

An abstract graphic on the right side of the page. It features a large green shape at the top right, a blue teardrop shape in the middle, and a purple trapezoidal shape at the bottom right. These shapes are connected by thick black curved lines.

15-YEAR-OLD MEREK

AN INVESTIGATIVE REVIEW

Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, Alberta
September 2026

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Under my authority and duty as identified in Section 9.1 of the *Child and Youth Advocate Act (CYAA)*, the following is an individual investigative review regarding Merek. His circumstances meet the criteria for a **mandatory review**. Merek and his family were receiving Child Intervention through a Custody Order at the time of his passing.

Investigative reviews are designed to improve the lives of young people by identifying ways to enhance services and supports, leading to system improvements and better outcomes for young people and their families.

The investigation process includes:

- Examination of critical issues
- Review of documentation and reports
- Review of policy and casework practice
- Personal interviews
- Other factors that may arise for consideration
- Notification and involvement of the young person's family, Band, Delegated First Nation Agency, community or cultural group, relevant Ministry, law enforcement agency, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Alberta Health Services, and any other person the Advocate considers appropriate.

In accordance with the CYAA, investigative reviews must be non-identifying. Therefore, the names used in these reports are pseudonyms (false names). Great care has been taken to protect their privacy; however, there is no guarantee that interested parties will be unable to identify them. Accordingly, readers and interested parties, including the media, should respect this privacy and not focus on identifying the individuals and locations involved in these matters.

Investigative reviews do not contain findings of legal responsibility or conclusions of law nor replace other processes that may occur, such as investigations or prosecutions under the *Criminal Code* of Canada. The intent of a review is not to find fault with specific individuals but to identify key issues and meaningful findings.

Merek's experiences were unique, and he left a lasting impression on those who knew and loved him. My heartfelt condolences go out to his family and those who cared about Merek.

Respectfully,

[Original signed by Terri Pelton]

Terri Pelton

Child and Youth Advocate (Alberta)

ABOUT MEREK AND HIS FAMILY

Merek¹ was 15 years old when he was the victim of violence and passed away.² The police investigated, and charges were not laid. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner concluded that he passed away due to his injuries. Merek and his family were receiving Child Intervention through a **Custody Order (CO)**³ at the time of his passing.

Merek was a caring and thoughtful First Nation youth. He was deeply connected to, and proud of, his culture. Merek was part of a blended family; his two oldest siblings were raised by relatives. His parents, Patricia and Steven, used substances, and their relationship was violent. They separated shortly after his birth. Merek had a close relationship with his grandmother, Eve.

SUMMARY OF MEREK'S EXPERIENCES WITH GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

Merek from Birth to 9 Years Old

Merek was born healthy and was discharged to his mother's care. Little is known about the health services Merek received in his First Nation. When he was three weeks old, Child Intervention received a report about emotional injury related to his parents' substance use and family violence. He and his sister, Zena, were **apprehended** and placed in foster care. Patricia and Steven separated, and he did not have further contact with his children. Patricia obtained an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) and moved to her First Nation to live with her mother, Eve. She completed addiction and life skills programming, and the children were returned to her care under a **Supervision Order (SO)**.

The following month, caseworkers learned that Patricia was using substances, and the children did not have an appropriate caregiver. They were apprehended and placed with Eve under kinship care; Patricia stayed between Eve's home and her place in the city. Soon after, Merek and his sister became the subjects of a **Temporary Guardianship Order (TGO)**.

Patricia was pregnant with her fifth child. She had a support worker who helped her strengthen parenting and budgeting skills and connected her to community-based supports. Her circumstances improved, and 11-month-old Merek, and 3-year-old Zena were returned to her care under an SO. Soon after, Willa was born.

Within months, Patricia was arrested for outstanding warrants and for drinking and driving with her children in the car. Merek and his siblings were apprehended and placed with Eve.

Over the next eight months, Patricia developed a support network, completed treatment, and secured housing. Her children were returned home, and involvement ended.

Over the next three years, Child Intervention received two reports about emotional injury and risk of physical injury. Both times, Patricia was driving while intoxicated with her children in the car and was involved in an accident. Merek and his siblings were taken to the hospital, treated, and discharged to Eve's care.

Following the first incident, an SO was obtained and Patricia completed addiction programming and secured housing; involvement ended. During the second involvement, Eve said that she would apply for guardianship; however, it is not known if this occurred. Intervention involvement ended.

Little is known about the education services Merek received in his First Nation. By Grade 1, he had changed schools 3 times. Teachers noted that he had physical and emotional outbursts and had trouble focusing. He was assessed and diagnosed with a mild cognitive delay, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). He began taking medication. Additional recommendations included occupational therapy, a quiet working space, frequent breaks, and programming for self-regulation. It is not known if these were implemented.

