

PEOPLEWORK NOT PAPERWORK

INTRODUCTION

Recent statements by senior Ministry officials and staff from the Minister's office that the child welfare reform agenda has successfully been completed and that there may actually be claw backs to agency budgets have prompted front line protection workers to tell their side of the story.

Excessive workload has been an issue in Children's Aid Societies across Ontario for more than a decade. The OACAS first tried to study the problem when the Pickens-van Leeuwen Workload Measurement Tool was developed in 1991. The OPSEU Workload Measurement Project was completed in 1999. It built on work that had been done in British Columbia in a joint study involving the government and the BCGEU. Most recently, the joint OACAS-OPSEU/CUPE study was released in February 2001.

Each of the studies done in Ontario came to the same conclusion. There is too much work for front line protection and support staff to do in order to complete any child protection tasks within the timelines allocated by the Ministry in the Funding Framework that was implemented in 1999. This serious problem has recently been made even worse by the introduction of new child welfare reform projects that have been developed, in large part by Ministry staff, without consultation with front line workers. While many of these reforms were welcomed by front line staff, they have unfortunately created a layer of bureaucracy and red tape that is unnecessary and unacceptable.

Ministry officials have consistently failed to acknowledge a key recommendation that has been made by virtually every inquest or task force in the past five years. Namely, "*that the government work with the employers and the unions representing front line staff to develop realistic workload guidelines*". As a result, there are a number of factors that are currently contributing to the workload crisis. The list includes:

1. a flawed funding formula based on Ministry established benchmarks;
2. increased referrals due to changes to the *Child and Family Services Act (CFSA)* and an increase in investigation due to the introduction of the Eligibility Spectrum;
3. an overemphasis on red tape and recording, leaving less time to see clients; and,

4. staff recruitment and retention problems.

FLAWED FUNDING FORMULA

The MCSS Funding Framework is perhaps the most critical shortcoming of the present system. The Funding Framework was a unilateral Ministry initiative that was introduced to rationalise the funding of societies across the province. It was to be implemented for three years, from 1999 to 2001, and then reviewed. A number of concerns have been identified. Most of the established benchmarks provide workers with less time to do their job than recent studies have shown it actually takes. And, there are a number of core child welfare tasks which have not even been included.

Much of the work that has been done in the past three years to measure workload was done in anticipation of the "comprehensive review of the funding formula" which had been promised by the Ministry. Now it seems clear that the Ministry is not willing to do the review as promised. It is unacceptable for the Ministry to renege on its commitment to do a review of the benchmarks. Even the Provincial Auditor, in his report released in November 2000 stated, *"that the Ministry's new Funding Framework, which is to be fully implemented in the 2000/01 fiscal year, is a substantial improvement over the Ministry's previous method of determining the Societies' program funding. However, the Ministry will not realise the benefits of the new funding framework until it ensures that funding for direct services costs is based on reasonable workload standards and salary levels that are achievable in the year to which the funding relates"*.

INCREASED REFERRALS

The OACAS reported in February 2001 that the number of investigations had increased by 13% since 1998-1999. As well, the number of children in care had increased by 26% since 1997. Changes to the CFSA are largely responsible for the increase in referrals. The emphasis of protection was refocused on children, rather than on keeping the family together. The threshold of risk was lowered so that potential abuse is reported and responded to earlier. The duty for professionals to report was strengthened and expanded. And, a "pattern of neglect" was

included in the grounds for protection. While nobody is arguing against these changes, it is also clear that the workforce must also be expanded to meet the increase in demand for services. The workforce has grown, but not nearly enough to make the workload manageable for front line staff. The government is taking the position that they have done enough for children at risk of abuse or neglect. This position is clearly not borne out by the facts.

PAPERWORK GIVEN PRIORITY

Part of the Ministry's Child Welfare Reform Agenda was to standardize the documentation of services provided by societies across the province. Not only is every child abuse investigation in the province documented in exactly the same way, but the timelines for investigations have also been established by the Ministry. The expectations are unrealistically high and are being rigidly enforced. The OACAS Workload Measurement Project Report found that front line protection workers now spend 70% of their time attending to "administrative" expectations. Leaving only 30% of the work day for actually seeing children and their families. This is unacceptable to anyone who recognises that the real work of protecting children is done with children and their families, not with computers. Yet the Ministry is not interested in working with front line staff to make the necessary adjustments to the expectations that they have unilaterally established.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PROBLEMS

In light of what has already been said, it is not surprising that stress on front line staff has become overwhelming in many cases. It is also not surprising that societies across the province are having a great deal of difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff. Many agencies have lowered their expectations regarding academic qualifications for applicants. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, given the training program that has been implemented for new staff. However, new workers aren't getting the training in a timely fashion and as a result, experienced workers who have been trained are expected to shoulder more of the load. Unfortunately, it seems that experienced workers are leaving almost as quickly as new ones are hired. Turnover

rates have increased to over 30% in most cases and it is not uncommon to find agencies with over 50% of their front line staff with less than 2 years of experience.

CONCLUSION

The workload crisis in child welfare will only get worse unless the government honours its commitment to do a comprehensive review of the benchmarks they established in the Funding Formula.

Unfortunately, Ministry officials seem more interested in forcing agencies to hold the line on spending at a time when referrals have increased dramatically and more children are in care than ever before. The projected deficit for societies is about \$50 million for the fiscal year 2000-2001. Some agencies will have exceeded their budgets for the year by January. They have been told not to expect any additional funds even though their deficits have been incurred providing legitimate child protection services. They have also been told to plan for a reduction in their budgets for 2002-03 because of the government's anti-deficit legislation.

Peoplework
NOT
Paperwork

October 2001

Possible titles for the campaign that were generated in a brain storming session.:

Put your Money Where Your Mouth Is!

You`re Not Getting what you Paid for.

Children are Shortchanged

Families are Shortchanged

Peoplework NOT Paperwork

Where are the Children?

All our Children

Here we go Again

Money Talks

Is your Child Safe?

Kids Deserve Better

Kids Count Too

Priorities Are the Children of Ontario REALLY being Protected? (Harris Priorities;

Common Sense Priorities; Tory Priorities; Conservative Government Priorities)

Common Sense – No Sense