently support successful reunification. Supporting successful reunifications requires time and space to build capacity and for families and communities to heal. This takes time. With 10,000 children and youth in care (90% being Indigenous), reunification does not happen overnight. We are concerned about what is happening in CFS today, tomorrow, and the near future.

We are concerned about the welfare of the children we all care about and have cared for for years. Being so heavily involved in the child welfare system [as foster parents, respite providers/etc], we have solutions.

Proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care:

- An immediate increase in support for foster parents
 - o An increase in the basic maintenance, and fee for service rates; and
 - o A pre-service foster parent training program;
- Consistency across all four Authorities
 - o Consistent fees for service according to a leveling system;
 - o Front-line workers being required to have social work degrees who are registered; and
 - o Open and honest communication with foster parents
- Prevent unnecessary child apprehensions
 - o Prioritize a collaborative working environment that encourages preventative support instead of apprehending children; and
 - o Preventing unnecessary apprehensions will lessen the burden on child welfare workers who often have well beyond the recommended number of cases

These solutions are just a few of the recommendations that have been cited in multiple reports from the Auditor General, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Based on research, community leaders, and recommendations, we know what has to be done. We truly hope this government is willing to make the changes necessary to promote positive outcomes for children in care.

Respectfully,

Mackenzie Winiasz

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

To the Members of the standing Committee on Legislative Affairs,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns. My name is Deborah Flynn.

I am a foster parent for 30+ years with 1 Agency. I also do support work for some young Moms. I have raised 5 foster kids from birth to Adult and who consider me their Mom And their kids Grandma. I also have raised some for awhile who moved on to live with their extended family. I am now raising another 4 from birth and who all have high needs.

Throughout my experience with the child welfare system, I have been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for the children and youth in care. During my tenure, I have been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the province of Manitoba has provided for foster parents.

Furthermore, it has been beyond disheartening to learn about the many unnecessary tragedies that have taken place as a direct result of an underfunded child welfare system. A 17 year old child, Myah-lee was murdered. She was murdered while in the care of child and family services (CFS).The Agency ignored many warnings from Myah-Lee's birth family regarding the violence of the person who eventually murdered their loved one. In a separate incident, a 14 yr old girl was murdered in downtown Winnipeg, almost immediately after being released from Custody.

These children were murdered because there are no placements options for vulnerable children. This is a symptom of a system being so underfunded, that foster parents are forced to shut down their homes. This not only leaves children vulnerable, but it provides opportunities for profit agencies to take advantage of the system. As a recent example, Spirit Rising house was owned and operated as a for-profit company who was providing Marijuana to children in their homes for several years, without any accountability.

We have heard Minister Fontaine and Premier Kinew discuss their focus on reunification. We, as foster parents/respite providers/family members of foster parents, etc. Vehemently support successful reunification. Supporting successful reunification requires time and space to build capacity and for families and communities to heal. This takes time. With 10,000

children and youth in care (90% being Indigenous), reunification does not happen overnight. We are concerned about what is happening in CFS today, tomorrow, and in near future.

We are concerned about the welfare of the children we all care about and have cared for for years Being so heavily involved in the child welfare system (As Foster parents, respite workers, providers/etc. We have solutions.

Proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for the children and youth in care.

An immediate increase in support for foster parents

Increase the basic maintenance and fees for services rates and a pre-service foster parents training program;

Constantly across all four authorities

Consistent fees for services according to a leveling system;

Front line workers being required to have social work degrees who are registered and open and honest communication with foster parents

Prevent unnecessary child apprehensions

Prioritize a collaborative working environment that encourages preventative support instead of apprehending children; and preventing unnecessary apprehensions will lessen the burden on child welfare workers who often have well beyond the recommended number of cases.

These solutions are just a few of the recommendations that has been cited in multiple reports from the auditor General., the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, and the Canadian Association of Social workers. Based on Research, community leaders, and recommendations, we know what has to be done . We truly hope this government is willing to make the changes necessary to promote positive outcomes for children in care.

During covid many of us lost respite, fees for service, we had kids home and kids we had at daycare. Many of us have no daycare for our kid now as the waiting lists are extremely long. We did not get the extras that the government was giving to families, businesses, seniors, etc

Respectfully,

Deborah Flynn

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

To the Members of the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns. My name is Bodi Milljour. I have been a family member of a foster parent for 3 years (and they were a respite provider for 12 years prior to that). I am also a doula (21 years), and have frequently worked with families connected to the foster care system through one way or another. I currently have a recent client who, having experienced the loss of her infant last summer, is struggling not only with her immense grief, but also with having been essentially "kicked out" of care simply because she recently turned 18. She was ill-prepared to be living on her own, and has lost the one support (aside from myself) that she has come to rely on the past few years—her worker. This is not her worker's fault, of course, but speaks to a need for better transitional support. My continued involvement with this incredible young woman is honestly beyond the scope of my job, but I can't bear to be yet another person who disappeared.

