

# Saskatoon organization to install 'angel's cradle' to prevent infant deaths

A Saskatoon group will begin operating an anonymous drop-off for newborn babies after the discovery of a deceased infant in a downtown alley last week.

Sanctum Care Group announced in September 2018 that its new neonatal care home would include an “angel’s cradle,” a hatch by which a baby can safely be placed into a bassinet and provided with care.

Preparations were made, and an opening was cut into the side of the organization’s garage. However, the next month, the project was put on hold when the Ministry of Social Services said further study was needed to see whether the program was needed.

Now, Sanctum executive director Katelyn Roberts says her organization intends to move forward with the installation and hopes to have government and community support.

“We do feel that the tragedy that did unfold demonstrates a real need to push this along in a more efficient way,” Roberts said, adding there is no definite timeline for when the service would be operational.

“If we can save one infant from being unsafely abandoned, what else are you to do?”

The Ministry of Social Services did not directly respond to questions about its position on an angel’s cradle in the province.

In a written statement, assistant deputy minister Natalie Huber said the ministry is working with the Saskatoon Police Service to locate the mother and that the ministry has “been building capacity for supports and services specific to this client group to ensure better outcomes for moms and their babies,” including a recent meeting of 85 community partners in Saskatoon. That includes an

additional \$1.2 million in funding for new programming.

Huber wrote that people considering abandoning a child should contact the ministry, on-reserve First Nation child and family service agencies or Mobile Crisis Services.

Advocates argue the cradles are a needed measure to prevent infanticide caused by abandonment.

“If it would have existed, it’s not a guarantee it would have changed this situation,” Dr. John Dosman said. “But you never know.”

Dosman is aware of the need for the service. As an infant, he was left at the doctors’ entrance of St. Paul’s Hospital in Saskatoon in July 1978.

The first angel’s cradle was installed at a different St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver in 2010. Edmonton and Calgary followed suit.

Calls for a cradle in Saskatoon began in 2010, after a 17-year-old girl gave birth to a baby and placed it in a garbage bin outside her home. The body was never found.

Saskatoon was set to receive its own cradle last year, but in October 2018, the social services ministry said the program was on hold and that a committee would be struck to study whether it was needed and how it would be implemented.

Following a resolution sponsored by Dosman, the Saskatchewan Medical Association in November 2018 sent letters to the ministries of health and social services asking for a seat on the committee. It never got a response.

Roberts said her organization has been in talks with the government about the committee, but it has never actually met.

Asked directly, Hubert did not say what the ministry’s stance was on the cradle being installed.

Critics of the cradles argue they could be used to circumvent adoption procedures, which involve communicating important information on the baby’s health and heritage.

There’s also a legislative barrier. Saskatchewan does not have a “safe-haven” or safe abandonment law that would exempt mothers or other persons from criminal charges for abandoning a child.

Roberts said law enforcement assured her last year that no one would be charged for accessing the service.

Social Services Minister Paul Merriman told CBC News last year that he would “have another look” at safe haven laws. No such law has been introduced.

Dosman said concerns about increased rates of child abandonment are overblown. At St. Paul's in Vancouver, only two children have ever been left in the angel's cradle in nine years of operation.

"An angel's cradle doesn't replace adoption ... it replaces this kind of tragedy," Dosman said.

Saskatoon police said an autopsy was conducted on the newborn Tuesday afternoon.

While it is unclear how or why the baby was left there, police said they hope to connect with the child's mother to offer support.

"Someone at the vigil said pretty loudly that if this woman had love and support and people around her, this probably wouldn't have happened," Dosman said. "I think that's probably true."

Roberts said people in similar situations could look to hospitals or social service providers, but stressed an angel's cradle is a needed option in the city.

"What really this comes down to is a choice — giving a mother a choice to safely abandon their child. Currently in this community there are no services to allow a mother to safely and anonymously relinquish her child," Roberts said.

"While we often don't know the circumstances that lead to infants being abandoned, we know they often are not found alive."