



A Voice for Youth

MEDIA RELEASE

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National Child Day — Putting Children and Youth First

SASKATOON — On the occasion of National Child Day marking the 19th Anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the Saskatchewan Children's Advocate calls on the Saskatchewan Government to embrace and promote a comprehensive "children's agenda" that puts children and youth first in this era of provincial prosperity.

"The rights of children and youth should be viewed in the same light as those afforded groups such as women, First Nations peoples and the disabled, all of whom have demanded that they be treated with respect and dignity, and that their voices be heard," said Marvin Bernstein, Saskatchewan Children's Advocate. "We need to move away from the idea that children are property or objects of protection, and begin to view them as rights-holders and full members of our society."

In Saskatchewan, 12.9 per cent of children and youth live below the poverty line and the situation is even more serious for Aboriginal children, where the poverty rate stands at approximately 50 per cent. Among the nearly 4,500 children in care of the Saskatchewan Government or First Nations child and family service agencies, there is a significant over-representation of Aboriginal children.

"While 15 per cent of the total Saskatchewan population is Aboriginal, a staggering 80 per cent of children coming into care are of Aboriginal background with 75 per cent of these children being of First Nations descent," said Bernstein. "This is one of the highest rates in the country and compares unfavourably with the national average of Aboriginal children in care, which has been estimated at a still disproportionate 38 per cent."

Bernstein cited the apology offered to residential school survivors by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in June 2008 as a positive first step in acknowledging and addressing Aboriginal issues, and in particular those affecting Aboriginal children and youth, in Canada. He noted that there are many lessons to be learned from these past events and experiences that could inform current attitudes, policies, practices and legislation that marginalize or harm children and youth in Saskatchewan.

“The root causes of why and how so many Aboriginal children are in care or living in poverty are complex and require application of historical and contemporary contexts,” said Bernstein. “However, to even begin that analysis, we must first be willing to acknowledge that this and other children’s issues exist; that social injustice is not a thing of the past; and that every day certain rights of children and youth are breached in our province.”

With the new prosperity in the province, built upon the abundance of “economic resources,” the Children’s Advocate encouraged the public to consider one very special and precious “human resource” that could sustain this success into future generations: the children and youth of Saskatchewan.

“Now is the time to invest in them, so that they too can benefit from our Province’s economic prosperity,” concluded Bernstein. “Saskatchewan will be a much better place for all of us if we do.”

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The Saskatchewan Children’s Advocate Office was established in 1994 as an independent office under the Ombudsman and Children’s Advocate Act.