Throughout my experience with the child welfare system, I have been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care. During my tenure, I have been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the Province of Manitoba has provided for foster parents.

Furthermore, it has been beyond disheartening to learn about the many unnecessary tragedies that have taken place as a direct result of an underfunded child welfare system. A 17-year-old child, Myah-Lee was murdered. She was murdered while in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). The agency ignored many warnings from Myah-Lee's birth family regarding the violence of the person who eventually murdered their loved one. In a separate incident, a 14-year-old girl was murdered in downtown Winnipeg, almost immediately after being released from custody.

These children were murdered because there are no placement options for vulnerable children. This is a symptom of a system being so underfunded, that foster parents are forced to shut down their homes. This not only leaves children vulnerable, but it provides opportunities for for-profit agencies to take advantage of the system. As a recent example, Spirit Rising House was owned and operated as a for-profit company who was providing marijuana to children in

their homes for several years, without any accountability.

We have heard Minister Fontaine and Premier Kinew discuss their focus on reunifications. We, as family members of foster parents, vehemently support successful reunification. Supporting successful reunifications requires time and space to build capacity and for families and communities to heal. This takes time. With 10,000 children and youth in care (90% being Indigenous), reunification does not happen overnight. We are concerned about what is happening in CFS today, tomorrow, and the near future.

We are concerned about the welfare of the children we all care about and have cared for for years. Being so heavily involved in the child welfare system as family members of foster parents, we have solutions.

Proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care:

- An immediate increase in support for foster parents
 - o An increase in the basic maintenance, and fee for service rates; and
 - o A pre-service foster parent training program;
- Consistency across all four Authorities
 - o Consistent fees for service according to a leveling system;
 - o Front-line workers being required to have social work degrees who are registered; and
 - o Open and honest communication with foster parents
- Prevent unnecessary child apprehensions
 - o Prioritize a collaborative working environment that encourages preventative support instead of apprehending children; and
 - o Preventing unnecessary apprehensions will lessen the burden on child welfare workers who often have well beyond the recommended number of children in their care.
 - o There needs to be better supports for children (especially those in group home situations) as they "age out" of care, to help ensure their success as independent adults.

These solutions are just a few of the recommendations that have been cited in multiple reports from the Auditor General, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Based on research, community leaders, and

recommendations, we know what has to be done. We truly hope this government is willing to make the changes necessary to promote positive outcomes for children in care.

Respectfully,

Bodi Milljour

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my concerns. My name is Phoenix Bishop. I started my journey within child welfare through daycare 20 yrs ago and respite 10 yrs ago. Doing both has introduced me into foster care which I started fostering 5 years ago. I've had the amazing opportunity of being a part of 2 little ones journey, siblings aged 2 & 4, while they went through the trauma of apprehension and then reunification. Over the 2 years they were in my care I spent a lot of time filling in as a support worker and driver as the agency I foster under lacked the proper support. I tried my best and believe made a positive impact on their and their parents lives. We are still connected a year later and I have the honour of being auntie. Right now I have the privilege in taking part in a young teen's journey who is struggling with lack of support in school, child welfare as well as with bio family. It is truly heart breaking to be told no to nearly everything she needs to help support her growth. This lack of support is a direct link to the lack of financial support her school, foster agency and bio parents receive. When I raise concerns I'm reminded this is not my child and to basically mind my business. So I ask who's responsibility is this child under government care when all sectors of government are failing her?

Throughout my experience with the child welfare system, I have been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care. During my tenure, I have been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the Province of Manitoba has provided for foster families.

Furthermore, it has been beyond disheartening to learn about the many unnecessary tragedies that have taken place as a direct result of an underfunded child welfare system. A 17-year-old child, Myah-Lee was murdered. She was murdered while in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). The agency ignored many warnings from Myah-Lee's birth family regarding the violence of the person who eventually

murdered their loved one. In a separate incident, a 14-year-old girl was murdered in downtown Winnipeg, almost immediately after being released from custody.

These children were murdered because there are no placement options for vulnerable children. This is a symptom of a system being so underfunded, that foster parents are forced to shut down their homes. This not only leaves children vulnerable, but it provides opportunities for for-profit agencies to take advantage of the system. As a recent example, Spirit Rising House was owned and operated as a for-profit company who was providing marijuana to children in their homes for several years, without any accountability.

We have heard Minister Fontaine and Premier Kinew discuss their focus on reunifications. I, as a foster parent, vehemently support successful reunification. Supporting successful reunifications requires time and space to build capacity and for families and communities to heal. This takes time. With 10,000 children and youth in care (90% being Indigenous), reunification does not happen overnight. We are concerned about what is happening in CFS today, tomorrow, and the near future.

I am concerned about the welfare of the children we all care about and have cared for for years. Being so heavily involved in the child welfare system we have solutions.

