



**Position Statement:
The Health and Safety Needs of Children and Youth in Natuashish**

October 2, 2013

I was appointed as the Child and Youth Advocate in September 2010, three months later I became aware of critical safety concerns facing children and youth in Natuashish involving solvent abuse activity. Since this time, I have been closely monitoring actions taken by provincial and federal government departments responsible for service provision, particularly the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS). As part of the monitoring process, staff visited Natuashish and I continue to have communication with government stakeholders and community leaders.

On September 26, 2012 I released a [press statement](#) whereby I called on CYFS "...to take immediate aggressive action to ensure the safety, protection and well-being of these children." In addition, I called on all government departments in the community to collaborate with CYFS to address overall issues in order to build a healthier community. I further stated: "As part of my mandate and legislated responsibilities, I will be closely monitoring this situation to see that appropriate action is taken to address the immediate concerns facing the children and youth of Natuashish. I will also be monitoring the long term plan of sustaining a healthier community." I publically discussed the importance of the immediate assessment of every child in the community, assisting the adults in the community, and the development of a long-term strategic plan to address the overall health of the community.

As part of my commitment to monitor this issue, I have regularly requested and received updates of any actions taken by CYFS and current statistical information. Almost three years have passed and, still today, I continue to receive increasingly alarming information regarding the safety and well-being of children and youth in Natuashish. Solvent abuse continues to present as a critical health and safety risk to children and adequate action to address the issue has not been taken by government departments and community stakeholders. While I recognize there are barriers to service delivery in Natuashish, I cannot accept that vulnerable children and youth are not being protected by those legislated to do so, and as I have previously stated, enough is enough!



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Solvent abuse among children and youth in this community is not a new issue; it precedes the relocation of Davis Inlet to Natuashish and is a symptom of complex multi-generational struggles in the community. This issue has continued to resurface in this community and children and youth continue to be impacted; the risks presented to their safety, health, and well-being are of critical concern. Although this issue has been in the forefront of public scrutiny on numerous occasions, it should not be dismissed or ignored.

The public should be informed of the current reality for children and youth living in Natuashish; solvent abuse among children continues to progress at a critical rate. It has come to my attention that the age of children engaged in such activities is getting younger and the number of children involved continues to grow in the community. Conflictual information has come forth from community stakeholders and government departments regarding the understanding of current service provision from CYFS. Given these concerns, it would be expected that there be a prominent CYFS presence in the community to assess these cases, ensure the protection of children, and work with the community to develop a sustainable plan. While immediate action needs to be taken to address the current crisis, long-term sustainable planning must also commence.

Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), of which Canada is a ratified partner, addresses the best interests of children and puts forth that this should be the primary concern in making decisions that affect children. It is paramount at this time that the best interests of children be the foundation of service provision and planning in addressing these serious health and safety concerns. Balancing the right of protection from abuse and neglect (Article 19), the right to health and health services (Article 24), with a child's right to their culture (Article 30) will require collaborative engagement of both the professionals and the community leaders.

Once again, I am publically addressing solvent abuse among children and youth in Natuashish and at this time I am asking all government departments and community leaders involved: *What is it going to take to ensure the safety of children and youth in Natuashish?* Now is the time; the time to respond to this crisis before a critical injury or death of a child occurs as a result of solvent abuse.

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