

IN THE MATTER OF:

Commission of Inquiry into the Circumstances  
Surrounding the Death of Phoenix Sinclair

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AFFIDAVIT OF GWENDOLYN M. GOSEK  
SWORN April 4, 2012

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IN THE MATTER OF:            Commission of Inquiry into the Circumstances  
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**AFFIDAVIT OF GWENDOLYN M. GOSEK**

I, GWENDOLYN M. GOSEK, of the Community of East Selkirk, in the Rural Municipality of St. Clements, in the Province of Manitoba,

MAKE OATH AND SAY AS FOLLOWS:

1. I am a faculty member with the Faculty of Social Work (the "Faculty") at The University of Manitoba (the "University"). I have been asked by the University to provide evidence, based on my personal experience and research studies, with respect to a motion brought by the MGEU for an order prohibiting any form of publication of the identities of social workers who will be testifying during the Commission of Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Phoenix Sinclair.
2. My work with the Faculty has included teaching, research, and community service within the following areas of expertise:
  - a. Foster Care in Canada in an Indigenous Context;
  - b. Indigenous Research Methodologies;
  - c. Suicide in Indigenous Communities;
  - d. Distance Education Programming in Social Work;
  - e. Special Needs Children and Youth in the Care of Indigenous Child Welfare; and
  - f. The Impact of Violence and Indigenous Families.
3. I have held the position of Instructor II within the Faculty since 1998, and I held the position of Distance Education Coordinator within the Faculty from 1998 to 2005. Attached hereto as Exhibit "A" is my current Curriculum Vitae (C.V.).

4. As Instructor and Distance Education Coordinator at the University, my duties have included planning and implementation of the course delivery to mainly Indigenous communities, as well as teaching and advising students. I have also had the responsibility for acting as support and faculty liaison for a cohort of Indigenous Masters of Social Work (MSW) students who were employed as frontline workers and managers in child welfare. In addition, I participated on a committee for the development of the Child Welfare Workers' Certificate Program offered through the Continuing Education Division at the University of Manitoba.
5. One method of delivering the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program at the University is through the cohort method, whereby a group of students take many or even most of their BSW courses together in a community setting. Throughout my employment with the University, I have noted that the vast majority of students in these cohorts were child welfare workers and I have had many informal discussions with these students regarding their experiences working in child welfare.
6. Part of my work with the University includes advising graduate students. I have noted that the majority of the graduate students that I have advised have been child welfare workers and have based their theses and course-based specializations within the field of child welfare, and I have had many informal discussions with these students regarding their own research and their personal experiences working in child welfare.
7. I have also conducted research studies regarding Indigenous child welfare in Canada, whereby I performed interviews with front line child welfare workers regarding their work experiences.
8. As part of my academic research studies, I have reviewed a number of articles relating to child protection workers and the stressors they encounter as practitioners. I have reviewed studies in the United States and other western countries such as Britain, Australia and Sweden, as I have found research in this particular area of inquiry to be limited in the Canadian context. Attached hereto as Exhibit "B" is a list of articles that I have reviewed as part of my research.

9. Accordingly, I have personal knowledge of the facts and matters set out herein, except where I indicate that such facts and/or matters are based on information and belief, in which case I believe them to be true.
  
10. Based on my research, my review of the existing literature as outlined in Exhibit B, as well as my personal experiences as an Instructor and a Distance Education Coordinator, I believe the following to be true:
  - a. Historically, the social work professions and the social services in Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia and Sweden have much in common with each other in terms of professional development, commonly held values, theories and approaches to issues across societies. Academics from Canada often pursue their educations in these countries and have their academic work published internationally, and vice versa.
  
  - b. Studies have shown that social workers choose their professions based on the desire to help others (Russ, et al 2009). This holds true for child welfare professionals. For example, in a study involving 460 child welfare workers in the United States, researchers found that 80% of respondents selected the work based on their desire to help families and children (Faller Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010). Other American studies confirm that "a motivational factor characterized by professional commitment and the concern for and desire to enhance the welfare of others" (Westbrook, Ellis & Ellett, p. 43) contributes to retention of child welfare workers (Anderson, 2000).
  
  - c. The field of child welfare has evolved into a complex work environment that demands well-educated, highly skilled and committed workers. Social workers are required by law to protect and support children with increasingly complex needs, while working with families who are generally impacted by issues such as poverty, unemployment, racism and concerns such as substance abuse,

violence, mental health issues, incarceration, adolescent parents, and homelessness (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook & Dews, 2007).

