



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies

Pre-Budget Submission 2020
Modernizing Child Welfare
for a Brighter Future



Top 6 Investment Areas for the Child Welfare Sector

Modernizing Child Welfare for a Better Future



RECOMMENDATION 1: Strengthen the funding formula and invest in modernization and sector transformation.



RECOMMENDATION 2: Sustain funding to Children's Aid Societies to restore jurisdiction for the care of Indigenous children to Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies and communities.



RECOMMENDATION 3: Endorse and support the implementation of Signs of Safety® as a community of practice and provincial service model.



RECOMMENDATION 4: Invest in building a child welfare system-wide strategy and training for the issues of human trafficking and substance use.



RECOMMENDATION 5: Address disproportionalities and overrepresentation.



RECOMMENDATION 6: Invest in the Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) to continue maximizing working as a unified system.

Introduction

For over 100 years, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) has been promoting the welfare and well-being of children, youth, and families in Ontario. We are a provincial membership organization that represents 47 of 50 Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies in Ontario and one pre-mandated organization. We work to ensure that our member Societies have the necessary tools, training, and conditions to fulfill their statutory mandate to deliver child welfare services and to achieve equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families across the province.

We welcome the opportunity to strengthen, modernize, and improve the child welfare system. Every child, youth, and family working with Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies should receive high quality services and supports no matter where they reside – so they can succeed and thrive.

OACAS's recommendations focus on: (1) strengthen the funding formula and investing in modernization and sector transformation; (2) sustainable funding to support Children's Aid Societies as they restore jurisdiction for Indigenous children to Indigenous communities and well-being organizations; (3) implementing a new service model to align and improve child welfare service in Ontario; (4) strengthening our response to human trafficking and substance use by designing a provincial-wide strategy and educational training initiative in child welfare; (5) addressing disproportionalities and overrepresentation in the child welfare system so those who are the most vulnerable are protected; and (6) investing in the Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) to continue maximizing working as a unified system. These priority investments will assist with sustaining, enhancing, and aligning service delivery of child welfare services, programs, and supports in Ontario.

Vulnerable families, youth, and children depend on high-quality services and supports in their community. Continued investment is needed in the child welfare sector to ensure child well-being, safety, and protection.

What is the current funding environment in child welfare?

In the fiscal year 2019-20, \$1.525 billion in funding is expected to be provided directly to 50 Societies with a mandate for child protection services in the province of Ontario through the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

This funding represents approximately 9% of the total budget for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and approximately 0.9% of the total budget for the province of Ontario.

In 2019, approximately 42% of the province's CASs were in deficit against their allocations. These deficits are placing significant financial stress on these organizations and putting the children and youth they serve at risk. Investments are needed to ensure the financial stability of these agencies and the sector.

The current funding formula needs to be strengthened as it does not distribute funding in an equitable way and this results in unnecessary fiscal pressures for agencies that are "disadvantaged" by the funding formula.

No Children's Aid Society should have to care for the most vulnerable children, youth, and families with significant financial pressures. This will result in increased risks for vulnerable children, youth, and families.

Investing in change management practices, quality workplace environments, and serving those who are most vulnerable is fiscally responsible, and required for the safety, protection, and care of children.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Strengthen the funding formula and invest in modernization and sector transformation.

OACAS is recommending:

- Minimum investment of one percent a year for the next five years to support the successful implementation of modernization, recognizing that there is a need for increased investments to strengthen the sector and support good outcomes for children and youth.
- The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services examine how to strengthen the funding formula to support Societies' work towards financial sustainability.

Indigenous communities have the inherent right to care for their families.

"The over-representation of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children in the child and family services system has been described as a humanitarian crisis."¹ – Indigenous Services Canada

Children's Aid Societies are working toward ensuring cases involving Indigenous children and youth can be transferred safely to Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies, as part of the historic amendments to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit People in the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017* (CYFSA).

While the CYFSA and the *Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* (Bill C-92) offer structural legislative solutions, the provincial government must assist with resourcing change throughout this modernization and transformation process of restorative justice.

Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies need increased funding to build capacity in advance of large-scale case transfers from non-Indigenous Societies. While there is recognition that non-Indigenous Societies will need to "right-size" once transfers are completed, the funding should allow for a phased approach.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Sustain funding to Children's Aid Societies to restore jurisdiction for the care of Indigenous children to Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies and communities.

The simultaneous shift imposed by the transitional funding formula places pressure on Indigenous and non-Indigenous Societies that may prolong the transition.

To date, Children's Aid Societies have been actively working with two Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies to restore jurisdiction of child protection for Indigenous children and youth to Indigenous communities. Currently, there are 12 designated Indigenous Child and Well-being Agencies across Ontario.

FACT: "Ontario is the most populous province or territory in Canada when it comes to Indigenous people. Of the 375,000 Indigenous people living in Ontario, 80 per cent now live off-reserve, and 20 per cent of the Indigenous population in Ontario resides in Toronto." (2016 Census, *Toronto Star*, Oct. 15, 2019)

OACAS is recommending:

- **The government dedicate additional funds to non-Indigenous Agencies and Indigenous Societies, as adequate financial support is critical during all phases of devolution, designation, and during the case transfer process.**
- Funding be released to Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies that is “predictable, flexible, long-term.”² Agencies must be *continually* supported for infrastructure and operational capacity. This would include investment for one-time start-up and infrastructure costs for newly designated Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies.
- The government assist with providing direct support to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Societies to allow for the legislative intent of the *Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* (Bill C-92), which came into effect January 1, 2020. This will help to ensure that there are best practice approaches, communication opportunities, and greater knowledge exchange (e.g., protocol development).
- The provincial government urge the federal government to comply with all rulings by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, implement Jordan’s Principle³, and commit to the implementation of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*⁴.
- The provincial government support Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies to solidify their long-term sustainability.
- The provincial government recognize that Indigenous children must have barrier-free access to high quality and culturally relevant children’s mental health and development rehabilitation services in their communities, in line with Jordan’s Principle.
- The provincial government fund service infrastructure in Indigenous communities, ensuring access to services within remote communities, as well as in urban centres, so that no child, youth, or parent has to travel

over 2000 kilometers outside their community for care. Over the past year, OACAS has worked alongside Children’s Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-being Agencies to bring clarity regarding *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, SC 2019, c 24 (Bill C-92). It is imperative that Indigenous children and families “...stay together, children remain in their communities, [and] [that] children are connected to their language and culture.”⁵

We must continue to work diligently to create a safer future for the next generation of Indigenous children and youth in Ontario.

OACAS’s Commitment to Reconciliation:

- In 2017, OACAS hosted a gathering called “*A Moment on the Path*” to acknowledge and apologize for the harmful role child welfare has played historically, and continues to play, in the lives of Ontario Indigenous children, families, and communities.
- **OACAS has nine key commitments that the child welfare sector has agreed upon in order to move forward with Reconciliation.**
- The OACAS Board has also supported four commitments that include: (1) shifting resources to Indigenous organizations so that they are better able to provide services for and advocate on behalf of Indigenous children, families, and communities; (2) supporting Indigenous leadership in their quest for self-governance and legislation regarding the care of children within their local communities; (3) supporting Indigenous autonomy in the development of specific Indigenous services and the child welfare system; and (4) supporting and encouraging non-Indigenous agencies to work with local Indigenous communities to ensure that children and families are served in a way that leads to Reconciliation.

Increase alignment, reduce fragmentation, and implement Signs of Safety® as a community practice and provincial service model.

*"Children's services needs to be done better. Signs of Safety® sets out to do this and has been making a difference around the world, involving parents and children at the centre of the work."*⁶

– Andrew Turnell, Signs of Safety® Co-creator

RECOMMENDATION 3: Endorse and support the implementation of Signs of Safety® as a community of practice and provincial service model.

OACAS has been working to bring substantial changes needed to build a better child welfare system in Ontario. The Auditor General of Ontario, the media, and, most importantly, the children, youth, and families involved with child welfare, have deep concerns that child welfare services are not offered equitably across Ontario. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, has been critical that "children and youth do not always get the quality of care they deserve."⁷

There is an opportunity for government during their modernization process to implement, "Signs of Safety®" as a provincial service model. By implementing Signs of Safety®, a consistent and less fragmented service practice will be used to serve children, youth and families across the province. There are approximately 25 Societies utilizing Signs of Safety®.

