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CHIEF CORONER

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February 5, 2019

Lisa Lapointe
Chief Coroner
Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
PO Box 9259 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9J4

Dear Ms. Lapointe:

Thank you for your letter of November 13, 2018, regarding the Coroner's Inquest into the death of Deanna Renee Desjarlais. The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (the ministry) has carefully reviewed the recommendations and has outlined its response to the jury's recommendations below.

Recommendation #2 to the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction:

2. End the practice of denying income assistance benefits based on the existence of outstanding warrants.

Presiding Coroner Comment (recommendations 2 and 3): *The jury heard evidence that financial support through income assistance is essential to protecting the wellbeing of vulnerable women, who are at increased risk if they have no means of support. The jury suggested that the current system further marginalizes vulnerable women who may have outstanding warrants or who may have been recently incarcerated.*

Social Development and Poverty Reduction Response:

The ministry supports the jury's recommendation.

Applicants for BC Employment and Assistance who are dealing with an outstanding warrant are currently not eligible for income assistance but may be eligible for two types of supplements.

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- A repayable warrant supplement up to the amount of assistance the applicant's family unit would normally receive if none of the adults in the family unit were warrant holders may be paid where the family unit is at risk of experiencing undue hardship. The supplement can be paid for up to six months.
- A repayable warrant transportation supplement to assist a warrant holder (and other members of the family unit, if appropriate) to return to the issuing jurisdiction to address the warrant.

The ministry will bring forward a proposal to amend the legislation and end the practice of denying income assistance based on the existence of outstanding warrants. The proposal will require approval of the Legislative Assembly.

Recommendation #3 to the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General

3. Integrate access to income assistance benefits into release planning in correctional facilities for all individuals who have been sentenced or remanded into custody. This should be available to both new and continuing income assistance recipients.

Presiding Coroner Comment (recommendations 2 and 3): *The jury heard evidence that financial support through income assistance is essential to protecting the wellbeing of vulnerable women, who are at increased risk if they have no means of support. The jury suggested that the current system further marginalizes vulnerable women who may have outstanding warrants or who may have been recently incarcerated.*

Social Development and Poverty Reduction Response:

The ministry supports the jury's recommendation.

Individuals who are detained in a lawful place of confinement, such as federal or provincial correctional facilities, are ineligible to receive assistance under the Employment and Assistance Regulations. Existing income assistance recipients must re-qualify for assistance prior to or upon release. Application and qualification is expedited for applicants who are pre-release prisoners.

BC Corrections utilizes this expedited process for exiting inmates who have served a minimum of 90 days, and these qualified inmates are released with an income assistance cheque. Inmates serving less than 90 days must proceed through the routine application process, which can also be expedited.

The ministry will continue to work with BC Corrections to utilize the existing expedited processes and to seek other opportunities to better assist inmates applying for income assistance prior to release.

Recommendation #8 to the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General, the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and the Minister of Health

8. Engage in cooperative ministerial action, within the appropriate framework and security safeguards, to implement an effective continuum of services to foster communication and information sharing among providers of health and social supports and custodial care.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury identified significant gaps in the continuum of care between correctional settings and community living. They heard evidence about limited information sharing between various services providing supports to Ms. Desjarlais (including shelters, hospitals, and correctional centres).*

Social Development and Poverty Reduction Response:

The ministry supports the jury's recommendation.

The ministry has dedicated Outreach and Integration teams that focus on connecting British Columbia's most vulnerable citizens with BC Employment and Assistance and other community resources.

The ministry will continue to work collaboratively with Public Safety and Solicitor General, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Ministry of Health to ensure continuum of communication and information sharing among providers of health and social supports for our mutual clients.

**Recommendation #9 to the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General,
the Minister of Health,
the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and
the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation**

9. Increase culturally appropriate support services for Indigenous women and provide training for community supports and corrections staff on available Indigenous supports within the community.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury indicated that supports for Indigenous women appeared to be overwhelmed and underfunded, and that support services for Indigenous individuals were oftentimes overlooked by mainstream providers.*

Social Development and Poverty Reduction Response:

The ministry supports the jury's recommendation.

The ministry is committed to implementing the principles of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, as well as the *Truth and Reconciliation Committee's Calls to Action* and fully supports the *Draft Principles that Guide the Province of British Columbia's Relationship with indigenous Peoples (the Draft Principles)*.

The ministry has developed an implementation plan for the *Draft Principles*. The plan will increase engagement with Indigenous peoples and shift the ministry's internal culture to increase cultural safety for Indigenous clients. Training in Indigenous history and cultural competency will be provided to staff throughout the ministry.

The ministry has developed Outreach and Liaison teams that focus on connecting British Columbia's most vulnerable citizens with income assistance, as well as with community resources. The teams have established partnerships with several Indigenous serving agencies in many areas of the province. The teams work directly with local bands, outreach workers from local Friendship Centres, and Indigenous workers from local shelters. Work is ongoing to expand and strengthen relationships with Indigenous support agencies.

Many ministry offices throughout the province are involved in a local Domestic Violence Committee/Interagency Community Action Team or Violence Against Women in Relationships Committee. As well, the ministry has a policy to help protect applicants and recipients who are fleeing abuse (physical, psychological or emotional abuse, intimidation or stalking). New applicants who disclose they are fleeing abuse are prioritized for service and an eligibility decision is expedited so the individual does not have to remain in the abusive situation due to financial need.

Thank you for bringing these matters to my attention and providing me with the opportunity to respond to the jury's recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shane Simpson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Shane Simpson
Minister

cc: Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health
Honourable Mike Farnworth, Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General
Honourable Scott Fraser, Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
Honourable Selina Robinson, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing