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OPSEU, CAS staff stage protest

Posted By RONALD ZAJAC , STAFF WRITER

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RONALD ZAJAC The Recorder and TimesJohanne Wyss-Huskinson, chief steward at Family and Children's Services of Leeds and Grenville with the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), poses by a mock cheque to Children and Youth Services Minister Laurel Broten during a protest fundraiser at Memorial Park on Monday.

Queen's Park is suggesting children's aid societies hold barbecues to pay for services, the local agency's union said Monday.

So members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) did just that around the lunch hour, selling hotdogs and hamburgers at Memorial Park.

But a spokesman for the provincial minister responsible for children's aid said Monday the minister never suggested such agencies should have to fundraise for essential services.

OPSEU members held the fundraiser by the soccer fields to highlight what Family and Children's Services of Leeds and Grenville (FCS), the local Children's Aid Society (CAS) agency, considers chronic underfunding from the provincial government.

The local OPSEU members joined colleagues in four other Ontario communities in hosting such a fundraiser/protest.

Johanne Wyss-Huskinson, OPSEU's chief steward at Family and Children's Services here, said OPSEU officials met months ago with Children and Youth Services Minister Laurel Broten about the issue, and the minister suggested the agencies find more money by fundraising.

"We have decided that Laurel Broten needs to step up to the plate and fund services adequately and we are going to give our money to the kids in care," said Wyss-Huskinson.

Rather than going to regular FCS operations, the \$125 collected at Monday's midday barbecue will go to the agency's Children in Care Education Fund, which helps children served by the agency get access to post-secondary education, she said.

Wyss-Huskinson thanked the community for its generosity and support.

The event drew a steady stream of people to the event outside the Rotary Field House, she said.

They included Michelle Bos, a service assistant in transportation at Community and Primary Health Care, who showed up to support the cause while enjoying lunch.

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"I'd like to see a few more people here," said Bos, who believes anything to do with child care is underfunded by the province.

Leeds-Grenville MPP Steve Clark, who met with Wyss-Huskinson on Monday morning, said his Opposition Progressive Conservative Party believes in stable and predictable funding for child welfare agencies.

"It's a unique issue when you've got both management and the union having the same complaint against the government," said Clark.

If Broten truly said CAS agencies should revert to "barbecues and bake sales" to fund themselves, that it "a real shock," said Clark.

"When I was told that, I just couldn't believe that that was the solution to stability in the industry," said Clark. "It's ridiculous."

"It's the kids that are going to suffer, for sure," added Clark.

OPSEU argues that, while more than 200 new directives have been issued as a result of welcome amendments to the Child and Family Services Act in 2006, the McGuinty government has not provided agencies with the resources to make them work.

FCS warned in late February that it was in financial difficulty and it had been asked to use a line of credit to cover any cost overruns.

Executive director Bob Pickens said

Monday FCS ended the last fiscal year, at the end of March, with a \$366,000 deficit on net expenses of just under \$11 million.

That is in addition to a deficit of \$326,000 carried over from a previous year, for a total deficit of \$692,000.

The agency, which is now using a line of credit, is projecting a \$400,000 deficit in this fiscal year, Pickens said in a

telephone interview from Toronto, where he was attending a conference.

"We're in agreement (with OPSEU) that this agency and the field of child welfare is underfunded," said Pickens.

As for suggestions the agency should fundraise, Pickens called the idea "absurd," and likened it to the province telling police and firefighters to hold fundraisers if they want more personnel or equipment.

"We are an essential community protective service."

Family and Children's Services has 132 children for whom it is legally responsible, said Pickens.

The agency serves some 1,300 families every year, for an estimated total of 2,600 children, said Pickens.

The problem, he said, lies in a flawed funding formula.

"It seems to me the issue is they don't want to spend money on children that are the province's children," said Pickens.

Management does not approve of raising funds for the agency's operating budget, but sending the money to the education fund is reasonable, since FCS regularly fundraises for it, he said.

Dawn Skinner, a spokesman for Broten, said the minister denies she ever suggested agencies hold fundraisers to meet their budgets.

"She absolutely did not say that," said Skinner.

Since 1999, the province's child welfare allocation has gone up from \$500 million to \$1.4 billion, she said.

The ministry has set up the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare, a panel entrusted with looking at the funding formula, service delivery and other matters, said Skinner.

That commission, which is to report in the summer, met Monday with members of OPSEU and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), she added.

"We're absolutely taking a really intensive look at what's happening on the ground," said Skinner.

In this fiscal year, she said, CAS agencies will get additional funding for "child welfare transformation priorities," including money for services that prevent kids from coming into care, support stable placements for children in care and help adoptive families, she said.

"This is a transition year," added Skinner, who said the funding formula could be altered based on the commission's report.

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Perhaps if CAS would stop taking children from good parents, based on unfounded concerns. Foster parents and CAS offices are a huge cottage industry costing taxpayers millions every year and in over 50% of the cases, there is no reason for it

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