- d. Social workers operate within a highly stressful environment that is plagued by funding cutbacks, low salaries, and high turnover rates, which result in high caseloads and elevated stress and burnout rates (Edwards, Shera, Reid & York, 2006; Nunno, 2006). The social worker's responsibilities intensify when working with highly restricted budgets and a lack of resources to support client needs. The end result is a work environment that is crisis-oriented.
- e. In recent years the roles in child welfare have developed opposing goals in which social workers are expected, on one hand, to support families through family preservation and, on the other hand, to control them through child abuse investigations which may end in the removal of children from their families (Munro, 2005). As Kanani, Regehr and Bernstein (2002) note, social workers are criticized for either not taking action "in response to warning signs which are obvious enough when seen in the clear light of hindsight", or for taking action prematurely (p. 1031).
- f. In recent decades the increasing public concern and scrutiny of child deaths have resulted in changes in legislation, policies and practices that in turn have influenced a shift away from the support services to a "narrow residual focus on protecting children from severe abuse and neglect" (Trocme & Lindsay, 1996; Littlechild, 2008). This change has negative consequences for families in need of support services, as well as for the child welfare workers who entered the profession with the intent of helping people in need. It adds to the already stressful responsibility of social workers who must provide services in a conflicted political climate that demands the protection of children at all costs, while legally restricting the powers of investigation so as to maintain the "family as a bastion of liberty" (Munro, 1996; Russ, Lonne, & Darlington, 2009 ).

- g. Social workers have provided varied and complex reasons for leaving the profession, which reasons are best described as “the interaction of a variety of organizational and personal variables” (McGowan et al, 2009, p. 229). Some of the variables identified in the literature include: assignment of full caseload too soon after starting the job; ongoing high caseloads, administrative burdens, inadequate training, role conflict which occurs when individual expectations do not fit with specific demands of the job, lack of self-efficacy which describes situations in which an individual's belief in the ability to successfully complete specific tasks fails, lack of supervisor's support, inadequate pay, risk of violence, staff shortages, excessive paperwork, and less experienced, younger workers (Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; DePanfilas & Zlotnik, 2008; Ellett et al, 2007; Healy et al, 2009; McGowan et al, 2009; Strand & Dore, 2009; Weaver, Chang, Clark & Rhee, 2007; Westbrook et al, 2006; Yamatani et al, 2009).
- h. In Canada, over the past three decades, annual turnover rates in child welfare have been reported to range between 23% and 60% (McGowan et al, 2009). In the United States annual turnover rates are estimated to range between 23% and 60% (McGowan et al, 2009; Strand et al, 2010; Mor Barak et al, 2001) with some estimates as high as 85% (Mor Barak et al, 2006). Other countries such as Britain, Australia and Sweden have also reported high turnover rates in child welfare staff (Healy, Meagher & Cullin, 2009).
- i. High turnover rates for social workers in the field of child welfare has been an ongoing concern with grave implications for children and families involved with the system, as well as for child welfare agencies and government (Regehr, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe & Chau, 2004; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly & Lane, 2006; Hopkins, Cohen-Callow, Kim, & Hwang, 2010; Mor Barak, Nissly & Levin, 2001; Falleret al,2010; McGowan, Auerbach & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009; Strand, Spath & Bosco-Ruggiero, 2010).
- j. Firstly, high turnover rates for the families and children involved in child welfare result in frequent changes in social workers assigned to individual cases, making

it difficult for families to establish stable and trusting relationships (Westbrook et al, 2006). In their 2005 analysis of child welfare recruitment and retention efforts in the United States (cited in Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010), Flower, McDonald and Sumski found that high turnover rates negatively impacted permanency planning, in that children assigned one caseworker had a 74.5% chance of permanency as compared to 17.5% for children with two case workers and 5.3% for children with three case workers.

- k. Secondly, high turnover rates impact the remaining agency workers as they struggle to cover caseloads for exiting employees. This in turn adds to their workload burdens and stress levels, both of which negatively impact staff morale (Gomez et al, 2010; Faller et al, 2010). Maintaining excessively large caseloads has been shown to contribute to "inadequate investigations and inconsistent case monitoring" which directly affect the families involved (Yamatani, Engel & Spjeldnes, 2009). According to Brunet (1998) after the Gove Inquiry in B.C., "250 of the 300 workers hired" in that province quit because of case overload (Cited in Regehr, Chau, Leslie & Howe, 2002, p. 888).
- l. Thirdly, high turnover rates are a serious concern for governments and social service agencies as they bear the financial responsibility that comes with recruitment, hiring and training of new staff. In the United States, it has been estimated that the financial cost for training one child welfare worker is equivalent to one third to one half of their annual salary (Faller et al, 2010). Other estimates for replacing a single child welfare worker range between \$10,000.00 to \$17,000.00, which can easily translate into millions of dollars in areas experiencing high turnover rates (Gomez et al, 2010; Westbrook et al, 2006). Sustaining these costs is even more difficult in a time of shrinking budgets and fiscal restraint.
- m. Fourthly, high turnover rates reflect a direct loss in terms of productivity that comes with a stable, experienced staff complement, versus an inexperienced staff who needs time to develop the direct practice knowledge, skills, abilities and

