



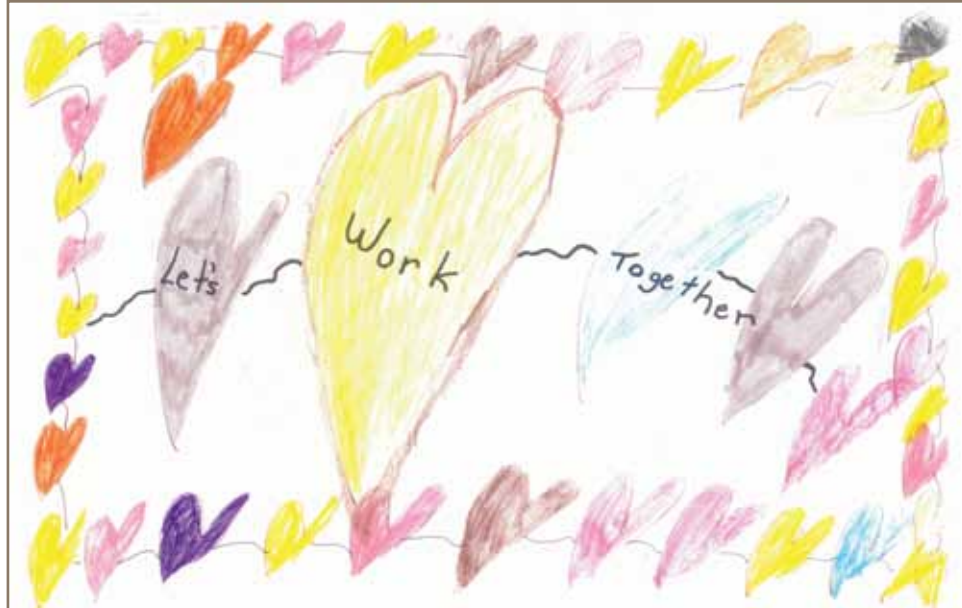
Commission to Promote  
Sustainable Child Welfare

Commission de promotion de la viabilité  
des services de bien-être de l'enfance

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# Towards Sustainable Child Welfare in Ontario

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# Executive Summary

Child welfare is one of several provincially funded programs designed to keep Ontario's children safe and healthy so that they will grow up to realize their full potential.

Today, child welfare in Ontario is delivered through 53 children's aid societies (CASs). Every year, staff in these agencies field more than 160,000 telephone calls for assistance. The phone rings at all hours of the day and night, seven days a week. Whoever calls, the CAS responds.

The job of the CAS is to ensure that children are safe and to help their parents keep them safe. If the children are not safe at home, then the CAS on behalf of all of Ontario's residents acts as their parents until they are able to return home or find a new home with another family.

## AN INVESTMENT IN OUR FUTURE

The staff of the children's aid societies make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families every day. This work is an investment in the children's future and the future of communities in which they live in Ontario.

In the fiscal year 2010/2011, Ontario's children's aid societies will spend more than \$1.4 billion delivering this important service. This amount has increased substantially over the last decade – and at a much greater rate than spending on many other services for vulnerable children and youth. These dynamics together with the recent economic downturn have raised concerns about the costs of delivering the service and about the limited information that is available on outcomes that are being realized by children who receive services from CASs.

These concerns have prompted other questions. Is the province getting maximum value for the money it spends on child welfare? Is the present system of protecting vulnerable children, youth and families through 53 independent children aid societies the best way? Has the provincial government found the right balance in spending on child welfare through the children's aid societies and on other services for vulnerable children, youth and families?

## SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

These are the types of questions that led the Ontario Government to establish a Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare in November 2009. The three-member Commission has a three-year mandate to develop and implement changes that will ensure a sustainable child welfare system for the province's vulnerable children, youth and families.

This is the Commission's first report. It examines Ontario's child welfare system as it stands today and how its policies, funding and service delivery have grown and changed in the past 10

years. The report then describes its vision of a sustainable and integrated system of children's services and sets out a strategic roadmap to follow from now to September 2012, when the Commission's mandate ends.

## CHILD WELFARE IN ONTARIO TODAY

The financial trends show a sector that experienced a significant growth in its case load and spending in the early part of the last decade. This growth arose from multiple policy changes in the late 1990s to increase the focus on protecting vulnerable children. In the latter half of the current decade, there was a shift in emphasis towards supporting more vulnerable children at home with their families. This shift resulted in fewer children being taken into care and for shorter periods of time. Not surprisingly, the growth in spending decreased.

This change was a direct result of the Transformation Agenda launched by the government in 2006. The Transformation Agenda focused on a more balanced position between protecting the child and preserving the family. Further, the Transformation Agenda emphasized the importance of child welfare staff working collaboratively with community partners and in applying newly developed standards and tools.

The economic downturn over the last two years has brought new challenges to government spending. The child welfare sector in Ontario is now in its second year with no increases in funding and several CASs continue to face serious financial challenges. These dynamics have raised new questions about sustainability and about the best way to organize the sector to ensure that vulnerable children and youth will be supported regardless of the fiscal environment.

## A VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

As a province, if we want to improve the outcomes for our most vulnerable children, we must make some policy choices. We need to move from the notion of "child welfare" to the "welfare of children". This is a responsibility we all share as members of a society; it is not the exclusive responsibility of the children's aid societies.

Further, the Commission believes that we need to see the welfare of children from the broader perspective of services for children, youth and their families. We need an integrated system across the province that is able to identify vulnerable children and families early, assess what services they need and ensure that they get them and in the form that will make a positive difference in their lives and for their futures.

