

February 4, 2014

Dear Jeffrey:

We are a group of 12 young people with lived experiences in the child welfare system and we have been hearing about your life. We volunteered to work with the Advocate's Office to learn about what happened to you and provide our thoughts on what could be done so that the same mistakes will not ever be repeated. We have been meeting together twice a month since late August 2013. We have met with the lawyer from the Advocate's Office and helped her to understand the issues from our perspective. Some of us have sat in the courtroom at your inquest and listened to the ways your death could have been prevented. We have followed the testimony and the many reports in the media.

The extensive abuse and neglect that you suffered has left not only us, but the whole community, devastated. Your death opened people's eyes to changes that need to be made. We are so sorry that it took your death for this to happen. Jeffrey, you were kept silent while you were on this earth. We cannot speak for you. No one can. Our own experiences in the child welfare system were sometimes also hard but we do not think for a minute that we went through what you went through in the Bottineau/Kidman household. We did not live your life. It seems to us that there were four victims in that house—you and your three siblings. We were very happy to hear that your siblings are doing well and have hope for the future.

Each week that we met, as we reviewed the evidence, we had your picture in front of us as an anchor. It was to remind us about what brought us together, and that you are not a file, not a "case"—that you are a person. We are writing this letter to you because there have been so many times over the past months that we wished we could have spoken to you – because we feel connected to you. We could have heard from you first hand. We would have told you that you did not deserve what happened to you and that it was not your fault. You did nothing wrong. Having looked at your experiences in light of our own, we have tried to use that knowledge to communicate what we think is important to the jury. Because, Jeffrey, you deserved better.

To the Members of the Jury:

During the months of the inquest there have been many issues and ideas raised about how this could have possibly happened to Jeffrey. The group spent a lot of time talking and sharing the things that impacted us the most. We made a list of the things we heard from the inquest and a list of the concerns that kept coming up again and again for us. It was a very long list. Each member had a chance to vote and we picked a smaller list of the most important themes. Collectively, we put the results together and came up with a shared list of themes that we hope the jury will address in their recommendations. The themes are: the role of public education for society at large; the addition of abuse and neglect education into the school curriculum; creating an all-inclusive information tracking system; and holding a public inquiry about child protection and child welfare in Ontario. Besides adults having a vital role to play in all of this, we also need the active voices and participation of the children and youth who have the most at stake — children and youth who are living or have lived in the child welfare system in Ontario.

As with Jeffrey, too many times warning signs are ignored by adults out of fear, doubt and lack of knowledge. Fear of what might happen to them or to the children, doubt about social workers, and lack of knowledge about the child welfare system can all lead to the kinds of things that happened to Jeffrey. Children are the most vulnerable members of society. It is the duty of adults in society to protect children. A lot of people could have reported concerns during Jeffrey's life and did not. That is why this is so important. Some of us have also talked about our own coming into care experiences and how there were signals that could have been picked up by the adults around us sooner. One member of our group talked about weeks of standing at the teacher's desk and waiting to talk to her before recess or at the end of the day. Another young person said that teachers often suspected violence or abuse in his childhood but were uncertain about what to do. It took one young person a year to say something and even though the signs were there—no one seemed to notice. Teachers, doctors, social workers, bus drivers, neighbors, family and friends all have the potential to help but need the education, skills and confidence to recognize the warning signs and take the right action. The group discussed what this might look like, and how valuable it would be, to have ongoing training as part of the mandatory education received by adults who work closely with or around children. The training should also be easily accessible to the general public.

It is time for the whole community to learn that if someone suspects child abuse or neglect it is their legal duty to report it. We strongly believe that there needs to be a public education and

awareness campaign that targets all ages and members of the public. Some ideas we have had are: having material in doctors' offices and schools, on social media sites, and advertisements on TV, radio and in public spaces like billboards and on transit. We also believe that for this campaign to be most effective, children and youth must be at the heart of its planning and delivery.

Just as educating adults is important, so is ensuring that children and youth also know and understand what abuse and neglect is. A number of us in our group recognize that what we once thought as children was “normal”, we now know—was abuse and neglect. Why are children vulnerable? It is because they don't know. Several of us did not disclose the abuse that was happening to us because no one told us that it was wrong for our parents and/or other caregivers to do this. No one told us what would occur if we said something. No one asked the right questions at the right time. One group member put it this way, “Teachers knew something was wrong, they would ask questions, but I didn't know that it wasn't my fault, I didn't say anything, and they didn't know what was really happening. Education, it is important for us to know.” Many of us didn't have the knowledge or tools to speak up, to say no and to protect ourselves. While it is the responsibility of adults to intervene, it is necessary that children and youth be given the information to recognize when something is wrong.

We think that education about abuse and neglect should be age appropriate and start as early as kindergarten. Abuse and neglect should be covered in the same way that topics like bullying are dealt with in schools across Ontario. If, as we believe, the best practice is to put children and youth at the centre—then we need to be actively involved at every step and every turn. This should include helping to develop ways to talk to other children and youth about abuse and neglect.

Public education and education in the schools is critical but still not enough. We heard in the evidence about the countless mistakes made in checking identities and entering data accurately. While we have heard that there is a new system being put into place, we worry that it will not be sufficient or that it will not be used to its full potential. This problem came up in our discussions several times. Many of us believe that a database only works if it is supported by what one young person called the “moral vigour” of the people using it. “A database is only as good as the training of the staff.” “Names and spelling need to be verified [with official documentation].”

We also heard that the previous database system was not intuitive and did not necessarily link one family member with another. For example if workers put in the name of one family member, they should be able to see “the whole family tree” and all information relating to any histories an individual might have. We think that the database should be similar to police databases. Workers should be able to input a person’s name and get all of the information about that person’s involvement with Children’s Aid Societies (whether it is as a child or as an adult). If this had been done with Yvonne Kidman, then Elva’s name would have been flagged and we might not be writing this letter today.

*ALL* of the key issues identified make it clear to us that there must be actions taken which go beyond the boundaries of this inquest. We agree with the Provincial Advocate’s recommendation to ask for a province-wide public inquiry. We are not convinced that the necessary fundamental change in the system and in society has taken place since Jeffrey’s death. We believe that there are still children in Ontario where issues like adults recognizing the signs of abuse and neglect, the duty to report, children not knowing what to do or important family information not available to child welfare workers could lead to more tragedy. Our collective experience has been: what happens “on the ground” often does not match the laws and policies that were made to protect children like Jeffrey. We believe that a public inquiry, with the active participation of children and youth within or formerly in the child welfare system, could make a difference. If it is done in an informed way, with integrity, and engages the whole community, this might increase the chance that society will start to see that children truly are everyone’s responsibility. We hope that the Government of Ontario will support this request for a public inquiry into child protection and child welfare.

Most of us have also had some positive experiences in the system and have met adults that have helped and supported us. We have faith that adults care about children and want to do what is best for them. The question at hand is simple: if we as a society care about children as much as we claim to, are we prepared to do everything it takes to ensure that what happened to Jeffrey does not ever happen to another child? We hope the answer is a resounding, “Yes!”

Thank you to the jury for allowing us the opportunity to share our thoughts with you.

Lastly to Jeffrey, we will continue to advocate and fight for change in your honour. You will not be forgotten.

With hope,

From the members of Jeffrey’s Inquest Youth Advisory Group