insights to carry out agency mandates (Ellett et al, 2007). In many instances, it also results in higher numbers of inexperienced frontline staff who are immediately faced with making "life and death decisions about child safety" (Faller et al, 2010, p. 840; Healy et al, 2009). At the organizational level, there is significant loss of human capital when organizations are drained of highly educated and trained individuals who would conceivably have gone on to supervisory and management positions within the agency over time (Westbrook et al, 2006).

- n. The challenges inherent in replacing experienced child welfare workers cannot be overstated when one considers that it typically takes about two years "for new child welfare employees to learn what needs to be done in their jobs and to develop the knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions to work independently" (Gomez et al, 2010, p. 664; Ellett et al, 2007). In the meantime, studies indicate that the average length of employment for child welfare workers ranges between one to three years (Ellett et al, 2007; Faller et al, 2010; Gomez et al, 2010). In a survey conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2006), it was determined that while workers had intended to stay in their jobs for 5 to 10 years, "41 percent left within two years" and of those who left, only 29 percent took a child welfare position (Yamatani et al, 2009, p. 362).
- o. Lastly, high turnover rates impact individual child welfare practitioners who experience the emotional and financial costs of job transitions (Healy et al, 2009). For those who leave due to distress related to vicarious trauma, post-traumatic stress or work related stressors are left to work through the painful experiences.
- p. Chronic stress has been identified as a major contributing factor in burnout, which is generally defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting in depersonalization of clients and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment (Anderson, 2000; Mann-Feder & Savicki, 2003; Regehr et al, 2004;). In a national Canadian study of Aboriginal children and



youth in the care of Aboriginal child welfare, child welfare professionals identified the extremely stressful conditions they worked under (Wright, Hiebert-Murphy, Gosek, 2005). For example, in describing the levels of stress as front line child welfare workers, participants commented:

As long as we're working in crisis all the time, nothing can...  
You're putting out the fire but everything's burnt. (Study  
Participant)

You know, if you can get through a crisis and you're intact  
and you're not dead, you're not crying every day, you know  
you've made it, but then you never get to deal with some of  
the longer-term underlying problems. (Study participant)  
(Gosek, Wright, Hiebert-Murphy, 2007 p. 9)

- q. Regehr et al (2004) identify role conflict, role ambiguity, equivocal successes, lack of control over the working environment and high workloads as factors contributing to burnout and subsequent exiting from child welfare. In an American study involving 368 Masters of Social Work graduates working in child welfare, Dickinson and Perry (2003) found burnout was the number one reason for child welfare workers to leave their employment with child welfare.
- r. Another documented area of concern to the social work profession, child welfare agencies and individuals involved is the effect on child welfare workers who are exposed to traumatic events such as child deaths, traumatic deaths of adult clients, threats of violence against themselves and physical assaults. In a Canadian based study, Regehr et al (2002) discuss the impact of child death inquiries on the child welfare workers, the agency and public response. The child welfare workers experience the trauma and grieving of a child they have worked with and then are re-exposed to the trauma stimuli leading up to and during the inquiry. The inquiry becomes all-consuming as the child welfare workers involved review and question every aspect of the process in preparation for the inquiry. In

the meantime they both anticipate and experience criticism of their personal and professional integrity and live with the fear of threats of violence. Additionally, they experience a sense of isolation as people moved to the sidelines to observe rather than support (Regehr, 2002).