Proposed solutions to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care:

- An immediate increase in support for foster parents
 - o An increase in the basic maintenance, and fee for service rates; and
 - o A pre-service foster parent training program;
- Consistency across all four Authorities
 - o Consistent fees for service according to a leveling system;
 - o Front-line workers being required to have social work degrees who are registered; and
 - o Open and honest communication with foster parents
- Prevent unnecessary child apprehensions
 - o Prioritize a collaborative working environment that encourages preventative support instead of apprehending children; and

o Preventing unnecessary apprehensions will lessen the burden on child welfare workers who often have well beyond the recommended number of cases

These solutions are just a few of the recommendations that have been cited in multiple reports from the Auditor General, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Based on research, community leaders, and recommendations, we know what has to be done. We truly hope this government is willing to make the changes necessary to promote positive outcomes for children in care.

Respectfully,

Phoenix Bishop

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

To the Members of the Standing Committee;

My name is Tara Summerfield. I have been a foster parent since 2010. Currently I have two foster boys that have been living with me since they were two and a half and six months old. They are now 15 and 13. In those thirteen years we have loved, laughed and cried together. We celebrate the victories, support during the trying times and all around love each other every day. They will be with us long after funding runs out.

Throughout my experience with the child welfare system, I have been passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and youth in care. During my time as a foster parent, I have been disheartened to see the unquestionable lack of support that the Province of Manitoba has provided for foster parents and the children in care. Support has been almost non-existent from my CFS agency. I know social workers are overworked and probably underpaid but as a foster parent I need supports as well. Parents need to have full support from social workers when serious incidents happen in a child's life. That has not always been the case, numerous call to the CFS agency regarding certain incidents with no returned calls. Foster parents also need an independent advocate that is not affiliated with their agencies, to deal with issues that come up. Long term foster parents need to have time off, alone, so they can recharge, just like any other parents. Foster parents need to be compensated for excessive expenses that come up regarding child care. I can't count how many times I have paid for things that should have been supplied by their CFS agency; eye glasses,

prescriptions, money to Grandpa so they can have a decent visit. Is it right to expect foster parents to dish out of their own pockets to raise children that have been apprehended by this province?

My boys are active sports enthusiasts. Even as little kids, they didn't get up and watch Saturday morning cartoons, they watched sports highlights from the evening before. They play every sport they can, through school teams, community leagues or just hanging out with friends. They play soccer, baseball, basketball, ultimate Frisbee, football, and all the school sports they can sign up for. But their biggest love of all is hockey. As a foster parent I cannot claim sports fees on my taxes like other parents can, my foster children's hockey expenses were in the range of \$6000 this year, not including fuel and take-out food between games/practices or because we had to be at a rink across the city by 5 pm after school/work were finished. This was not covered by the CFS agency, this all came out of my pocket. Keeping children active in activities, helps keep them out of trouble and gives them long lasting life lessons, sportsmanship and teamwork etiquettes.

Many changes were done to the CFS system under the previous NDP administration. Changes that were supposed to improve the system, but because of a lack of oversight by government, the system is failing. How many times over the years have we heard of children in care, specifically group settings or inappropriate placements that have failed to keep the children safe? The recent deaths of children in care is proof that the current system is not working. Warnings from families, even the children themselves were ignored and not looked into. Kids being offered cannabis or cash to keep them out of trouble is not a viable option. Vulnerable children have nowhere to go, and with the rising cost of living many foster parents are closing their doors because they simply can't afford to take care of the children that need it most. Can you tell me how to feed teenagers nutritious and healthy meals on \$7 a day?

Your government has the opportunity to take steps to fix these issues. They must listen to the experts, the social workers and most importantly the foster parents who look after these children. The rates for foster parents must be increased. Training for foster parents must be provided, both for new parents starting out and parents that have lived in the system for years.

We need trained support workers who are there for us and the children when serious issues come up like a

suspension from school for misbehaviour or an emergency like a broken arm from playing sports.

We need trained workers to work with families and kids to help keep those kids in their own homes when it is logical and safe to do so. Manitoba has one of the highest kids in care rates in the country. That won't change overnight but we do need to take steps to ensure kids can stay in safe situations and have some where safe to go should the need arise. We fully support keeping children with families and in their communities whenever possible, but a child's well-being and safety should not be compromised.

I hope the government will listen to the recommendations that have been cited by the Auditor General, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, the Canadian Association of Social Workers and other experts in the field. I truly hope this government has the compassion to do the right thing for the children.

Respectfully,

Tara Summerfield

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

My name is Marina Twoheart, I am 18 years old.

In 2021... Metis CFS took me away from my foster mom for 16 years and sent me to a group home in Winnipeg. I had told them that my best friend's father (another Metis foster parent) had been sexually abusing me. My foster mom tried to protect me but the CFS social workers didn't like her so they made up lies about her and took me away.

When I was in Winnipeg, Metis social workers wanted me to get to know my my birth family. My birth father started sexually abusing me and trafficked me. I told my foster mom even though Metis CFS said they would send her to jail if she talked to me. I told the group home staff. I told the Metis CFS social workers. I told MACY workers when they would come to the group home and talk to me but nothing ever changed.

