

Watchdog to probe deaths of four B.C. children

Investigation to raise issues about child welfare system

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Savannah Hall, a little Prince George foster child who died under mysterious circumstances, is one of the first four children whose deaths are to be investigated by B.C.'s new children's watchdog.



Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, who in April filled the new post of an independent children's representative, has made it one of her first tasks to probe the deaths of Savannah and three other children with links to the provincial child welfare system.

CREDIT:
Savannah Hall

"The nature of these cases sort of set them apart and drew her attention," said deputy representative John Greschner, who spoke to The Vancouver Sun about Turpel-Lafond's investigation because she was unavailable this week. "She felt that the four cases had the possibility of raising a number of systemic issues about the system."

Turpel-Lafond's position was created following a scathing report by former judge Ted Hughes into the government services offered to B.C.'s most vulnerable children and how their deaths were initially reviewed.

Savannah's case was brought to the public's attention in 2005, when The Sun published a series of stories about the death of the three-year-old in 2001.

Savannah was discovered gasping for breath in her crib, where she was often tied down with leather straps at night. She fell into a coma and died two days later.

Her file was closed and no action taken, even though the coroners service ruled her death "troubling" but "undetermined," and noted she had unusual bruising, severe brain swelling and hypothermia.

Now, Turpel-Lafond will be investigating the government's role in Savannah's short life. In addition, the RCMP reopened a criminal investigation and a coroner's inquest will be held in October because of new information that was revealed.

Turpel-Lafond, a Saskatchewan provincial court judge, is also examining the historical files surrounding three other children:

- Amanda Simpson, 4, who died in 1999 in Prince George. A coroner's jury found in June that her injuries were intentional.

Her family had been the subject of 22 complaints of abuse and neglect before she died.

- 14-month-old Rowen Von Niederhausern, who died in 2002 after the Ministry of Children and Family Development had been involved with his family. A coroner's jury in Terrace found in June that he died of brain swelling after being shaken accidentally.

- Seven-month-old Serena Wiebe, who was found by her mother with no vital signs on June 17, 2005. A coroner's inquest into her death will be held in October in Fort St. James.

Greschner said Turpel-Lafond's investigation will be much broader than the ones performed by the coroner or police, and will include looking at what happened in each child's life, the role of the government and what can be learned.

A report into the four deaths will not be complete until after Serena's and Savannah's inquests. Greschner estimated it might be done in the winter of 2008.

Although the investigation is in its early stages, it could ultimately raise recommendations for changes to the child protection system and other government agencies that played a role in these young lives.

Peter Grant, who specializes in aboriginal law and represents Savannah's mother, Corinna Hall, said there are two central questions that his client has: How did her daughter die? And could it be prevented from happening again in the future?

"I know that Corinna will be very happy that the child representative has elevated the situation of Savannah's case to looking at what are some of the root causes of these problems," Grant said in an interview.

The RCMP has forwarded its recent findings about Savannah's file to the coroner in preparation for the inquest in October, said Const. Annie Linteau.

"We will await the completion of the inquest before taking more investigative steps, if any," Linteau said.

Powell River-Sunshine Coast MLA Nicholas Simons, the NDP's new children's critic, is on the government committee that officially referred these four files back to Turpel-Lafond for investigation, after she suggested they be done.

"They were chosen primarily because unanswered questions remain," Simons said. "They lead the representative to the conclusion that there are likely some lessons still to be learned."

Simons said the Liberal government has "reluctantly addressed" the shortcomings of the child welfare system that were raised by Hughes and added there are things that can be learned by Turpel-Lafond's investigation -- even if it comes years after the four children died.

Simons said the representative can look into child welfare programs and the support offered to foster parents -- areas that would not be examined by police or the coroner.

"The representative can go further and say, 'Are the rules that are applied adequate to protect children?'"

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