



OPSEU CHILDREN'S AID SECTOR
“Advocating for Workers Who Support Children and Families”

Honourable Dwight Duncan
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat
Frost Building North 3rd Floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto ON M7A 1Z1

February 04, 2010

Dear Mr. Duncan,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the development of the 2010 Budget. OPSEU represent 3,000 members who provide child welfare and protection services in our communities. Under the Child and Family Services Act, Children's Aids Societies (CASs) have a unique mandate to protect children, investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, and provide guidance, care, prevention and adoption services. We provide services to families where no other services are available or even welcomed.

This past year has been fraught with budget difficulties for 37 CASs across the province. An anticipated combined deficit of more than \$65 million looms over the field. Agencies cannot cut mandated services and therefore face very few options to reduce their deficits. If an agency does manage to have a surplus at the end of a particular budget year, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) does not allow them to apply it to an existing deficit. This rule makes it impossible for CASs to reduce their deficits.

We urge you to make sustainable funding of CASs a priority in the 2010 Budget. The following are our responses to your three questions.

1. What processes should the government put in place to enable it to move out of deficit?

There are no quick fixes to enable the government to move out of deficit. Cutting public services by cutting transfer payments to Broader Public Sector agencies, such as CASs, would cause irreparable harm to children and families in this province.

When public services are cut, the infrastructure of society begins to erode. Mandated services such as ours provide protection and essential resources to the most disadvantaged members of our communities. The underfunding of CASs calls into question the government's concern for vulnerable children. Our agencies were once seen as pillars of our communities, advocating for and protecting children and safeguarding their rights. Fiscal restraint comes in many forms. Accountability and quality assurance have become the new watchwords of government. To meet these standards takes many hours of work from managers and front line staff. Frequently, outside consultants and services are required that are costly and time consuming.

Time units on an hourly and daily basis are time consuming, inefficient and redundant. Workplaces employ supervisors whose job it is to know what, where, when and how workers are completing their work. In child welfare, each decision a worker makes needs to be approved by a supervisor with regular consultation. Electronic calendars allow supervisors to know the whereabouts of their staff and collective agreements ensure overtime is approved beforehand and signed off on. Time units are a waste of government money when supervisors are performing the same service.

CASs face two reviews each year. They have a Crown Ward Review and a Foster Care licensing review. A great deal of time, energy and money is put into these reviews. MCYS should incorporate the two reviews into one. Often, many of the same families, children and youth are interviewed by both reviews and are asked the same questions. Combining the two reviews into one would result in a substantial savings for unit assistant time in preparation, front line workers, foster parents, agency management and expenses for the Ministry personnel who are conducting the reviews.

Sharing services would be another cost savings for CASs. Training budgets, educationals and seminars would be save significant money for agencies.

Providing stable funding for recruitment and foster parent retention and kinship out of care would also be a cost saving. As would providing adoption subsidies. CASs spend significant funding on outside resources for foster children. If appropriate stable funding was allocated to develop the kinship out of care programs, significant savings would result. Studies in the United States and England show that kinship out of care is a cost efficient and quality service for children who need foster care. If stable funding was allocated for staff retention to recruit and retain foster parents, a sustainable foster care network would result. This network would be trained with internal expertise, support and encouragement, enabling foster parents and kinship out of care individuals to rise to the challenges of caring for the children in our system. Kinship out of care providers are a great resource which can significantly reduce foster care costs and OPI costs which are both significant costs to the child welfare system.

There needs to be an infusion of funding to assist in stabilizing staff retention and recruitment challenges especially in rural and First Nations communities. Staff turnover, sick time and workloads, in particular, paperwork, have significantly risen with the implementation of *Transformation: PRIDE and SAFE Assessments*. The cost to agencies to recruit and train new child welfare staff increases each year. Child welfare is considered an entry level workplace for social workers. Once they gain a year or two of experience, they seek other employment with better working conditions, more competitive wages and benefits.

