

Canadian Child Welfare Services: How Much Do We Share With Our Neighbours?

Introduction

During the last decades of the 1900's, the thinking of how children should be treated changed from punitive to caring and supportive. Reformers in Britain, Canada and the US advocated for care for abandoned and neglected children by their own communities and were instrumental in putting in place children's care and protection agencies. These reformers and advocates, Goldwin Smith, John J Kelso, Charles L Brace, Jane Adams and Grace Abbot built the foundations of our current children's aid and protective agencies,

History

To set the stage for our discussion, I think it might be interesting to recall that while some social programs in Canada are titled "universal" and operate in all ten provinces and territories, i.e. Old Age Security, Unemployment Insurance and our Universal Health plan, as far back as the British North America Act of 1867 other social services were designated to be under provincial responsibility - i.e. health, education and social services. Child Welfare, one of the largest sections under the Social Services umbrella is mandated to be managed, funded and delivered under the auspices of a special provincial government department known as the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

Financial Responsibility

The funding agreements between the federal and provincial governments with regard to the child welfare services have been both complicated and at times controversial. The basic unit used for many years in Canada is known as a transfer payment.

Under this system, federal taxes are paid into the federal government and then transfers are made back to the provinces to help fund programs for which they are responsible, but too expensive to carry at a provincial level.

Under a social program known as the Canada Assistance Plan a federal-provincial equally shared program provided funding for social assistance, child care subsidy, and child welfare, the provinces were able to bill the federal government based on the cost of providing these programs, and received transfer payments equal to 50% of the cost. In 1991, unfortunately for many social services, the federal government put a cap on the amount available to be transferred to the three richest provinces, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. Soon after this cap was applied it was enforced on all the provinces. This withdrawal of federal support for these essential services changed the original cost sharing agreement between the federal and provincial governments, and made it much more difficult for the provinces to plan for the allocation of funding for child welfare programs.

Thus in Ontario, our Ministry for Children and Youth Services, responsible for the operation of the province's child welfare system operates on a provincial transfer payment basis for the fifty-three Children's Aid Societies within the province. All of these agencies are mandated under a piece of social legislation known as the Child and Family Services Act, 2006, to provide a range of services for children within the province.

Annually, each CAS provides a budget and a management plan for the coming year, which once passed by its' board is filed with the Ministry of Child and Youth Services for approval. Once approved the funding allocation is made and the funds are transferred to the Society to provide the services for the upcoming year.

In addition to providing the financial allocation the role of the provincial government has grown over the years from a limited legislative and monitoring function to a far more aggressive role of inspecting, facilitating and imposing standards.

The advantages of this arrangement for the Children's Aids Societies are a secure funding base and an advocate, a Minister in the Provincial Cabinet.

Service Delivery Options

An area of interest to all involved in the child welfare field is that of service delivery. Thus I have included an overview of how basic child welfare services are delivered in Ontario. As mentioned protective child welfare services in the province are provided by community based voluntary agencies who are mandated under provincial legislation. These are known as Children's Aid Societies (CAS). There are fifty-three such agencies in Ontario. Their primary obligation and exclusive responsibility is investigation where children are in need of protection from abuse and neglect. Under the Legislation families cannot be turned away or placed on a waiting list when it is apparent that more immediate investigation or intervention is necessary to protect children at risk of abuse and neglect.

Five of the Children's Aid Societies are designated as Aboriginal (First Nation's Agencies), 3 are faith based (2 Catholic, 1 Jewish) and 3 are multi-service agencies that combine CAS and Family Services. The remaining CAS's are non-sectarian.

While these agencies have a good deal of flexibility in many areas of service delivery, Child Protection Services are the exception and demand a quick response. After the initial investigation of a possible neglected or abused child, the Society must consider several alternatives:

- Work with the family and child in the home so that the family can remain intact and hope to resolve the problems so that the child can remain in the care of a normally functioning family.
- If the child's safety cannot be assured, the child is removed from the home to the care of a Children's Aid Society either on a voluntary basis or by order of a Family Court judge.

- If the child comes into care, the Society continues to work with both the child and the family to determine the best interests of the child on both a temporary and/or permanent basis. Placement options include foster care, kinship care, group homes and adoption.

Challenges and Opportunities

Immigration Problems

The continued flow of immigrants into the Canadian Population especially into the larger urban centers produces new challenges for the child welfare sector: i.e. recruitment of a diversified work force; the frequent need for translators; a continuing education program to provide front line workers with a basic knowledge of the cultural values and mores of a diversified client population, and major problems with immigration authorities.

Thus in 2007 the Society created a new position for an **Immigration Specialist** in response to the high volume of children in care who were experiencing immigration concerns. The purpose of this position was to provide expert advice and consultative services, including advocacy and support to both staff members experiencing immigration issues for crown wards in their care, and to the young clients themselves seeking to secure legal immigration status.

