



A voice for the 'lost'

Mother of slain teen speaks for dead kids

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By TAMARA KING, STAFF REPORTER

The mother of a teen who was murdered after he wound up wandering the streets when he was denied supervision by Child and Family Services is speaking out on behalf of eight other children killed last year while in government care.

"This has been happening far too much. One death is too much," Val Surbey said. "It breaks my heart. It really upsets me that these children die. (CFS) lost these kids."

Surbey's 17-year-old adopted son, Christopher, was stabbed to death June 6, 2005, after he wandered away from his "independent living" apartment in the Elmwood area of Winnipeg.

BRAIN DAMAGE

Christopher suffered from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, which like fetal alcohol syndrome is a disability caused when a mother drinks alcohol while pregnant, causing brain damage, meaning children can't act rationally, Surbey said.

Surbey wasn't aware other kids had died in CFS care until she read published reports during the past few days.

Disturbed after reading about Phoenix Sinclair, the five-year-old girl violently abused after being in CFS care for most of her life, and Heaven Traverse, who was murdered while in a government foster home, Surbey is sending a letter to Manitoba's Child Advocate, demanding an investigation into all nine of last year's child homicides.

No one was available from the Child Advocate's office for comment yesterday.

Surbey and her husband, Vincent, say they

had no other choice but to voluntarily place their son with CFS because they couldn't access home care or therapy -- which became necessary as Christopher entered his teens and began acting out.

He did things like throwing himself in front of moving cars, unable to understand the potential outcome, Val Surbey said.

At first, her son lived in a group home, Surbey said, but because he was approaching his 18th birthday, CFS was pushing Christopher to live on his own -- in spite of his parents' pleas for 24-hour supervision.

"We could see what was happening to him and we were afraid for him -- very, very afraid for him," Surbey said.

Nine months after her son's murder -- and though police quickly caught a 21-year-old man and charged him with Christopher's death -- Surbey feels the same way she did last June.

"I was angry. I'm still angry, at the whole system," said Surbey in an interview yesterday.

Surbey also slammed the government for playing up the fact that only two of last year's CFS ward murders were at the hands of the actual foster parents or caregivers.

"That's terrible to put that spin on the stats," Val Surbey said. "I think they were defending the numbers. It's almost downplaying the fact that other children have died violently."

Of the nine child homicides involving CFS wards, one is still under investigation and six were "third-party deaths," meaning the perpetrators were not caregivers or in a position of trust.