I missed my foster family and my birth brothers and I really needed my foster mom. I used lots of drugs to try to forget what was happening to me. I wanted to die and overdosed on fentanyl and heroin in September of 2022 and was in a coma and everybody thought I would die but I didn't.

When I got out of the hospital in February of 2023, Metis CFS sent me to another group home that was

nasty. I was exposed to drugs and drinking and violence and more sexual exploitation. After 2 months, I begged my my foster mom to take me home. She did even though Metis CFS threatened her. I knew that I would die if I stayed there.

I was able to be with lots of my foster family that I love in the summer/fall of 2023 but I had a relapse in December/January when Animikii Ozoson CFS who has my brothers now stopped letting me see my brothers because Metis CFS told Animikii that my foster mom was bad. She is not bad now and she never was bad. She is the only one who really tried to help me and my brothers.

I'm doing good now at home. I am sober and no one is abusing me anymore. I went to drug rehab at Aurora in Gimli. Jordan's Principle paid for it even though I am over 18 because no one else would and my foster mom doesn't have any money. I want to go to Teen Challenge in Newfoundland for a year so I can get my life back.

My 15 year old brother is having a hard time and is using lots of drugs now in Winnipeg. I wish that MACY could help him. MACY won't listen to my foster mom because my foster mom didn't follow the rules. All my brothers are missing mom and their siblings that they grew up with but no one will listen to what us kids actually need. I hope my brother doesn't die.

Marina Twoheart

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

Dear Standing Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our recommendations regarding the review of the current legislation.

Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc., Ojibway for Our Relative's Home, is an Indigenous youth serving organization that has been in operation for over 30 years. The concept of Our Relatives Home goes beyond the traditional nuclear family living together in one house. We recognize that families are extensive networks of strong, connective kinship and are often entire communities who understand that raising a child is everyone's responsibility. Kinship is a system that reflects how people relate to one another and their surroundings, with the aim of creating an undivided and harmonious community.

We respect the important work of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth and honor our responsibility to be Good Relatives in working together to provide holistic Indigenous focused services to youth in our community. In addition to the provincial legislation that governs the roles and responsibilities of the Advocate, we believe the Seven Sacred Laws must be at the forefront.

In reviewing the existing legislation, we are concerned that the current language is more focused on the rights of the Advocate rather than the responsibilities of the role of Advocate. For example, the use of the word "should" and "deserve" when referencing children and youth (Please refer to Chapter AG.7) which sets the tone for the interpretation of the legislation and "must" when referring to reimbursement of expenses for the Advocate (Part 2 Section 5(3)) implying advocacy is optional whereas reimbursement is mandatory. We recommend that the language be amended in the Act to reflect the rights of the child and the responsibilities of the Advocate to ensure they are upheld.

Additionally, recommendations to increase the age of extensions of care from 21 to 25 have been made for close to two decades and there has been no movement on this recommendation (Please refer to "Strengthening Our Youth Their Journey to Independence" written by the Manitoba Advocate in 2006). Evidence supports this decision from numerous perspectives including, but not limited to reduced involvement with justice, improved educational outcomes resulting in increased earnings and fewer youth accessing social assistance, improved health (including mental health), etc.

Consideration must also be given to the definition of "serious injury". As Indigenous peoples, we understand that a holistic view is imperative since Mino Bimaadiziwin (the Good Life) cannot be achieved without balance in the wellness circle including the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual being. Serious injury can and does result from colonial approaches to "care". Addressing the harms caused by Canada's legacy of cultural genocide requires ongoing advocacy and support.

In consideration of the constant changes occurring in social services, including Indigenous governing bodies laying down law and the increasing needs of children and youth in our community, we recommend that the Advocate serve a term of three years to ensure they have the skill set and experience required to respond effectively to the demands. We also

recognize the heart work of the Advocate and are aware of the significant impact of vicarious trauma. We further recommend that the Advocate be eligible for reappointment for up to three three-year terms, which is in accordance with the term of office for most governing bodies.

With respect to the appointment of a Deputy Advocate, we recommend that the language in the Act be amended to stress the importance of ensuring that the person demonstrates understanding of and experience working with Indigenous children, youth, and their families in Manitoba in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

We request transparency regarding the process for determining "any other person, body, or entity" the Advocate contacts as part of the review or investigative process including reporting findings. Further, we request clarification concerning any other legislation the process may be linked to.

We are hopeful that a fulsome review of the Act will result in increased advocacy and accountability to better serve the needs of children, youth, and their families in Manitoba.

Respectfully,

Shanlee Scott
Executive Director
Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc.

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

I read Carol Sander's article, "Indigenous MLA 'worried' about First Nations gaining control of child welfare", in the April 27th Winnipeg Free Press. I totally agree with MLA Amanda Lathlin and Ms Sherry Gott's concern that there needs to be an advocate for the First Nations children who are in care. Ms. Gott is correct when she writes, "There needs to be a voice for those children under the new federal legislation for child welfare."