- s. Similarly, child welfare agency staff experience distress during an inquiry as they empathize with their colleague, knowing the tragedy could have just as easily happened on their watch (Regehr et al, 2002). They also undergo scrutiny of their agency and feel guilt by association. As with most inquiries, they anticipate yet more changes to policies and increased paperwork which takes even more time and energy to become familiar with and to implement; time that could be spent with clients (Regehr et al, 2002). As Longlade (1999) indicates, the process of restructuring and changes to communication has a "destabilizing effect that is detrimental to workers and their clients" (p. 306).
- t. Child welfare professionals must constantly assess their environment due to threats of violence from angry parents who are under investigation for child abuse or have had their child or children apprehended (Littlechild, 2008; Dane, 2000). One of the changes I have observed in Manitoba in recent years is the security features installed in many child welfare agency buildings and the need to alert child welfare workers to temporary 'lock downs' due to imminent threats from clients. Threats of this type only add to the stress of an already crisis oriented work environment (Anderson, 2000). Exposure to these types of events can result in vicarious trauma (Regehr et al, 2004; Bober & Regehr, 2006). In one study involving 173 child welfare workers who had experienced direct trauma from violence and threats as well as through clients' stories, "47.7% reported traumatic stress symptoms in the severe range" (Bober, Regehr & Zhou, 2006). This study's results are supported by other studies that have reported rates of 30% to 50% (Russ et al, 2009).
- u. The literature that I have reviewed reflects my own experiences and the comments that I have received from frontline child welfare workers and

supervisors in both the interviews I have conducted and in informal class discussions. Many of these frontline child welfare workers and supervisors that I have spoken to have indicated that child death inquiries are devastating to the morale of child protection workers and their agencies.

- v. I believe that the literature is also consistent with comments made by child protection workers participating in the Government of Manitoba's Winnipeg Child and Family Services Workload Assessment Review, as summarized in Commission Disclosure Document 0592, which document was provided to me by the University of Manitoba Legal Counsel and with respect to which I have executed a Confidentiality Undertaking.
  
- w. I believe that while many media sources strive for balanced journalism, others resort to the use of drama and sensationalizing of traumatic events such as child death inquiries. As a result whenever an inquest is held, the social work profession is under intense siege resulting in degradation to its image and a subsequent lack of public support. The extensive negative press impacts at the individual social worker and agency levels have been well-documented in other jurisdictions (Ayre, 2001; Longlade, 1999; Harding, 2010; Corby, 2003).
  
- x. Students within the Faculty of Social Work are not immune from the publicity surrounding child death inquiries. In my informal class discussions with Social Work students over the years, many students have indicated that they are hesitant to choose child welfare as a career. Students have expressed concern that the majority of jobs available at graduation may be in child welfare and while they would prefer to work in another area, they believe they will need to take a temporary position with a child welfare agency until other positions become available. Based on my discussions with frontline workers and students, I believe there is a commonly held belief that "If you can survive a year in frontline child welfare, you have proven your social work abilities and therefore are considered very employable".

- y. Child welfare operates in a climate of uncertainty; the uncertainty that comes with a limited knowledge of human nature with all its complexity and unpredictable behaviors (Munro, 1996). When individual social workers and agencies are subjected to the intense scrutiny of the public and media, it results in a climate of fear (Littlechild, 2008). As Littlechild (2008) explains, "If we blame staff for what happens, and make them fearful of reporting difficulties, the reality of the problems can neither be systematically examined, nor action taken to remedy them" (p. 670). A focus on individuals rather than a review of systematic issues such as poverty and lack of resources, as well interlocking issues such as interagency communication that result in individuals, agencies and families working in isolation, results in a "culture of blame" which "is unhelpful for agencies, workers and clients" (Littlechild, 2008; Longlade, 1999). While calling for inquiry reports to be made public, Corby (2003) notes the need for them to be "(suitably anonymized)" (p. 238).
  - z. A review of the literature and anecdotal information support the need to ensure anonymity for social workers involved in the inquiry process. Publication of names of individuals would serve the purpose of the media in sensationalizing the loss of a child's life at the expense of individuals rather than focusing on a more comprehensive set of circumstances. As noted in the existing literature, social workers work under stressful and uncertain circumstances. As a result social workers who invest years of education and training in their pursuit to support children and families often find themselves working under stressful, crisis oriented conditions that result in burnout, vicarious trauma, and high turnover rates. The child welfare workers and agencies experience intense media and public scrutiny, as well as threats of violence from individuals involved in the child welfare system and publication of their names would only intensify the negative outcomes for child welfare professionals.
11. I make this Affidavit in good faith and in support of the motion by the MGEU opposing any form of publishing, broadcasting or otherwise communication, by television, internet, radio, in print, or by any other means, the name, face or identity of any

witness at the Inquiry who is or was a Social Worker or of any Social Worker who is mentioned or identified in documents made public through the Inquiry.

SWORN BEFORE me at the City of  
Winnipeg, in the Province of  
Manitoba, this 4th day of April, 2012.

*M. Versace*

A Notary Public in and for the  
Province of Manitoba

  
GWENDOLYN M. GOSEK