

Child and Youth Advocate Office

Backgrounder



Who We Are

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) exists to serve and protect Nova Scotians by effectively regulating the profession of social work. We work in solidarity with Nova Scotians to advocate for policies that improve social conditions, challenge injustice and value diversity. Learn more about the College at <http://nscsw.org/about/>.

What are Child and Youth Advocate Offices?

Child and youth advocate offices are very important in the protection and provision of services to vulnerable children and youth. There is no Canadian federal ministry for children so it has become the mandate of the provincial child and youth advocate offices to protect and promote children and youth rights (MacLean and Howe, 2009). Currently, there are 8 child and youth advocacy offices within Canadian provinces (CCCYA, n.d).

The **Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA)** states the mandate of the Child and Youth Advocate offices is to ensure that children and youth rights are respected, valued, and that their interest and voices regarding services delivered to children by the provincial governments are heard (CCCYA, n.d).

In addition, offices are also involved in right-based public education, conflict resolution, conducting independent reviews and making recommendations to governments on programs and services delivered to children and youths.

MacLean and Howe (2009) categorizes the work of the child and advocacy offices into three broad themes namely **individual case advocacy**, **systemic advocacy** and **policy advocacy**.

- Individual case advocacy applies when an office responds to a complaint or concern of an individual child or person representing the child;
- systemic advocacy is when an office attempts to deal with and improve systems or procedures or programs affecting a group of children;
- and policy advocacy occurs when an office attempts to change legislation or government policy affecting children in general (MacLean and Howe, 2009, pg3).

They are autonomous in their decision-making abilities and the offices emerged out of a dedicated Act. Each office is accountable to their provincial Legislative Assembly.

Core Outcomes of Child and Youth Advocate Offices

MacLean and Howe (2009) acknowledged that all the provincial offices undertake individual case advocacy as their major purpose. However, some provinces have been very active in promoting and ensuring systemic changes through advocacy. Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, BC and Alberta have pushed for and influenced major policy and program changes in their provinces.

Ontario

The Ontario Child and Youth Advocate Office was successful in changing procedures in the operation of residential facilities for youths in conflict with the law.

Saskatchewan

The Saskatchewan office created what it describes as the eight Child and Youth First Principles based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The government of Saskatchewan adopted the principles in 2009 in the framework for new child-related legislation and policy. The Saskatchewan office also pushed for the reformation of the Education Act to ban corporal punishment in school. They pushed for changes in the Youth Drug Detoxification and Stabilization Act to provide a treatment plan for detained youth.

The office has secured increased access to health information by youth, and changes in policy on the prevention of bullying in schools by integrating UNCRC principles into policy. They have also succeeded in getting government's political will and commitment to improve upon on permanency planning and increasing the accessibility of foster care homes.

Manitoba

Through the office advocacy initiatives and has seen the advancement of procedures for providing emergency placement for children in care, training of those involved with placement, more space in shelters, which has resulted in less dependence on hotels for placement.

MacLean and Howe (2009) concludes that all children's advocate offices in Canada have vital roles in promoting, protecting and responding to the needs of children and youths in Canada.

A Child and Youth Advocate Office in Nova Scotia

The need for a Child and Youth Advocate Office in Nova Scotia cannot be over emphasized as there is a great need to protect and promote rights of children and youth. Currently the Nova Scotia Office of the Ombudsman is deemed to place this role. The office is autonomous in providing independent investigations against the government and was created through the Ombudsman Act (NSOO, 2015).

The office is structured along the lines of 4 service areas namely office administration, investigation and complaint services, youth and senior services and public interest disclosure of wrong doing with an executive director and staff (NSOO, 2015). The overall mission of the office is 'to promote the principles of fairness, integrity, and good governance (NSOO, 2015, pg.2).

The office's goal is to 'ensure that government decisions and processes are fair, consistent, and transparent and provide services to all individuals who receive services from, or are impacted by, provincial and municipal governments such as government employees and members of the public who have allegations of provincial government wrongdoing' (pg.2).

It is evident from the mandate the office of the Ombudsman does not primarily focus on children and youth as found in other provinces. A mandate that targets the general population may take the focus away from the unique rights of children and youths who are the most vulnerable members of the society.

Overall, the services are aimed at providing help and support at the individual advocacy level. Though it states that it can help challenge processes that are not fair in the system, the office has not made significant impact on systemic and policy changes in Nova. The office targets children and youth as individuals without consideration of the family as a unit and the community.

Establishing the Need for a Child and Youth Advocate Office in Nova Scotia

Because of the obvious limitations of the Office of the Ombudsman, there is a need for a Child and Youth Advocate office in Nova Scotia that will combine individual advocacy with a vibrant policy and systemic advocacy that prioritizes children and youths as the core targets of their programs and services (Ritchie, 2016).

The Child and Youth Advocate Office will ensure the provision of holistic and coordinated services to the whole child in collaboration with all stakeholder as found in other provinces.

The office will ensure effective collaboration and coordination between and among various government departments, timely, accessible and adequate service provision for youths at risk and their families within their social location.

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