CASs have requested a workload/time/services study be completed by the government considering the reform of the child welfare system by *Child Welfare Transformation 2006*. This workload study would have multiple cost saving benefits to the field. Allocating appropriate resources to kinship out of care would result in a properly functioning program. The protection of workers against burn out and stress due to unmanageable caseloads involving complex cases, would save recruitment and training costs. The emotional cost to our children, families, foster parents and co-workers in these situations is huge and disruptive for everyone involved.

Prevent any further program and service cuts by stabilizing the 2010-11 core budgets of CASs regarding the implementation of *Child Welfare Transformation*, particularly, kinship out of care funding.

Provide funding to eliminate agencies' 2007-09 deficits. If the deficits are not eliminated, further layoffs and cuts to service could result.

Recommend agencies decrease unnecessary computer printing costs. In this time of technology, emails, schedules, reports and other files do not need to be downloaded and printed. USB sticks for the storage of electronic documents are inexpensive and easily portable from office to office, computer to computer, from work to home etc.

2. What steps should the government take to streamline and provide better public service to Ontarians?

There needs to be a review of the whole funding system. The system needs to evaluate what is working and what is not working, thereby determining what the real needs are. The government needs to think outside the box and let agencies think outside the box when it comes to their funding allocations. Mandated services are limited by arduous provisions for accountability, which constrain innovation. The child welfare system could sustain itself if it were allowed some flexibility with the funding allocations.

For example, agencies have capital funds for furniture, computers and phones, that if they do not use they will lose. They cannot transfer these allocations costs to another financial line that is in need of funds.

If agencies do manage to be in a surplus, MCYS takes the surplus funds away. This is a questionable practice which does not provide any incentive for agencies to be innovative, or enable them to work within their budget and if needed, reduce any deficits.

Budgeting restrictions and guidelines are often confusing and rigid. For example, Ontario Child Benefit Equivalency (OCBE) funding for children in child welfare is restrictive and cumbersome. It is an excellent idea for our children but, once again, it is a funding situation where there are often unworkable strings attached. If you do not fit the three criteria, you cannot access the funds for children. Children are not widgets that fit into a specific mould. Creativity and innovation have to be used to determine best practices because of the complexity and ever-changing nature and circumstances for children.

3. Government priorities are job creation, health care, education, strong fiscal management and economic growth. How should the government balance this multitude of priorities? Given the considerable fiscal challenges, what should be the core priorities of the 2010 budget?

We know that in difficult economic times, the stressors on families increase. CASs have found that in cities where the unemployment rate has increased, there is a significant rise in the need for child protection services. The longer this economic crisis lasts, the more complex and demanding the workload will be in child welfare agencies. This past fiscal year has presented many challenges to child welfare.

The need for services for children with special needs has been significant throughout the province. Deficits are climbing partly because of the costs of Outside Paid Institutions (OPIs). OPIs are expensive and costly. Often agencies do not have a choice in placing children with significant high needs in appropriate OPIs. Our foster care systems are not currently designed to accommodate such significant high needs children. Foster homes are becoming increasingly harder to recruit and more demanding of services themselves. Breakdowns occur which are costly not only financially but emotionally. The trauma associated with foster home breakdowns is significant for children. If attachment theory is correct, when the child has experienced multiple caregivers, the ability for the child to attach and meet developmental milestones decreases significantly, with each new caregiver introduced to the child. In turn, this will cause significant financial costs to the government as the child will increasingly act out, requiring more services, not only from the child welfare system, but from a range government services. Studies have shown that crime and violence cost Canadians \$120 billion per year (Heckman 2006) and that mental illness and behaviour problems cost a further \$100 billion per year (Gnam et al 2006). If we continue underfunding CASs, then the consequences I have just described of children not reaching key

developmental milestones and therefore facing challenges that will cost the system for years to come, will continue to grow. Sustainably and appropriately fund CASs now, and the costs to social services and the criminal justice system will significantly decline in the future.

The government must continue to fund public services at levels that are appropriate and healthy. Public services keep families intact and sustain our communities during difficult economic times.

Respectfully Submitted

Rick Pybus
Chair
OPSEU Children's Aid Society Sector

Cc: Honourable Laurel Broten, Minister of Children and Youth Services