Currently, Alberta and Manitoba have provincially implemented Signs of Safety®. The Yukon is exploring its use as is British Columbia⁸. Over 200 jurisdictions in 15 countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Ireland, USA, and Cambodia are using it.

Signs of Safety® supporting families and Societies

"We used Signs of Safety® with a family where five children were in foster care due to domestic violence, neglect and physical discipline. Believing that the parents were unable to care for their children, we used Signs of Safety® to better hear the children's voices, wishes, and opinions. We understood the father's past without bias and worked to build a support network for the family. The children were returned home, and the Signs of Safety® approach allowed us to focus on child safety and helping the family with a long-term safety plan." – Children's Aid Society worker

OACAS supports Signs of Safety® as part of modernization because:

- The "overriding goal of Signs of Safety® is child safety... [reducing] child maltreatment, [reducing rates] of repeated maltreatment, decrease in family disruption, increase in family engagement, increase in participation of children and families in child welfare decision-making."⁹
- Small studies in Western Australia, Drenthe, Netherlands, Gateshead, England, and Copenhagen, Denmark, note that this approach "increases worker's morale, increases practitioner clarity and decision-making, improves and focuses relationships between practitioners and families, improves collaboration between child protection and other professionals, reduces rates of child removal, reduces the duration of cases that are open to the agency."¹⁰
- The approach provides "all agency staff and the practitioner with processes and tools to move through child protection/child welfare case work from commencement to closure."¹¹
- It uses a "balanced risk assessment that brings together a problem and a solution focus by utilizing an approach to risk that is forensic, explores harm and danger while enticing strengths and safety."¹²
- It will help to see "restored trust and confidence"¹³ in the therapeutic working relationship of Children's Aid Societies and those in need.

Signs of Safety® is a "risk assessment model" and it **must be funded in conjunction with equity and anti-oppressive practices as well as Reconciliation principles** as no service delivery model/risk assessment is embedded with equity, anti-oppression, anti-Black racism, and Reconciliation. The child welfare sector has agreed to use Signs of Safety® as a service model, within a framework that is based on equity, anti-oppression, anti-Black racism and Reconciliation.

OACAS encourages the long-term investment of funding this service model approach along with funding training and ongoing learning opportunities for Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. **A funding commitment is needed ranging from \$50,000 - \$75,000 per agency to invest in Signs of Safety®,** which will ensure a strengthened community practice model is developed and delivered consistently at all Children's Aid Societies across Ontario.

End human trafficking and assist those with substance use issues.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Invest in building a child welfare system-wide strategy and training for the issues of human trafficking and substance use.

The government's recent investment of \$20 million in yearly funding for anti-human trafficking in November 2019¹⁴ to support survivors and anti-human trafficking enforcement initiatives is commendable. It is imperative that the child welfare sector be included in the government's range of investment strategies.

We urge the government to include Children's Aid Societies as part of their provincial strategy and invest \$180,000 in a child welfare system-wide human trafficking strategy which would include educational training and capacity building initiatives for Children's Aid Societies in Ontario.

Human trafficking represents a growing form of child abuse in Ontario. This training is critically needed as Children's Aid Societies need to be prepared to recognize and respond to victims of sex trafficking.

Young people in the child welfare system are especially vulnerable due to factors which include but are not limited to experiences of childhood maltreatment and trauma; lack of family support; insufficient parental oversight/supervision; multiple placements; separation from friends, family, and community; emotional vulnerability; and intersectional identities.

Traffickers often target those people who experience marginalization, including Indigenous people, LGBTQ2S+ people, low-income people, newcomers, people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, people with substance use and mental health issues, racialized people, and women and girls. Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people are disproportionately affected, with one national survey of service providers reporting that 50% of the trafficked girls and 51% of the trafficked women they serve were Indigenous.