These include difficulties such as:

- locating biological parents or caregivers
- obtaining identifying documentation
- a lack of funding for non crown wards to obtain legal help when necessary
- situations in which the confidentiality policies of the Society conflicted with the demands of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

The results of this relatively new position have been quite positive in the past two years in that the Society now sits on an Immigration liaison committee with several other local agencies and a representative from **Citizenship and Immigration Canada**. Working relationships with immigration lawyers have improved and more than 50 cases moved toward Canadian Citizenship.*

*The background information for this section was provided by Ronal Ibarra, the Child Protection Immigration Specialist for the Society

New Worker Training

The need for focused training for the child welfare field has been apparent in Canada for more than twenty years due to the realization that schools of Social Work could not include sufficient specialized child welfare content in their already overcrowded curriculums. Thus most provinces have developed some type of new worker training for hired staff. One example is the model utilized by the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto as briefly described below.

The Society's agency based New Worker Training Program is designed to meet the following objectives:

- To help new workers gain knowledge of the corporate and branch organizational systems and structures
- To help new workers gain the basic clinical skills necessary to provide effective service to clients
- To provide new workers with a positive and supportive learning environment
- To integrate and apply the classroom learning to day-to-day practice and to casework
- To support and encourage the new workers' entry into the Society and to the practice of Child Welfare Services
- To assist new workers in the development of their confidence in their ability to perform the role.

The program enables the supervisors to have increased time to "mentor" their new workers while the "coaches" assist them with the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the transfer of learning and integration of the classroom learning to the field.

The program is designed for newly hired Child Protection Workers, without previous experience. New workers are enrolled in the program at the time of their commencement for a period of three months. For those new hires that have previous child welfare experience, a specialized learning plan is developed by the new worker's branch based supervisor and the Supervisor of the New Worker Training Program. To date the outcome of this training has been positive particularly in the high retention rate of workers and in the quality of service delivery.

Education Advocate Program

In the Child Welfare Field we have long known the potentially negative effects of children in care too frequently moving from one placement to another and from one child care worker to another. These changes seriously impact the child's current progress in school, and future educational planning. In Canada, as elsewhere, research data have confirmed that children and youth living under the care of the child welfare system compose one of the most at risk drop-out groups in the education system.

Thus in 1998 the CCAS created a new position known as **The Education Advocate**. The job description was to develop and implement a program built on the belief that educational success is a major variable in preparing young people for a healthy, productive and satisfying adulthood.

The objective of the program was to develop and promote an educational culture that supports and enhances learning opportunities for the children and youth served by the Society, and provides leadership in the development and implementation of the society's strategy.

The major components of the program include:

- Enabling education policy at the local level
- Establishing education roles
- Providing ongoing systemic advocacy
- Providing direct education support

- Conducting ongoing research involving qualitative and quantitative data collection · Developing necessary resources · Organizing professional development, partnerships, and opportunities for child/youth participation ·
- Planned recognition of effort and achievement.

Further, training is provided to case workers and other Society personnel responsible for child care to assist in understanding current education legislation programs and curriculum developments and the need to advocate and plan for children in the education system.

In the past ten years, the work of the Education Advocate has made a positive impact in the education of children and youth under the care of the CCAS. Elementary and high school students have consistently demonstrated a higher level of academic success, and an increasing number of Crown Wards have pursued post secondary education.*

*The background information for the Education Advocate Program was provided by Luz Bascunan.

Integration of Child Welfare Services Through Formal Partnerships and Shared Outcomes

Recently Ontario Children's Aid Societies and Violence Against Women agencies unveiled a Collaboration Agreement involving an innovative joint initiative, the goal of which was to work more effectively towards ending violence against women and children. It outlined monitoring and accountability processes based on their shared understanding of woman and child abuse and neglect to ensure that the involved agencies work together at specific points where the two sectors connect. Early progress reports have been very positive.

Research and Practice Partnerships

Evidence Based Practice based on solid research findings resulting from partnerships between University based academics and Society service providers. Such partnerships are beneficial to both participants. Front line workers have an opportunity to step back and apply systemic research techniques in their work; while academics have the opportunity to conduct research in real practice setting.

Foster Home Recruitment

This area continues to present ongoing service problems. For many years the Children's Aid Societies have relied on developing and maintaining good foster home placements for children requiring temporary or long term care. However, in the current economic environment, many families require two incomes, especially those who live in urban centers with higher living costs. While foster parents are compensated for foster care, the rates are not competitive with those offered in the work place. Several aggressive advertising and Public Relations campaigns over the past few years have not generated the number of foster homes required. This reality necessitates the placement of children outside of their own community,

creating communication, supervision and travel problems for the Society workers and the child's natural family.

Summary

Our ongoing partnership with the provincial government provides its own set of challenges. While we are almost totally dependent upon the government for our funding the agencies have always maintained their jurisdiction over policies and programs.

In recent years, issues such as death of children in care, economic cutbacks in provincial spending, and adverse publicity from the media have all contributed to increased levels of bureaucracy imposed on the Child Welfare sector, resulting in more time required to complete paperwork, and less time to spend with the children and their families whom the agencies are mandated to serve. We continue to struggle with this dilemma!

I am sure that many of the issues I have raised are familiar to all of you and will generate fruitful discussion from our panel members and other colleagues. Thank you for your interest and attention. It is my great pleasure to be with you today.