Approximately 15 years ago, a foster family moved into the house beside us. We live in the recently designated Crescentwood Enderton Park Heritage Conservation District. Our neighbourhood was concerned about a foster family with five First Nation children moving in. That concern was completely ill founded! The Caucasian foster mother and father, the Wilders along with their own 18 year old daughter,

were wonderful parents to these five children - all from the same family, the Penner family! Our entire neighborhood got to know and enjoy the children who played with everyone in the Peanut Park neighbourhood. The Wilders enrolled the children in after school activities, including Their Native Language classes! The young boy, Odie, played on a hockey team for the first time in his life, and would tell us every time he scored a goal. He would come over and declare, "Hey Ross, I scored three goals today!" The oldest child, Sky, had never attended school regularly for various reasons, and when she was put into a grade 8 class at River Heights Junior High, she was completely lost and terrified.

I am a retired school teacher and offered to tutor Sky on a regular basis. When she first came, she never lifted her head and would barely say a word. We worked hard on her school work and gradually she started to gain some confidence, partly because she was learning and improving. We studied every day, all day, for the last couple of weeks before her final exams and she passed all her courses. By the end of the year her teacher told me that she was raising her hand to answer questions because she had gained so much confidence in herself. She had become a different person - thankful and happy. At the end of August she went to see the councillor at Kelvin High School and made arrangements to get extra tutoring and help so that she could continue to do well in her studies. Her desire to succeed was heartwarming!

And Then, disaster struck - something that the Wilders had been dreading happened. One day a representative of Anishinaabe Child and Family Services turned up at the house and simply removed the children from their home. They didn't want Caucasian foster parents raising the children. They didn't seem to care that the children were thriving! They put them temporarily in a hotel, and then moved them to a house in St. Vital with a 21 year old boy supervising them. The children were distraught. Sky, 16 by this time, took a taxi back to the Wilders and begged them to let the children return "home". She said the fridge where they were housed was empty, and that they missed their home and parents.

One lawyer in our neighbourhood went to McNally Robinson book store and bought an age appropriate book for each of the children. I delivered them to the children and sat outside on the lawn reading to the youngest ones. When I returned home, I was met by an official saying I was not to visit them again or I would be arrested.

The foster parents and our whole neighbourhood met to support and fundraise in order to take this situation to court. It was amazing to witness a neighbourhood pulling together to try to keep these children in a home where they were happy and flourishing. I understand that the case went as far as the third level in court and the parents were successful. The children were supposed to be returned to their Crescentwood home, but that never happened! The Wilders formally adopted the youngest boy who they had raised from an infant, but the other four children were split up and went their various ways. The last I heard, the teenager that I had tutored, Sky, had a baby. Odie, the young boy who played hockey had joined a gang.

These children desperately needed an advocate. The Anishinaabe Child and Family Services councillor who came and took the children away was a 21 year old girl without the qualifications for such an important position.

Our neighbourhood felt that these five children had a chance at a successful life and lost that chance. Perhaps if there had been an advocate working on their behalf, the outcome might have been different. They were denied the opportunity to become successful, contributing members of our community!

Sincerely,

Barbara Parke

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

Good morning,

I wanted to make it in personally for today's meeting and unfortunately I could not so I will write this instead. Thank you for the opportunity.

Fellow foster parents today will be telling their stories and advocating for the youth in their care and I share their concerns about lack of resources, training, licensing and funding. I am trusting that they will address those concerns for me. Though recently my concerns are more with leadership in Manitoba. My concern is that when addressed or hearing mention that citizens in Manitoba have concerns about the welfare of children in this government's care we are told that we are colonizers who get no say because the Minister of Families is "too busy" trying to fix the wrongs/harms of past governments. When the concern was raised the Prime Minister got up and left the room! Too busy to stop the continued deaths of

Manitoba's children? Meanwhile the Minister of Families is using her platform under a system created by said settlers to silence citizen's voices. Also many foster parents in fact are indigenous and not all children in care are indigenous. This is deeply deeply concerning. It should not matter anyone's background. When you are told our most vulnerable are struggling you do not turn your back on these children, you get to work, do your job and help children and families. Hearing leading members being attacked in Legislation saying, you get no say, when bringing up concerns is wholly concerning. In that rant the Ministers of Families told them they stole or were a part of stealing funds from our most vulnerable and no longer got a say. Sorry madam Minister that is not your choice. This is a democracy and those people were voted in and they do have a say. It is in fact their job. The Minister went on to say her government was a part of the lawsuit just settled about the matter. Almost bragging. She forgets to mention the lawsuit was for the years of 2005-2019 where the NDP was leadership at the beginning of that time and for a decade afterwards.

