

Fatal fire jury issues 32 recommendations

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A coroner's inquest into the death of a single mother and her two children in a 2007 fire has reported back with 32 recommendations.

Diane Anderson, 35, her nine-year-old daughter, Tayjah Simpson, and her three-year-old son, Jahziah Whittaker died on Dec. 22, 2007, when fire broke out in their Toronto Community Housing apartment on Grandravine Drive in northwest Toronto.

The fire was started by Anderson's younger children, who were playing with a lighter. Anderson had fallen asleep and was drunk and high on drugs when the fire started.

The jury heard Anderson's life had fallen into a downward spiral after her fiancé was murdered in 2005.

She had reached out to Victim Services, the Children's Aid Society and had placed a desperate 911 call a year and a half before the fire, but was unable to get the help she needed.



Diane Anderson's sister Sophia Anderson spoke to reporters outside the courthouse on Monday along with the family's lawyer Roger Rowe. (CBC)

The jury heard that in many instances, referrals from various government agencies were not followed up, preventing Anderson and her family from getting help.

The jury's 32 recommendations, which are not binding, call for changes in how various ministries and agencies operate and communicate on case files.

They call for improved communication between the provincial ministries and city services that help at-risk children. The recommendations also call for improvements to fire safety, such as banning the sale of lighters to children and rules requiring tenants to notify landlords when smoke alarms aren't working.

Case workers wouldn't visit the apartment

Anderson had multiple referrals, but was never seen by the case workers because many of the agencies were downtown, far from her home near Jane and Finch.

The jury heard that Social Service case workers would not go to Anderson's apartment because it was considered too dangerous for home visits.

Lawyer Roger Rowe represents the Anderson family. He said the jury came up with solid recommendations but said the scope of the inquest was too narrow.

"The jury did the best they could with what they were allowed to hear," Rowe told reporters on Monday. "We wanted the welfare office and other social service agencies to be at the table. They had the longest and most continuous contact with Diane and her family."

Irwin Elman, the provincial advocate for children and youth, said he hopes the recommendations will be adopted to help children from slipping through the cracks.

Elman said the service provider that starts a case file "needs to stick with the [client] until they get to the place they need to be to receive the help they need or that they're asking for, not just hand them off with a phone number."

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exasperation

The demand for social services is so much larger than available resources that these kinds of recommendations can only pile up on the desk of some poor dumb and probably completely burned out bureaucrats desk along with other findings from similar disasters. Until the people of Ontario and our elected officials agree to properly fund and operate our social services it will not change. Our ministers make huge demands on social service agencies and then refuse to pay the whole price tag. In it's current state it's a system on the brink of imploding in upon itself. We pay high taxes but no longer receive a high level of governmental service. Our schools, hospitals and infrastructure are not what they once were. I am saddened to think that traditional Canadian socialism is dead because of corruption and greed. The money is there (our money is there), it's just being rerouted to an elite group of special people who deserve only the best quality of life at our expense. Pathetic!

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