

October 24, 2024


RE: Ontario's Child Welfare Services sector need for child welfare services funding

On behalf of the Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee, please see attached letter from the Children's Aid Society of Oxford County outlining their critical funding situation. As indicated in the letter, the work of the Children's Aid Society of Oxford County aligns directly with the goals and objectives within the Safe and Well Oxford plan. The services provided are crucial to the well-being of youth within our communities, proactively supporting the future of Oxford County.

We encourage your Council to read the letter and formalize your support through the writing of a letter, as requested by the Children's Aid Society of Oxford County. Having all municipalities within the County demonstrate their support for the financial needs of the Children's Aid Society of Oxford County is important and impactful.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or concerns regarding our support, please contact me at mryan@oxfordcounty.ca or 519-539-9800 x3003.

Sincerely,



Marcus Ryan
Chair, Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee
Warden, Oxford County





**Children's
Aid Society**
Of Oxford County

Safe children and youth, strong families, caring communities

Tina Diamond, MSW, RSW, MBA, CHRL
Executive Director

September 9, 2024

Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee
c/o Sarah Hamulecki
21 Reeve Street, P.O. Box 1614,
Woodstock, Ontario
N4S 7Y3

Dear Steering Committee;

Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies, otherwise known as child welfare agencies, are dedicated to promoting the health, well-being, and safety of children, youth, and families across Ontario. They work together with local community-based organizations and service providers to support children, youth, and families facing challenges.

- Under the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017*, child welfare agencies have the legal mandate to provide child protection services 7 days a week, 365 days a year. They are the only mandated service providers within the broader children's services system.
- Child welfare agencies do not simply help protect children and youth who are experiencing abuse or neglect, or at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect. Agencies also provide critical crisis intervention and ongoing early intervention and preventative services, while prioritizing improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families. They work tirelessly to ensure children, youth, and families get the right care, at the right time, close to home, so they can thrive and stay together.
- Most cases that child welfare agencies encounter are not ones of extreme abuse or neglect. Families face issues such as poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment, mental health challenges, and addictions, as well as intersecting systems of power, privilege, and oppression. These stressors and complications can impact a family's ability to care for their children and increase the likelihood of an interaction with the child welfare sector.
- Systems are failing caregivers, and child welfare agencies are doing work to fill systemic gaps and put children, youth, and families first.

Child welfare agencies across the province, similar to other publicly funded services, are facing significant funding challenges. We do not have the ability to turn families away, we do not manage waitlists, nor do we have the option to say that services are not available through us. As a sector we have committed to approaching our municipalities seeking a letter of support for sustainable child welfare services. Safe and Well Oxford's overriding purpose is to improve the safety and well-being of community members, by defining and addressing priority risks through proactive, integrated system-wide strategies. Please consider our request for a letter of support from Safe and Well Oxford.

In 2023/24, the Children's Aid Society of Oxford County provided the following critical services:

- Completed 801 Child Protection Investigations throughout the year and provided ongoing services to an average of 162 families each month.
- Supported an average of 30 children and youth in the care of the Society on a monthly basis. This compares to 2013/2014, when an average of 154 children and youth were in the care of the Society each month. This change reflects the intentional work of the Society over the past decade to engage in early intervention and prevention services with families, so that children and youth can remain safely in their homes or communities. Ensuring children are safe and well in their homes, requires additional resources, and the funds once spent to bring children and youth into Society care, is redirected directly to the family through prevention supports and ongoing services.
- Supported an average of 52 children and youth placed in the care of kin (members of their extended family or network) as an alternative to care. Again, this has been a significant area of focus for the Society as 64% of children and youth requiring an out of home placement were placed with members of their family or community last year, compared to 2013/14 when only 15% of children and youth were placed with kin. We believe children and youth have better outcomes when living with people who are familiar to them and ensure that kinship families receive the financial support required.
- Provided service to an average of 6 youth aged 16-17 years, and 27 youth aged 18-23 years, each month.

Despite providing communities with services designed to protect children and youth and to offer support to vulnerable families, agencies are not receiving adequate funding, nor does the funding formula truly align with best practices and service principles (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to kin, community, and culture) as set out in the Child Welfare Redesign framework. We are calling on Ontario to bring greater financial stability and sustainability to the child welfare sector by ensuring that agencies are provided with enough funding to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant care and develop an updated funding formula that truly prioritizes early intervention, prevention, and continued connections to kin, community, and culture.