OACAS recommends:

- **Investing \$180,000 in a child welfare system-wide human trafficking strategy and training initiative** that will explore human trafficking as it relates to child welfare and the current system realities, which includes overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth and Black Canadians in the child welfare system.
- An investment of \$180,000 will allow for the development of a blended delivery educational approach that utilizes eLearning for introductory/foundational knowledge, followed by an instructor-led classroom session to explore advanced topics in a safe learning environment.

This strategy and training will make a significant difference to child welfare professionals. When OACAS launched its Human Trafficking Library Guide that consists of online articles, research, and links to available supports, we received 262 reviews on the first day and 688 reviews within the first month. The sector response has been overwhelmingly positive with multiple requests for additional formalized training on this critical topic.

An additional way to enhance worker training and improve service delivery in Ontario is **to invest in a comprehensive Substance Use issues strategy and training initiative in child welfare to explore the intersection between substance use and child welfare.**

Substance use is considered a risk factor of child maltreatment and is associated with child welfare involvement. However parental substance use alone does not necessarily interfere with caregiver functioning and parenting or negatively impact child development and well-being. Biases, such as racial bias, can also impact perceptions of certain groups of people and how their substance use is viewed.

Why is training on substance use important in child welfare?

"A 30-year-old mom gave birth to a baby with no prenatal care. She did not know she was pregnant and used fentanyl daily. The baby was born addicted and remained in the NICU for several weeks. Due to a proactive and supportive approach from the Children's Aid Society, the mom has been engaging with her workers for support. She is diligently working on becoming clean and a full-time parent. Due to the skilled expertise of the workers they have understood the process of addiction and have supported her sobriety, intent to improve her parenting skills and supported her with securing safe housing. Once she attends treatment and has a period of sobriety the goal is to transition the child home." – Children's Aid Society worker

"The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services should consult with Children's Aid Societies and substance use treatment providers to develop a program, similar to the former Children Affected by Substance Abuse program, to support partnerships between these two sectors. The program should provide for substance use treatment providers working alongside Society staff. It should be funded on a permanent basis and expanded across the province." – Motherisk Commission Report, January 2018

OACAS is recommending that \$150,000 be invested in a Substance Use Issues strategy and training so that:

- Front-line workers will be equipped with the knowledge, expertise, resources and information on substance use in Ontario; understand the dynamics of substance use, particularly understanding cycles of recovery and addictions; train child welfare practitioners to identify the impact of substance use on caregiving skills, not merely identifying use.

Children's Aid Societies changing lives:

"Human Trafficking and supporting young people leaving is complex. Those involved with child welfare are at an increased risk of human trafficking. We supported a youth at age 14 when she came to our Children's Aid Society for parent-teen conflict. We spent extensive time engaging her and building a relationship where she could reach out any time. And she did, at age 17, ask for help. She came back for support and we were able to help her leave trafficking, connect with health services, secure financial support and obtain services for human trafficking survivors. Children's Aid has a chance to change the trajectory of this person's life – and we did." – Children's Aid Society worker

Overrepresentation of marginalized and racialized children in care must stop.

"Indigenous, Black, and other racialized families and communities have raised the alarm that their children are over-represented in the child welfare system. Although Indigenous and racialized children's pathways through the system are quite different, Ontario-based research shows that racial disparities – that is, differences between racial groups at decision-making points in a service – do exist."

– Ontario Human Rights Commission

Current recommendations in support of advancing equity at the provincial level:

"The government of Ontario should develop a provincial strategy to identify and address how families' social and economic conditions are linked to racial disparities and disproportionality in the child welfare system. This strategy should contain measurable commitments to address these inequalities, including increasing the availability of funding, housing, services and supports to help families meet their needs and safely keep their children. The government should report on these commitments on an annual basis."
– Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018

Building on the successes of the One Vision One Voice project, there is an opportunity to continue our work to provide equitable services and programs for all children and families.

There are significant social and financial costs associated with doing child welfare work in the outdated ways. The one-size-fits-all approach to child welfare has resulted in disproportionalities that overburdened the system and have resulted in poor outcomes for marginalized children and youth, particularly those who are Indigenous and Black.

