

**Children's Ministry Must Develop a Standard Protocol for Children Found in Marijuana Grow Ops, says BC Association of Social Workers**

The Ministry of Children and Family Development must develop a standard protocol for social workers investigating children found in marijuana grow op homes, says the BC Association of Social Workers. "Children found in a grow op have been put in harm's way by their parents", states Paul Jenkinson, chair of the BCASW Child Welfare and Family Committee. "These children are in danger of poisoning because of the large amounts of fertilizers in close proximity. The grow op is a humid environment where moulds grow and affect their respiratory health. The electrical bypass that steals electricity from hydro companies puts children at risk of electrocution and house fires. Barred windows and multiple locks on door means the children have no way of escape if a fire breaks out. The very real threat of grow ripoffs by rival gangs or growers puts the children at risk of violence, guns, and beatings occurring around or to them".

MCFD's response has varied over the years from one in which marijuana grow ops were seen to be a police issue to more recent practices that acknowledge the safety and violence risks associated with children living in a grow op. Unfortunately policy makers still seem committed to child welfare practices that are both dated and dangerous. Having the children go to a relative when their home situation is unsafe has been a responsible ministry practice in some circumstances. It is not a responsible practice in marijuana grow op situations as many of the relatives are part of a network of grow op homes. BCASW is calling on MCFD to establish a special protocol for the placement of children in grow op situations.

MCFD response has focused on the immediate safety of the child found in the grow op. MCFD spokesperson Kate Thompson was quoted in a recent newspaper article (Province, September 11) as saying "the child could be taken into care, placed with extended family or returned to parents if it is safe enough". This emphasis on reducing the immediate risk to the child, until *it is safe enough* does not address the ongoing risks and the mindset of parents who put their child in such dangerous situations. Kate Thompson notes "if the parents are released the kids could be back with their parents the same day". The BCASW requests that the Ministry review this practice as it appears to be an unsafe response to parents who put their children in very dangerous situations.

BCASW takes exception to MCFD spokesperson Kate Thompson's further comments that "we are not seeing large numbers so it's hard to say there's any kind of trend". Social workers in the field cite police statistics of approximately 5000 grow ops functioning in the lower mainland, with children found in 20% of the homes. It seems that the Ministry is minimizing the risk to the very children it is mandated to protect. Jenkinson notes "it is this pattern of minimizing the risk for children in grow ops that have contributed to the Ministry's slow response to this emerging child protection crisis".

BCASW recommends that MCFD produce a standard practice policy that would include:

- 1) A practice standard that clearly directs social workers to check out the physical safety of any alternative home presented by the parents at the time of the grow op bust;
- 2) Instructions that all persons in the alternative home have an initial police criminal record check to address the risk that the child may be left with others involved in the drug trade;
- 3) Prioritize as "high risk parents" those who put their children in these dangerous conditions and conduct the safety assessment and planning for the children with this ranking being taken into consideration;
- 4) Direct that the children have a complete physical done the day after the grow op bust and that the thorough physical be conducted in a hospital setting;

- 5) That MCFD maintain contact with these high-risk families for at least three months after it determines it is now safe for the children to return to the parents' care. That the contact be formalized by a legal Family Court Supervision Order with specific conditions outlined for the parents. The Supervision Order should include specific safety-enhancing conditions such as a) the parent will not initiate or be found in a grow op and b) the social worker will have access to the house and to the children.

BCASW notes that the use of a Supervision Order and a uniform set of conditions is becoming standard child protection practice in some British Columbian communities but practices vary widely across the province. It is this variation in practice that the BCASW is asking MCFD to address. There are practice protocols for many other common child protection risks. It is now time to have a common practice protocol to guide child protection social workers in contact with children found in high risk grow op homes.