

January 2016

Responding to the [Plecas Review, Part One: Decision Time A review of policy, practice and legislation of child welfare in BC in relation to a judicial decision in the J.P. case](#)

Below is brief summary of the thoughts, actions, and analysis of some BCASW members as gathered by Carol Ross, BCASW's Lead for Child Protection.

I had the opportunity to meet with Bob Plecas before his report was released in December 2015, then read the full report, media reactions, and pulled comments from a number of our members. Several actions have resulted:

- A [letter of support](#) for the continuation of the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth was sent to the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth.
- A response has been prepared to be sent to Bob Plecas.
- A letter has been drafted for Minister Stephanie Cadieux affirming BCASW support for the bulk of the Plecas recommendations and requesting a meeting with her to elaborate on our priorities.
- Dianne Heath, BCASW Executive Director, spoke with Bob Plecas and she and I provided input to the media.

As expected, BCASW members' analysis of and reactions to this report varied. Some quickly reacted to assumed disrespect shown to Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. Actually, there is much in the report that honours her work and the importance of the role, including a recommendation to continue the position for another six years (at least) and to continue to review the role and legislation. Plecas rightly says it was the stated long term goal to return oversight to the ministry. Many of us who have been involved in child protection advocacy feel strongly that external oversight of MCFD will always be essential.

Some members see the negative impact that reports from the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth have on MCFD social workers. This concern is valid from my perspective, and is recognized (perhaps too simplistically) in the report. Others stressed what was missing: impact of poverty and colonialism; lack of inter-ministerial collaboration on ending child abuse; recommendation for College registration for ministry staff; lack of comment on the scarcity of child protection and family advocacy; limits of access to legal services for families. Robert Hart, BCASW Advocacy Committee, commented "I did not see a clear commitment to those external programs that social workers need to address parent's issues immediately: addiction programs, anti-violence, and a higher degree of counselling program than we have generally available. We also need provincial standards for parent support programs with very clear realizable objectives in terms of home maintenance and acceptable levels of child care."

I believe we all recognize the need for child safety to be the number one ministry priority; not managing within budget. All who provided feedback on the report agreed on the following priorities: additional MCFD funding, staffing, and services for children and families; ongoing training for front line and management staff; and access to skilled clinical supervision for child protection social workers.

In meeting with Bob Plecas, it became clear to me that he had limited understanding of the diversity of social work roles and what education was needed to prepare us for all roles. I was able to elaborate on the reasons social work education is broadly based and includes ethics, philosophy, communication,

critical thinking and analysis along with the over-arching threads of social justice and advocacy, rather than on training every student for child protection work.

I agree with much that is in the Plecas report, even though it is not tightly written and much of it is not new. I can see opinions from his personal history and perhaps related bias threaded throughout. I frankly enjoyed speaking with him and appreciated his questions, candor, and good listening skills.

Specific points of agreement include:

- The management model must change, especially in the areas of incident reporting/tracking and skilled supervision.
- Access to clinical supervision is essential.
- Staffing and therefore funding levels must increase. Will 100 new positions be adequate? I doubt it. Is there excess in some areas of management and administration? Likely. Backfill is essential so that when employees are on vacation or ill, there are always additional qualified employees to manage caseloads.
- Many internal changes in direction, priority, data collection, and more, within MCFD over the last decade or two have created havoc and left many offices, departments, and programs floundering and overwhelmed. The impact of change to Delegated Agencies and poor management of that process, as well as the high incidence of Aboriginal involvement in the child protection system is under recognized and under emphasized in the report. One Aboriginal Deputy Minister will not be the solution.
- All managers need to have directly related training and background along with clinical skills.
- Ongoing training at all levels is essential. That fits well with the recommendation for all to be registered social workers.
- I appreciate that Plecas recognized Child Protection as “one of the most difficult jobs in government.” Employees deserve higher wages and other workplace supports. There must be a far better system for evaluating staff performance, bias, incompetence, and in weeding out harmful practice.
- There has been a long history of punishing front line staff when a case goes awry and in some instances, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond has joined in this approach. Incompetence and bias must be addressed, however branding all workers creates harm, including a negative impact on children and families. When I speak with MCFD staff, the negative impact of reports (even the notice that a new report is coming out) is palpable. They also appreciate and value the arm’s length analysis and resulting recommendations.
- Quality assurance practices need a massive overhaul. Families report significant inadequacies in the administrative review process. Most parents/grandparents will not go through the complaint process due to fear of retaliation and deep mistrust of the system. The current system has very limited data based on input from families. Youth voices are slowly being heard more and more, but parents’ and kinship caregivers’ voices are faint.
- The Representative’s role is still needed and we need to be able to provide her office with our constructive criticism. No one is perfect, nor is the Representative’s approach without negative consequences. It will be difficult to fill her shoes at the end of 2016.
- We need to work harder towards registration of MCFD staff and perhaps even harder, on building awareness of the diversity and value of the profession of social work as a whole
- Nothing to add re the ICM system. It was an expensive and disruptive mess. It has improved and still needs to improve.
- External oversight remains essential. A constant move towards collaboration is also essential.

- From page 42 on, in the section entitled “Where To From Here”, there is much that most members have agreed with in the past, however, lack of trust in the Ministry is a significant barrier. I personally don't like Plecas' “contrarian” model and cannot see how that can come from within. Big systems are powerful. Standing outside the influence of one's own system takes superhuman effort. There needs to be an external child protection advocacy system in BC that protects caregivers' rights as well as children's and is at arms length from government.

At our recent BCASW Board meeting we had a discussion on the role of advocacy within BCASW and by Board and Committee members. This is a discussion that needs to continue. I encourage members to seek out committees that fit your areas of study or passion and to get involved.

Currently there is no official Child Protection Committee of the Board but instead a small group of members who have been working together to analyse the Plecas Review as well as CPP Disability pension inequities that have an impact on children. If there is interest in forming a Child Welfare/Child Protection Advocacy committee, we can make that happen. Please let me know if you are interested in active participation by emailing me at ceross@shaw.ca

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