

*Thom Garfat joined Jessica Hadley to revise her earlier letter with a view to the national scope of the issue.*

Services for Traumatized Young People in Crisis Nationally  
Jessica Hadley, CYC & Thom Garfat, PhD

The young people who assaulted the workers at the Selkirk Behavioural Health Foundation in Manitoba on May 30, 2016 have been arrested and charged. This is as it should be. Unfortunately, that is normally as far as our response to such incidents go - but we are hopeful that this time there may be a difference in how people within the system respond.

Before we get to that, let us say that this is not just a Manitoba-specific occurrence. It can be seen as an example of a national problem in the care and treatment of our most traumatized young people.

Likely, there will be an inquiry and it will highlight a number of issues or recommendations which will have been identified before in previous inquiries in other jurisdictions across Canada, such as:

- Inadequate funding for organisations providing services to our most vulnerable and traumatized young people,
- Lack of qualifications for direct care staff and a lack of hiring standards,
- Ineffective staff ratios.
- A program focus on conformity and control rather than treatment,
- A failure to engage young people in the process of their treatment,
- A lack of appropriate supportive supervision for staff, and
- A failure to recognize the Child & Youth Care profession and its skill set

We need only to look at the recent Residential Services Review report in Ontario (CBC News Online May 2016) to understand that this is a nation-wide crisis; a crisis which blurs the lines between governmental jurisdictions and portfolios.

There are programs and people in every corner of Canada who are doing good work and genuinely helping young people and their families. Yet, it is an unfortunate reality that time and time again (following such incidents) we hear that the system needs to change. In simple terms reports on such incidents, across the country, say that the system is just not working well, that it is a system in crisis.

We cannot continue to react to young people as if their struggles were only of their own making, expecting them to conform to a system of demands which treats them as objects, not subjects, and expects them to comply without responding to their needs as developing human beings.

With regard to the incident in Manitoba, we are encouraged by the message that the new Party in power in Manitoba was sending throughout its campaign, and in their early weeks in office, that they want to make a difference in the lives of the traumatized, disconnected, discarded and marginalized Children, Youth, and Families of Manitoba. It is our sincerest hope that we can

work with the government to avoid old ways of assigning blame, mouthing rhetoric, or quietly shelving inquiry findings and instead move forward in action to forge a new path, to work collaboratively towards change. It is also our sincerest hope that this newly forged partnership can be a rallying point for change not only for the children and youth of Manitoba, but for the rest of Canada as well.

This is, as we said earlier, not a Manitoba-specific incident - rather it is a symptom of the need for us to change - nationally – how we recognize, respond to, and treat traumatized young people and those who work with them. Why is it that the most damaged of our children receive the least adequate of services? When do we as a society recognize that we are not developing whole sections of our most valuable resource?

It is time for a different response than we have had in the past. We are hopeful that Manitoba might lead the way.

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