With modernization and sector transformation, now is the time to develop and embed equity programming into all areas of service delivery in the child welfare system. Let's work to transform the child welfare system so that it reflects its service users and their feedback. We must also ensure that the voices of children and youth are centred in our work.

The provincial government has proudly supported the child welfare sector's¹⁵ development of integrated approaches that centre equity in our work with children, youth, and families.

Now is the time to expand the One Vision One Voice (OVOV) program.

There are key successes of this program that address anti-Black racism in child welfare and provides a recourse for Black communities to address systemic racism. Continued funding for OVOV will help to combat disproportionality in other communities and populations in child welfare.

The successful OVOV framework can be reframed with the help of communities and groups who are experiencing similar disparities in service and systemic oppression within the child welfare system.

Child welfare statistics at a glance:

In 2018-19, 38 (non-Indigenous) Children's Aid Societies in Ontario:

- **77,217** investigations were completed
- **36,473** open ongoing protection cases were served
- **19,835** monthly average of open ongoing protection cases
- **9,227** families were receiving admission prevention assistance
- **15,334** children and youth in care were served
- **10,098** monthly average of children and youth in care
- **743** adoptions were completed
- **421** legal custody agreements completed
- **8,016** full-time equivalent staff

RECOMMENDATION 5: Address disproportionalities and overrepresentation.

- **OACAS urges the provincial government to expedite the authorizing and funding to support other marginalized communities' members for a Phase IV Project (\$600,000)** that is aligned with broader equity work.
- Oppression and discrimination are costing the child welfare system and service users due to the intrusive and disparaging interventions undertaken by Ontario's child welfare system with African Canadian, Indigenous and other marginalized and vulnerable families and children.
- **An investment in a Phase IV equity project** will lead to future cost reductions in child welfare spending and overall spending in social services. This investment would contribute to consistency of equitable service delivery, a structured approach required to address individual, systemic and structural issues, the development and dissemination of tools, guides and models, analysis of identity-based data, and the development of an '*Equity Centre of Excellence in Child Welfare*' at the provincial level.
- Children, youth, and families need a coordinated provincial approach to culturally relevant, safe, supportive programs, and services. There must be preventative measures and programs that work to dismantle racism, sexism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ageism to eliminate the disproportionality and disparity in everyday practice in the child welfare sector.

Investing in working as a unified system continues.

The Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) was first launched by the Ontario Government in 2014 as an enterprise system to modernize the way Children's Aid Societies do business. Currently in 2020, 39 Children's Aid Societies are using CPIN.

Ongoing investment is still required to address identified technical issues in CPIN. The government's continued support for this system is crucial to the safety of Ontario's children and youth – to be clear, there is no alternative.

This ongoing investment in CPIN supports the recommendations of the Ernst & Young report¹⁶ for government to invest in digital data, improve access to accurate and timely data related to service delivery, and evidence informed decision-making.

"CPIN is a valuable tool to help us make sure that vulnerable children and youth do not fall through the cracks. But the cost to the agencies of implementation impacts the ability to fulfill front-line services...[and] when we demand **an already strained system to do more without giving additional resources and support, we are simply trying to shift the blame for our failures.**"

– Hansard, October 24, 2018, Critic, Children and Youth

RECOMMENDATION 6: Invest in CPIN to continue maximizing working as a unified system.

OACAS recommends that government invest \$450,000 annually to ensure the further development of CPIN in the areas listed below, amongst other emerging priorities:

- **Duplicate Record Project:** OACAS developed a process to pilot the identification of duplicate records, and the merging of records. The pilot is intended to take a regional approach to best leverage knowledge and efficiencies. There is a risk that Societies do not have the human or financial resources to support this project. The risk associated with duplicate records is substantive and impacts on the safety of children.
- **Business Harmonization:** This work has resulted in a number of processes being harmonized since 2017. The priorities have shifted to support emerging provincial priorities, such as Part X. The vision of CPIN as a true enterprise system where safety is enhanced due to the consistent sharing of information is best met through continuing this important work.
- **Reporting:** Reliable reports which will help with better forecasting, more efficient use of human resources and better comparable data.
- Other areas of support include technical guidance and assisting with other emerging projects to amplify and enhance CPIN functionality and use.

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