The provincial child welfare allocation assigned to Oxford County has decreased by 2.9 million dollars (-17.5%) over the last ten years, despite acknowledgement that families, children and youth are experiencing unprecedented challenges. The families in our community, not unlike other communities, are experiencing challenges that have increased in severity and, as you are aware, access to services is becoming increasingly difficult - meaning that when families come to us, they are often past the crisis point.

Despite strong and collaborative community partnerships, we do not have the ability to bypass or move clients to the front of treatment waitlists for the services they require and in many tragic situations, the families end up relinquishing their parental rights in an effort to have the needs of their children met.

The underfunding of services to children and families, compounded by additional factors, have collectively resulted in half of all Ontario Children's Aid Societies operating in deficit:

- Two percent annual reductions in funding on the spurious grounds that after eight years of austerity a small agency can easily find six-figure efficiency savings.
- Pre-formula adjustments for overhead expenses based on actual expenses from 2011.
- Priorities that are only partially funded, including targeted adoption subsidies and support for youth.
- High costs for complex special needs children who are in need of treatment, but not necessarily in need of protection.

712 PEEL ST., WOODSTOCK, ONTARIO N4S 0B4 TELEPHONE (519) 539-6176 FAX (519) 421-0123

Reform of the funding formula was promised by the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services in 2020 as part of Child Welfare Redesign. To date, there has been no meaningful progress despite two specific consultations with sector leadership wherein recommendations were submitted, and months of sector and Ministry collaboration occurring in a joint task force designed to make child and family focused changes.

The Children's Aid Society of Oxford County practices child welfare in a manner that places the child/youth at the center of service and recognizes that when it is safe to do so, the best outcomes occur when the family or someone familiar to the child/youth is involved and providing care for them. However, due to the complex and significant needs of the youth in our community, we have seen an increase in families abandoning their youth into our care with the hope that we are able to expedite residential mental health services.

Not only do we not have expedited access to services, in some situations, the youth is not prioritized due to our involvement. Furthermore, despite our community having some of the strongest and most effective collaborations between service partners, we do not have residential services in our community. This means we are forced to move youth hours away from their homes and use our limited funding to ensure that their families are able to travel to, and from, the youth's placement as we believe this is necessary to support an eventual reintegration of the youth into their family. The costs associated with these placements are exorbitant. This year, we are forecasting boarding costs of 4 million dollars. This is an increase of 1.3 million dollars from last year. Additionally, we currently have two youth placed in Air BnB's, and one youth in a hotel, because we are unable to find placements that will accept the youth with their presenting needs.

Over the past year we have seen an increase in alarming behaviours due to the complex mental health needs of youth in our community. These have included attempts to jump off houses and other buildings, fabricated illnesses/injuries, self-harm attempts, significant substance use, threats of weapons, grooming by traffickers, and instances of youth being subjected to serious criminal offenses. In addition, we are currently experiencing a concerning trend within our community - a significant increase in the number of 17-year-olds in crisis. The families of these 17-year-old youth are unable to access treatment and support and in turn, abandon the youth to the child welfare system. These youth enter a system that is ill prepared to meet their needs and often adds to the problems they are facing. In the month of August 2024, we supported four families requesting the Society assume legal guardianship of their youth.

We have experienced a similar situation with families navigating the criminal justice system. When faced with complex-needs youth, the courts are issuing restraining orders that prevent these youth from returning home. Often the youth have been charged with acts of violence, resulting in limited family who can assume their care. Consequently, these youth are abandoned to a child welfare system ill-equipped to address their specific needs. In July 2024, we supported two families through this experience.

The costs to adequately support youth who present with severe and complex behaviours is significant, especially with a decreasing funding allocation. Not only do these high costs take away from supports we are able to provide to other children, youth, and families, but the indirect costs to the community are also noteworthy. For instance, the costs associated with increased police calls, ambulance usage to transport youth to hospitals, and fire calls over the last year have been substantial. Child welfare needs to be adequately funded to support these high needs youth or the Ministry of Health must cover the costs.

These are Oxford County's children, youth, and families, and our community deserves access to services that are appropriately funded and community based.

Sincerely,



Tina Diamond, MSW, RSW, MBA, CHRL
Chief Executive Officer
Children's Aid Society of Oxford County
tdiamond@casoxford.on.ca
(519) 539-6176 x 325



Catherine Leclair
Board Chair



Jeannette Van Lagen
Board Vice Chair



Robert Kates
Treasurer



Fred Freeman
Director



Erin Harvey
Director



Jo Ann Hanson
Director



Rod Wilkinson
Director



Tammy Hewson
Director



Tracey Thompson
Director

Rocio Salinas
Rocio Salinas
Director

Tami Murray
Tami Murray
Director



Igor Bubic
Director

Derek Salinas

Derek Salinas
Director