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SOCIAL WORK IMPOSTER'S SENTENCE SHOWS PUBLIC NEEDS MORE PROTECTION

(Vancouver, BC) The British Columbia Association of Social Workers supports the sentence given to a man posing as a social worker today by a BC Supreme Court Justice and believe it sends a message to the BC government to act to protect the public through professional regulation.

“Justice Steven Wilson sentenced Robert Riley Saunders to five years and, in doing so, recognized he acted in a premeditated manner, that his offenses had a significant impact on the children and youth in his care, and that he took advantage of his position of power over the victims” said BCASW President Michael Crawford. “Saunders deprived youth of the resources they needed to succeed in life, particularly when they were leaving the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. It didn’t need to be this way.”

The BC Association of Social Workers is engaged in a campaign to strengthen professional social work and to protect the public more fully. The campaign goal is to have the BC Social Workers Act amended to require that all social workers in BC be registered with the BC College of Social Workers for the purpose of regulating social work practice and overseeing the practice of social workers. Further, the campaign seeks to ensure that the title "social worker" is fully protected from use by unregulated persons. Currently, the Ministry of Children and Family Development administers the Social Workers Act and maintains an exemption for their staff from the requirements of the Act that calls for all social workers to be registered.

Throughout the trial the press has referred to Robert Riley Saunders as a “social worker”. He is not a social worker. Mr. Saunders was hired by MCFD staff who failed to properly check his educational credentials. He was fired in 2018 when financial irregularities and fraud were discovered, and the University of Manitoba social work degree was found to be forged.

“Had Saunders been required to apply for registration with the BC College of Social Workers prior to being hired by MCFD, the College's strict vetting process would have caught his fraudulent educational credentials, refused him registration, and MCFD would not have hired him, sparing dozens of children and youth from the consequences of his criminal behaviour,” said Crawford. “Registered social workers are committed to a strong code of ethics, adhere to clearly defined practice standards, and have their practice overseen by their peers through the regulatory college.”

It is only due to the deeply flawed BC Social Workers Act that Saunders and many other MCFD staff can refer to themselves as social workers. This situation leads to confusion among the public about the role of social workers and significantly affects the trust the public and recipients of service can have in social workers.

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The BC Association of Social Workers is a voluntary, not-for-profit membership association that supports and promotes the profession of social work and advocates for social justice.

BCASW acknowledges that our office is in the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations and that our members live and work in unceded territories across British Columbia.