Jordan's Principle, upheld by the courts, states that all First Nations children across Canada have access to the same resources of all Canadian children so First Nations children have an equal chance to thrive. Right now children in Manitoba's care are receiving half the funding of that of any other child in care across Canada. Half! That is a considerable difference and the Minister is aware. The Minister did not address this and instead said her focus is elsewhere. That her focus is making sure children are placed with the proper authority. I support this one hundred percent but also know it doesn't happen overnight. My question is that, is the Minister waiting (possibly years) to adequately fund these children? Waiting for the next lawsuit? Or is it that these new agencies will still not receive adequate funding either? Waiting to fund these children properly is meant to punish foster parents and is detestable. We did not go into homes and apprehend these children. We are the caretakers and the bottom of the choice making scale. Fingers have been pointed and foster parents have been shamed and I feel this government needs to remember it is them that has asked us to step up and do this job of caring for the children this government has apprehended. Unless Manitoba has stopped apprehending children in the last six months we are all working under the same system. My shame is your shame Madam Minister. I wish and hope for a day no child ever needs government intervention. Until that

day comes we must work together, find common ground and help our most vulnerable.

If the adults can not get along how will these children survive it? Thank you,

Michelle Ans

Re: The Advocate for Children and Youth Act (review)

To whom it may concern,

Please accept my submission to the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs regarding their review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act. Canada signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. Signing the Convention means these countries promised to protect and promote these rights. The Convention says that governments are in charge of making sure that children's rights are respected and that children know about their rights.

I understand that the provincial Act has a duty and sacred responsibility to protect all children of Manitoba. I also understand that all children have their unique histories that must be taken into consideration when looking to change the environment they live in, or have been placed in. I highlight this due to the high number of First Nations and Metis children that have been, and continue to be, apprehended in Manitoba under the guise that they would then be 'properly cared for.' In the UNCRC, under the Preamble, it recognizes that in all countries in the world, there exist children living in exceptionally difficult conditions and that such children require special consideration. Article 20 (1) states: "A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State."

As a lifelong resident of Manitoba, I was apprehended at the age of five and placed in residential school until I was 16 (1957-68). My experience of being forcibly removed from my nurturing family, community and collective has sent me on a lifelong journey to healing that requires deep, difficult and emotional work. This includes dealing with loss of my Cree identity; the imposition of a race-based identity; the imposition of inferiority by the Catholic church who ran the school; forced assimilation; cultural genocide including language loss; sexual grooming; loss of

communication, voice, sovereignty, and spirituality; being parentless, etc.

I am 72 years of age today and still dealing with the patriarchal and government-imposed effects that was inflicted through legislation and policy. The haphazard implementation of these policies in residential school included harsh punishment and constant surveillance, as if I had done something wrong to be born a Cree. The lingering dehumanization and fear that this generates takes away many rights of former students and inter-generational populations, many of whom continue to experience such apprehension.

Accordingly, I will be making my recommendations from a variety of perspectives including former chair of the School Committee under a provincial school system; a dentist; a Senator; a former residential school student; a First Nations woman; a mother and a grandmother. I also provide these perspectives as an individual who has had actions taken against me due to being labelled as 'inferior' and segregated due to the social construct of race. Colonialism is still present in the federal and provincial governments, embedded as institutional racism through its systems (including child care, health, education) and supported by its structures (including policies like child apprehension, discriminatory legislation, patriarchal processes). Unfortunately for First Nations, our children are further caught in inter-jurisdictional gaps that have never been addressed.

Both federal and provincial government officials and representatives must ensure that children in Manitoba do not just survive but thrive. Children and young adults in Manitoba face huge challenges that include abandonment; loss of identity; human rights and civil rights abuses, and so on.

Every one of us has a role to play. This can include advocacy; giving voices; financial support; improved legislation; and ensuring accountability, transparency, and truth. These actions all serve to protect the inherent rights that children are born with, with safety top of mind. As a society, we have the responsibility and capability to eliminate unnecessary suffering. As legislators, we need to look at large scale government reform in how we treat children. We do not want to continue to support acts of 'savagery.' We should be held to a higher standard and greater obligation to identify and address all violations against these crucial standards – especially for those within our 'care.'

We can demonstrate reconciliation by serving as legislators who translate their caring into reconciliatory action, such as these recommendations represent. We all hope to see the system adopt positive change to ensure better futures for children under our care. These are our future decision makers. We need to foster an improved world if we want humanity to thrive and if we want to empower the next seven generations to live lives with meaning and purpose – as they were meant to.

As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all ships. Ensuring substantive equity for First Nations, Inuit and Metis children in Manitoba will not only help all other children but will also enrich the community and provincial fabric. This will necessitate confronting colonialism that exists in governments, in the public and private sectors, and in each of us. It is time to correct the harms done under forced family separations so that future generations will not continue to suffer this same fate. If we fail to do so, does this mean we are condoning family separation and that we are implicit in the trauma that this will continue to cause?

I would like to be explicit that I support each of the recommendations that have been brought forward by the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) for consideration regarding the review of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act. I ask that you please see below for my remarks on many of these recommendations.