Over the following year, Child Intervention received two reports about emotional injury and neglect related to Patricia's substance use and not having a sober caregiver. Following the first report, Patricia entered into an **Enhancement Agreement (EA)**. A support worker helped her find employment and access addiction programming and counselling. Patricia completed programming, and involvement ended. During the second involvement, Eve agreed to care for her grandchildren, and caseworkers developed a safety plan with Patricia; intervention involvement ended. The children were subsequently returned to their mother's care.

Merek from 10 to 15 Years Old

Merek regularly took part in Indigenous ceremonies and activities in his First Nation. He had a strong connection to his culture, which his grandmother supported.

When Merek was 10 years old, Child Intervention received two reports. The first was about neglect related to Zena; she had behavioural challenges that Patricia found difficult to manage. Caseworkers helped Patricia arrange supports, and involvement ended. The second report was about emotional injury related to Patricia's substance use and family violence between her and other adults in the home. She told caseworkers that she was committed to her sobriety and connected to community-based parenting resources. Eve

1. All names in the report are pseudonyms.

2. Details about Merek's death are not provided to protect his privacy.

3. Bolded terms are defined in Appendix A.

said that she would continue to support her daughter and grandchildren and involvement ended.

Merek received routine medical care for minor illnesses and injuries. He began Grade 5 in his First Nation and transferred to a new school three months later when his family moved to a city. This was Merek's 11th school move. He was placed in a behaviour and learning program and had an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) that included a one-to-one aide, extra time to complete work, and frequent breaks. In Grade 6, his attendance began to decline. Attempts by school staff to engage him and his family to address the concern were not successful.

When Merek was 13 years old, Child Intervention received three reports about neglect related to Patricia's substance use. Involvements ended after safety plans were developed and relatives agreed to help support Patricia in caring for her children.

Merek's IPP continued into junior high school. Supports increased to include speech and language and occupational therapy. Eve learned that Merek began using substances when he was 14 years old. Around that same time, he was hospitalized for three weeks because of his declining mental health. He was diagnosed with substance-induced psychotic disorder, depression, anxiety, and an intellectual disability. Ongoing substance use was not an identified concern, and interventions focused on addressing trauma and its impacts on his mental health.

Child Intervention received a report about these concerns. Patricia did not engage in planning, and Eve said that her declining physical health impacted her ability to care for her grandson. Merek was apprehended; an application for a **Permanent Guardianship Order** was made and he became the subject of a CO, while his sisters lived with other relatives.

Caseworkers and medical staff met to discuss placement options for Merek. Recommendations included mental health and pharmaceutical supports, which were arranged. It was determined that Merek required therapy and a structured, well-supervised placement. After his discharge, he was placed in a group home that had an on-site clinician and one-to-one staff support was provided to help him stabilize.

Merek's school schedule was modified to manage his anxiety. He took part in virtual Cree classes and mental health programming at the group home. At times, he was taken to the hospital because of self-harm and suicidal ideation. Safety plans were developed, and he was connected to psychiatric support and had regular visits with Eve. Caseworkers, the on-site clinician, and group home staff met regularly to discuss planning and explored alternative therapeutic supports. Merek found his cultural teachings and spirituality such as smudging, drumming and singing helpful. He had access to an Elder, however; it is not known if Merek met with them.

When Merek was 15 years old, he was admitted to the hospital for six days because of his declining mental health. Upon discharge, he was confined in a **secure services** facility. While there, he was connected to a cultural worker and continued to use Indigenous teachings and spirituality to manage his mental health. Recommendations included psychiatric and therapeutic supports, which were implemented. He was discharged to a stabilization program and had a one-to-one worker; family visits resumed. Shortly after, Merek was referred to a specialist for stomach concerns. He was diagnosed with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and was encouraged to have a healthy diet.

Merek's needs exceeded Child Intervention and Mental Health's capacity. As a result, over the next five months, he had three placement moves. Although he had a one-to-one staff, he often left his placements without permission and was reported missing. Merek told caseworkers that he wanted to live in his Nation. Attempts to explore kinship care placements were not successful.

Merek left his placement without permission and was reported missing. Soon after, he was the victim of violence and passed away. The police investigated, and charges were not laid. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner concluded that he died due to his injuries. A funeral was held in his honour, and Merek is deeply missed by those who knew and loved him.

TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Birth to 9 Years Old	10 to 15 Years Old
• Birth – 3 Months Old · Child Intervention involved 2 times · Apprehended · Foster care · Parents separated · Emergency Protection Order · Supervision Order (SO) · Apprehended · Kinship care · Temporary Guardianship Order • 11 Months Old · SO · Apprehended · Kinship care • 3 – 5 Years Old · Child Intervention involved 2 times · Apprehended · SO • 6 – 8 Years Old · Assessed · Diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and a mild cognitive delay · Prescribed medication · Child Intervention involved 2 times · Enhancement Agreement	• 10 - 13 Years Old · Child Intervention involved 5 times · Individualized Program Plan (IPP) · Hospitalized for declining mental health • 14 – 15 Years Old · Child Intervention involvement · Taken to hospital for suicidal ideation · Child Intervention involvement · Apprehended · Application for a Permanent Guardianship Order · Custody Order · Group care · Hospitalized for declining mental health · Confined in secure services · Stabilization program · Placement instability 15-year-old Merek passed away

