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Honouring the memory of Phoenix Sinclair: Our collective responsibility

“The social and economic conditions that render children vulnerable to abuse and neglect are well beyond the scope of the child welfare system” (*Hon. Ted Hughes, Commissioner, The Legacy of Phoenix Sinclair: Achieving the Best for All Our Children*)

The long awaited Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry report is comprehensive in scope. It includes 62 recommendations that if implemented, will improve services to vulnerable children and families. The majority of recommendations focus on changes specific to the child welfare system and related legislation. A smaller number of recommendations speak to the need to support community - based organizations and in particular those that “promote cultural identity within Aboriginal communities”. Other important recommendations focus beyond the child welfare purview but respond to the underlying social and economic conditions that the Inquiry report describes. These recommendations are critical to addressing the often cited and too quickly dismissed “root causes”.

For example, recommendation 51 acknowledges the importance of stable housing and the poverty-related issues that make families vulnerable and can lead them into contact with the child welfare system. The report echos a recommendation initially raised in the CCPA Manitoba report titled *Bill C: 10 - The Truth about Consequences* to increase the social assistance housing allowance to at least 75 percent of the median market rate. Make Poverty History Manitoba has made increasing the rental allowance

a priority in a community campaign that has been publicly endorsed by many individuals and organizations.

Recommendation 50 calls on the province to “closely examine the 2009 report, *The View From Here: Manitobans Call for a Poverty Reduction Plan*” with a view to implementing the outstanding recommendations, paying particular attention to the area of adult education.” This recommendation is particularly profound because it recognizes that ending the cycle of poverty through a comprehensive set of policy measures is essential to improving outcomes for children and families. *The View From Here* lays out targets and timelines to reduce poverty and it includes several recommendations for how we might meet those targets.

The View From Here is an example of how the community can come together to provide a road map for government action. It aligns with Commissioner Hughes’ observation that “it is not possible to entirely prevent violent acts against children” but we can do much to improve the social and economic conditions “that put Phoenix at risk the day she was born.” This, he says, is “within our power to address, and it is our collective responsibility to do so.”

Using our collective power

Like the many public inquiries and commissions surrounding tragic events, the Phoenix Sinclair report rightly identifies where improvements can be made to policies and programs, but it also acknowledges the deeply structural

there is an alternative.

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issues that can lead to such tragic outcomes, but are more difficult and costly to address – at least in the short term.

While the recommendations outlined in the report are comprehensive in response to the complexity of the challenges facing vulnerable children and families, it is deeply concerning that the immediate public reaction has focused almost solely on fixing the child welfare system and its social workers.

Sadly, this has been the experience with past Inquiries. For example in 1982 the Province of Manitoba ordered a stop to out-of-province adoptions of Aboriginal children, and the Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoption and Placements recommended important child welfare reforms that were later implemented. However, in the final 1984 report titled *No Quiet Place*, Justice Kimelman also raised much deeper concerns, concluding that the “sixties scoop” was a continuation of the assimilationist policies that guided residential schools, and that governments continued to dismiss broader systemic issues, including Aboriginal economic security. Similarly the first page of the 1988 *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry* notes a denial of justice “of the the most profound kind,” describing Canada’s legacy to Aboriginal people as being “poverty and powerlessness.” The report spoke to the interconnectedness between the justice system and the child welfare system and recommended important changes to the child welfare system that have since been implemented. However, a high percentage of Aboriginal families continue to experience deep, intergenerational poverty; the structural issues identified in the report remain unchanged.

We now have an opportunity to leave a very different legacy in the name of Phoenix Sinclair, by prioritizing the recommendations that respond to the broader social and economic conditions that the Commissioner describes. Justice Hughes rightly notes that “the social and economic conditions that render children vulnerable

to abuse and neglect are well beyond the scope of the child welfare system,” and he emphasizes that “the responsibility to keep children safe can not be born by any single arm of government, or even by a single government, it’s a responsibility that belongs to the entire community.”

The Province of Manitoba has begun the process of implementing the recommendations of the Phoenix Sinclair report. The broader community can take responsibility by ensuring that our governments take action to address the underlying poverty that is the real problem. One way that we can do so is by advocating for the comprehensive changes outlined in the *View From Here, Manitobans Call for a Poverty Reduction Plan*, a report that was thoughtfully crafted and endorsed by over 70 community-based organizations committed to alleviating poverty.

Justice Hughes begins his report by describing Phoenix Victoria Hope Sinclair as a healthy baby who came into the world “with a lifetime of possibilities ahead of her.” But he also notes that “she entered life in circumstances that were fraught with risk.”

Adopting the recommendations outlined in the 2009 *View from Here* and others that will be put forward in an updated report in 2014 will serve to minimize the risk for vulnerable children and families. It is our responsibility to Phoenix Sinclair to move forward with the understanding that this beautiful innocent child died not because one individual or one system failed her. She died because a bigger system failed her. We are all part of that system and there is much we can and must do to change it.

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