Part 1: Definitions – Narrowing Service Gaps for Manitoba Children, Youth, and Young Adults

To coincide with the concerns most commonly observed in the education system, the Advocate recommends:

- For the definition of Educational Programming under Designated Services to refer to all educational programming as provided under The Public Schools Act.

My comments:

- I agree with this expansion for a number of reasons:
 - To only involve children who have an individual education plan under *The Public Schools Act* implies that the education plan will somehow influence the social and political determinants that affect and limit many children's opportunities – which it does not.
 - There are limitations to educators' teaching

methods, as I found out when I was chair of the School Committee under a provincial school system.

- For instance, the math specialist advised me that many teachers are intimidated by mathematics especially the teaching of fractions, and that puts limits on their students – starting as young as in grades 4 and 5. We had to get tutors to correct this deficit. As a result, a large number of students did not attend school because they were unable to understand what was being presented by their teacher – whether it was math, science, and so on.
- In many of the communities there were no labs.
- Another example is that teaching methods must accommodate the learning style of the students and many teachers can only teach in one way. I found that out as a university student. I had the privilege of having my chemistry teacher adjust his teaching style when I could not absorb/understand specific parts of his lecture.
- What are the root causes of the barriers to starting, undergoing, and finishing an education? We need to go beyond individual action plans to truly give children, youth, and young adults real opportunities to succeed.
- Continuing to work within silos is an injustice. When working as a dentist on my reserve, I came to understand how interconnected the consequences were of institutional racism practiced in such systems – whether it was in education, health, child care, or natural resources. I came to understand how structural racism propped these systems through legislation, policies, processes, decisions, and actions.
- The reason I raise this here is that if we only look at an individual education plan, we cannot deal with the consequences that are health- impacted: mental illness/conditions, suicides, consequences from substandard housing, lack of sanitation of clean drinking water, food insecurity, gas insecurity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, etc. We cannot deal with the consequences that surround sub-standard childcare: pipeline to incarceration, contact with the youth justice system; involvement with gangs & drugs, and the list goes on.
- When I was decolonizing the Western way of providing dental care and treatment as a dentist, I no longer asked the child "why didn't you brush

your teeth?" Instead, I asked myself: "Did this child have enough to eat last night and this morning? Did this child have a safe place to live, play and sleep last night? Did they get enough sleep? Was there domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and/or sexual predators in the house last night? Do they have the right clothes for the current weather? Did they get a hug as they left this morning?"

- Blaming the child/youth/young adult for barriers to their education is unacceptable. Under the UNCRC's Article 28 (1)(e) indicates that States Parties shall "Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates." Of equal applicability, Article 28 (2) says: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention."
- As you can see, these areas move away from an individual education plan.

To ensure the mandate of the advocate is addressing issues and concerns for gender diverse youth, an especially vulnerable group that requires additional protection and support, the advocate recommends:

- The addition of "services for gender diverse youth" as a designated service for children.

My comments:

- Under the Conventions' basic principles, under Non-Discrimination, the rights of all children are to be respected without discrimination of any kind, including gender.
- Appropriate and consistent support for gender diverse children, youth and young adults is critically needed. The issue surrounding gender diverse children, youth and young adults will not go away simply because adults and legislators are refusing to adequately acknowledge that they live among us. As First Nations, we have long acknowledged that gender diverse people have their own unique gifts and were placed on this earth for a purpose. Gender diverse people are human beings and have inherent and human rights like everyone else. To continue to knowingly place gender diverse children, youth and young adults in vulnerable situations is discrimination.

- Insufficient public knowledge of the problems and concerns experienced/raised by gender diverse children, youth and young adults that would demand a change is problematic. Not enough is known of their problems to establish the responsive solution these individuals are needing/seeking.
- Educating the public, including leaders and legislators, about gender diverse children, youth and young adults may spur action toward solutions.
- These children, youth and young adults have not had the right to speak for themselves. Article 12 of the UNCRC states:
 - 1) States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
 - 2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

To address the growing concerns regarding the unique needs of young adults, and the resource concerns for those transitioning to young adulthood, the advocate recommends:

- The expansion of designated services for young adults as related to their transition to adulthood; specifically removing the requirement that disability services or educational programming are a designated service for only those young adults who received services under or were in care under, The Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) prior to their 18th birthday.

My comments:

- There are many young people who are not properly cared for but are not in the care system.
- One of the main areas that need to be acknowledged and accounted for is identity. Institutions including schools, hospitals, and corrections all have an influence in shaping the lives of children who transition to youth then

adulthood. They carry these the imprints of these societal influences and oftentimes do so subconsciously.

- Many will have experienced a poor start in life and/or interrupted education. Some will have been abused or seriously neglected. Through no fault of their own, the future prospects of these youth have been diminished. The failure to secure proper care and support so critical in their development may result in them getting into trouble and coming into contact with the youth justice system.