FINDINGS

Children and Family Services

Child Intervention was involved with Merek and his family several times because of neglect, his mother's substance use, and family violence. Patricia received support through agreements, orders, and community-based services; however, she was unable to sustain progress. Involvements often ended after Merek was moved to his grandmother's care to address his physical safety, and he and his siblings were later returned to their mother. Safety plans were not always followed, and did not sufficiently address the underlying intervention concerns. Although Merek's physical safety was addressed, there was limited consideration of the impact of the persistent concerns on his overall well-being.

The Enhancement Policy Manual requires considerations of safety concerns, well-being, family strengths, and unresolved risks when determining whether a child is in need of intervention. It also emphasizes ongoing service evaluation and tailored, continuous case planning to minimize disruption and support well-being and development. These expectations were not consistently met. The Ministry of Children and Family Services has been notified that an internal review of Merek's circumstances may be beneficial to determine if improvements are required to strengthen adherence to policy and practice standards related to the above-mentioned concerns.

At 14 years old, Merek was apprehended for similar concerns and became the subject of a Custody Order while an application for a Permanent Guardianship Order was before the courts. Caseworkers collaborated with other professionals on planning to address his needs regarding placement, mental health, and family and cultural connection; however, despite these efforts, Merek's needs often exceeded Child Intervention's capacity.

Education

Little is known about the education services Merek received in his First Nation. When he was six years old, teachers noted concerns with his behaviours. Merek was promptly assessed, diagnosed and prescribed medication. Additional recommendations included occupational therapy, a quiet working space, frequent breaks, and programming for self-regulation; however, it is not known if these were implemented.

In Grade 5, Merek's family moved to a city, and he began school there. He was placed in a behaviour and learning program and had an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) that included a one-to-one aide, extra time to complete work, and frequent breaks. In Grade 6, his attendance began to decline. Attempts by school staff to engage him and his family in his education were unsuccessful. His IPP continued into junior high school, and his schoolwork was modified to meet his evolving needs. As his circumstances became unstable, his education was impacted.

Health and Mental Health and Addiction

Little is known about the health services Merek received in his First Nation. When he was 15 years old, he had stomach issues and was promptly referred to a pediatric specialist.

In his adolescence, Merek's mental health needs escalated, and he was hospitalized twice. He had timely assessments and received several diagnoses. He was prescribed medication and promptly connected to hospital and community-based psychiatric and therapeutic supports; however, Merek's mental health needs often exceeded Health and Mental Health's capacity.

THEMES TO TRACK

1. Implementation and consistency of policy and practice expectations

Policy and practice standards outlined in the Enhancement Policy Manual related to Intake, Assessment, safety and case planning were not met.

2. Education supports

Merek's educational supports were not disrupted when he moved between his First Nation and the city nor between schools. They were adapted to meet his evolving needs.

3. Services and supports for young people with complex needs

Merek's mental health needs often exceeded systems' capacity.

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

Apprehended

The court grants the “Director” as defined in the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (CYFEA) temporary custody of the child on reasonable and probable grounds that the child needs intervention in accordance with CYFEA.

Custody Order (CO)

The court grants the “Director” as defined in the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* temporary custody of the child until legal status can be determined. The child is placed in an approved placement.

Enhancement Agreement (EA)

A voluntary agreement under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* to provide services and support to a family or a young person who is 16 or 17 years old. It is intended to address protection concerns while the child remains with a guardian or lives independently.

Mandatory Review

Under the *Child and Youth Advocate Act*, the Advocate must conduct a mandatory review when a young person dies who had an agreement or order under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* at the time of their death. A public report must be released within one year of being notified of the young person’s death.

Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO)

Under this order, the “Director” as defined in the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* becomes the sole guardian of a child. The order is sought when it is believed that the child cannot be safely returned to their guardian within a specified time frame.

Secure Services

The *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* allows for the confinement of a child for up to 30 days for stabilization and assessment when the child is found to be an immediate danger to themselves or others.

Supervision Order (SO)

A court order granting the “Director” as defined in the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* mandatory supervision of a young person. Guardians retain custody.

Temporary Guardianship Order (TGO)

The court grants the “Director” as defined in the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* custody and guardianship of a child for a specific period. The child is in the care of Child Intervention Services, and guardianship is shared with the parent/ legal guardian.

15-YEAR-OLD MEREK • AN INVESTIGATIVE REVIEW



NORTH OFFICE

600, 9925 109 Street NW
Edmonton AB T5K 2J8



SOUTH OFFICE

2420, 801 6 Avenue SW
Calgary AB T2P 3W3

ocya.alberta.ca • 1-800-661-3446