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Poor jail conditions blamed for suicides

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WINNIPEG - Troubled teens are being put at greater risk of suicide in a jail that was never designed to hold them for long periods of time, says a Winnipeg lawyer.

"The tendency is to treat them like adults, and they aren't adults," said Saul Simmonds.

A 17-year-old girl was taken to hospital in critical condition Wednesday after attempting suicide at the Manitoba Youth Centre. Her medical status could not be confirmed Friday.

This comes five months after a 15-year-old girl committed suicide at the centre.

Simmonds says MYC wasn't designed to hold young offenders for years at a time -- something now commonplace -- and offers them little in the way of resources.

"That kind of long-term holding does not allow a person to develop," he said.

The increased presence of gangs at the youth centre makes it more difficult for some first-time offenders to cope, placing them at risk of suicide, Simmonds said.

The results of a review into the death of the 15-year-old girl are expected to be in the hands of justice officials next week, said Louis Goulet, executive director for youth correctional services. Goulet said another review will be conducted into the latest suicide attempt.

"We are always looking to see what else could be done," he said. "We are dealing with a volatile population ... a very challenging group and we need to be attentive to their needs."

Goulet would not say if the girl taken to hospital Wednesday was assessed as a suicide risk.

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