To clarify the types of injuries and incidents reported by public services to the serious injury program, the advocate recommends:

- The consideration by the Committee of whether the intent and purpose of the serious injury legislation is better served by defining serious "incidents" rather than "injuries," in order to remove the ambiguity of whether the most serious concerns affecting children, youth, and young adults (e.g., suicide attempts or acts of violence) are meeting the definition of an injury.

My comments:

- The effects of the intergenerational trauma that First Nations children carry with them include not only physical manifestations including suicide, maiming, and overdosing, but these actions also carry with them severe emotional, spiritual, and mental effects.
- I have experienced severe anxiety and, in those moments, understood why vulnerable and struggling individuals are driven to suicide. I have gone to the Emergency Room because my anxiety resulted in an extremely high heart rate and elevated blood pressure, necessitating an ECG and bloodwork to rule out a heart attack. While this was not considered a "serious injury" it certainly was a serious incident in my life. Thankfully, I had the privilege to have it diagnosed as anxiety and I went for counselling as I would have refused chemical restraint through sedatives.
- While waiting in the Emergency ward I met a young man who started a discussion with me and asked me if I had ever experienced anxiety. He was there due to his own anxiety, and we talked for about an hour. He told me he had woken up underneath a bridge and had no recollection of the preceding events. He had no money for food so I gave him some, realizing it would help to alleviate

at least one aspect of his suffering. Before he was called to be seen, a small group of young men (I wondered if they were they a gang) came for him and as he left, he turned back to look at me. I still remember his look and I still think of him and wonder what became of this serious incident in his life.

- Article 19 of the UNCRC states:
 - 1) States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
 - 2) Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

Part 3: General Responsibilities and Powers – Advancing Human Rights and Reconciliation

To strengthen and further empower the Advocate to uphold the rights of children under the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Advocate recommends:

- Amending section 12 of the ACYA, which references the power to raise awareness and understanding of the UNCRC, to include the ability to advocate for children's rights as outlined in the UNCRC. The Advocate may take steps to raise awareness and understanding of, or advance for, the rights of children as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child."

My comments:

- The UNCRC is frequently referenced, upheld, advocated for and alluded to by many senators in the varied and wide-ranging work that they do to protect children. As an international tool within the Canadian toolkit, it is vital that it is wielded in appropriate and applicable instances – such as this – to better ensure the rights of the child are met.

To recognize the importance of international human rights law in a Manitoba context, and the implications on the rights of Manitoba's children and youth found in the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Advocate recommends:

- The amendment of section 12 to include UNDRIP and UNCRPD. In alternative, the addition of a new section in recognition of these international instruments may be considered. The Advocate may take steps to raise awareness and understanding of, or advocate for, the rights of children as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

My comments:

- In my work as a Senator, I have personally used, relied upon, and referenced UNDRIP in the work I do on behalf of First Nations in Manitoba and across Canada.
- In my work as a Senator, I have also used, relied upon, and referenced the UNCRPD in the work I do on behalf of the disability community across Canada.
- As with the UNCRC, such international tools that Canada is a signatory to must be applied as the context necessitates. Such tools better position the Advocate in their work in support of, and on behalf of, children, youth, and young adults who are not empowered and enabled to advocate for themselves in such a manner.

To strengthen the Advocate's commitment to collaborating with community, and to reach the collaborative goal of providing essential support to manitoba's indigenous communities when requested, the Advocate recommends:

- The addition of a section in Part 3, where the Advocate may enter into agreements with any public body, including Indigenous governing bodies, to allow the Advocate to carry out responsibilities or exercise powers under the act.

My comments:

- As a Senator, I know firsthand the value and

importance of working with communities in a way that places reconciliation and self-determination top of mind.

- In the legislative work of Parliament, we often use the term 'Indigenous governing bodies' to ensure that we are working alongside them, creating space so they can be involved in solutions.
- In federal legislation, 'Indigenous governing bodies' are defined as:
 - A council, government or other entity that is authorized to act on behalf of an Indigenous group, community or people that holds rights recognized and affirmed by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

Part 6: General Provisions – The Importance of Reviewing the ACYA at Regular Intervals to Ensure the Continual Commitment to and Recognition of the Rights of Manitoba's Children, Youth, and Young Adults, the Advocate recommends:

- For The Advocate for Children and Youth Act To be reviewed at regular intervals, utilizing the proclamation date of March 15, 2018, as the

starting point. Consideration should be given to similar acts in both British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, which include the provision for review every five years.

My comment:

- The majority of federal legislation include a similar such provision.
- This feature ensures accountability and responsiveness that may be necessary to ensure that the Advocate's mandate, function, and responsibility is always best aligned with their ability to support their work for, and on behalf of, children, youth and young adults.

I thank you for your time and consideration on these important points and I urge you to support the thoughtful and critical recommendations that MACY has brought forward.

Sincerely,

Senator Mary Jane McCallum
Citizen of Barren Lands First Nation
Treaty 10, Manitoba Region

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.manitoba.ca/legislature/hansard/hansard.html>