

Altogether better.



THE FEDERATION
of COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES of BC

The following op-ed was composed by FCSSBC in response to a string of tragic youth suicides:

December 9, 2015 - Complex social issues require complex evidence-informed solutions.

Victoria, BC - Last week, an 18-year-old youth in the care of B.C.'s Ministry of Children and Family Development committed suicide. This is the fourth young person from government care to have reached this point of desperation in recent months.

There is a lot of work that needs to be done to prevent tragedies such as this. We need to do better. But responsibility for these tragedies cannot be assigned to a single person, nor a single institution. We all carry some of the responsibility. This increase in youth suicides is not just an MCFD trend. This is not just a kids in care trend. This is a much bigger social problem with roots in issues of poverty, housing affordability, mental health, and restorative justice.

According to a 2015 Conference Board of Canada report, mental illness is the second most common reason for hospital stays for people between 15 and 34 in Canada (and the third most common for people between 35 and 44). The systemic causes of these tragic suicides stretch beyond any one government ministry. MCFD has a responsibility, but the burden of responsibility falls beyond MCFD to Cabinet and the Ministries of Health, Justice, Social Development, and Finance.

Tragedies like these do not occur in a vacuum. The roots of this problem also stretch far beyond the government buildings. Yes, our elected leaders and civil servants are a big piece of the puzzle, but they are only one piece. We all need to take a look in the mirror.

We need to reevaluate our own societal values, our prejudices, and our beliefs. We need to think about the attention we give to one news story over another, how we involve ourselves in the political process, where the boundaries of our empathy fall. There is a long complicated history of government involvement in the care of children in this country. We need to understand how we got here if we really want to enact change. That will require taking a long hard look at the fraught relationship between Canada's First Nations and the rest of society.

Let's be clear. This issue is far too important to be bogged with details of custody and blame. Youth suicide is a complex social issue which will require long-term systemic change. We cannot and should not oversimplify the issue for the sake of pointing fingers. In times of crisis (and this is definitely a crisis), doing so may garner political sway. But we don't need blame. We need solutions.



We need to address the mental health crisis facing young people today. We need a plan that goes beyond knee-jerk reactions and piecemeal solutions. We need to rely on evidence informed practice and trauma informed care to guide these solutions. We all need to take responsibility and we all need to work together to come up with the answers.

Rick FitzZaland is the Executive Director of The Federation of Community Social Services of BC.
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The Federation of Community Social Services of BC represents more than 130 social service agencies and umbrella organizations across the province that provide a wide range of community-based support services.

For more information, or to arrange interviews, contact:
Rick FitzZaland
rick@fcssbc.ca
250-480-7387