*"A future in which a modernized child welfare system functions as one of many programs working together to provide integrated child-focused services fully aligned to improve the outcomes for children and youth"*

The Commission does not believe that children's aid societies should be the dominant provider, the sole point of access or the default organization for all services for vulnerable children and youth. What is needed is a new set of relationships in which other service providers and

children's aid societies operate as partners working together for the best possible outcome for children and their families.

A sustainable child welfare system should be dynamic and self-renewing. It should be child-centered, fully integrated and balanced between the protection of the child and the preservation of the family.

A sustainable child welfare system should be consistent for vulnerable children and families wherever they are in Ontario. This means equivalent access to services, equivalent performance and quality of services, and supported by processes and information flows that enable consistency and portability of services from one part of Ontario to another.

## MAKING THE VISION A REALITY

The present child welfare system has many strengths and challenges.

The people who lead and deliver Ontario's child welfare services are both expert and passionate about their work. Further, the strong, community-based roots of the children's aid societies have resulted in large numbers of committed foster parents and loyal volunteers, a high rate of local engagement and generous public and private philanthropy. These assets are priceless and important. They must be preserved.

Nonetheless, Ontario's children's aid societies were not designed to perform as an integrated provincial system of child welfare services. This means there are a number of challenges that must be met to realize the Commission's vision for a sustainable child welfare system.

These challenges and concerns include the following:

- There are differences among the 53 agencies in the services they deliver, in their capacities to deliver services, in their models of service delivery and in their interpretation of their role and mandate.
- There is not enough collaboration amongst the 53 children's aid societies and there is significant variability in the kinds and availability of services across the province.
- There is a lack of clear and consistent accountability between the CAS and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. The system today centres on compliance-based mechanisms that focus on detailed audits of compliance against standards rather than on outcomes for children and performance of the agencies and system.
- The present funding formula does not allow the system to adapt to the present fiscally constrained environment. In some instances, the present financial system seems to discourage good performance and does not support the goals of the Transformation Agenda.

- The fragmentation of ministry functions across many branches results in a lack of clarity and focus. It's hard to see which branch does what. There are opportunities here to improve on how priorities are set, results are evaluated, communications are coordinated and policy directions are translated among other things.

## **OTHER CHALLENGES**

The diversity of Ontario's geography and population present major challenges in ensuring equitable access and quality services across Ontario.

Aboriginal children and their families have different and complex needs. The legacy of residential schools and of the 1960s and 1970s when hundreds of children were removed through adoption have had a profound effect on the men and women involved and on their communities. There is an urgent need to work with Aboriginal communities to find and coordinate approaches that respond directly to the needs of their children and youth.

The Commission believes that although the strategy to advance child welfare is relevant to all of Ontario's residents, the special circumstances of Aboriginal children, youth and families must be viewed through an additional lens of the Aboriginal community.

A further challenge is meeting the needs of children and families whose first language is not English. It is critical that they receive services in the languages that they and their service providers understand.

Similarly, French-speaking residents not only deserve service in French, but it is the law. When warranted Franco-Ontarian children and families must have access to services in French anywhere in the province not only in the 22 communities designated under the French Language Act.

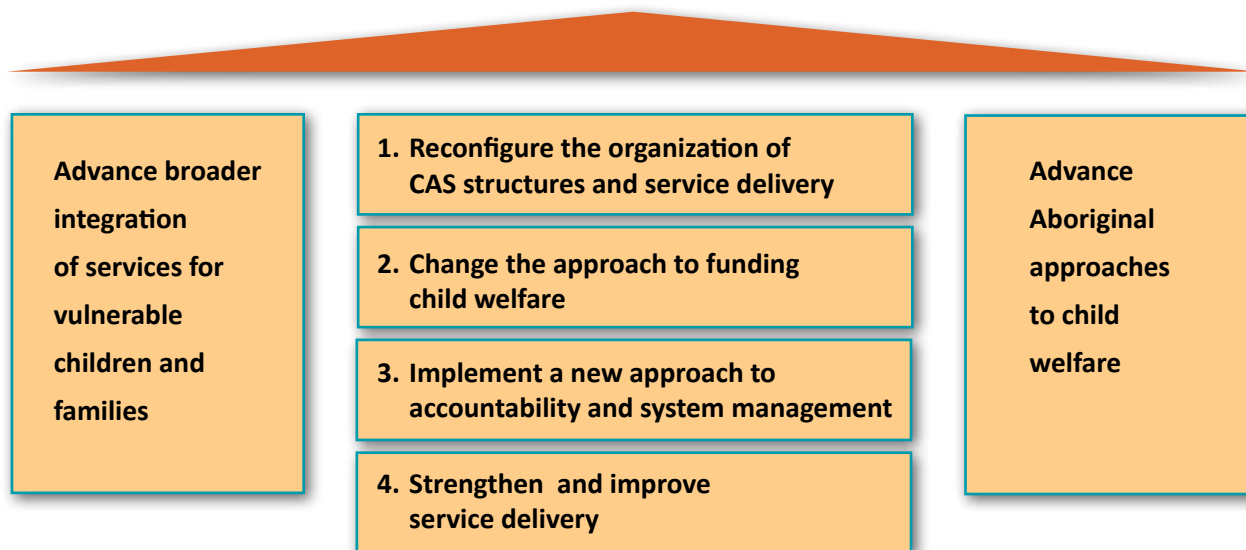
## **THE STRATEGY TO MOVE CHILD WELFARE FORWARD**

The Commission has developed a four-tiered strategy to move toward its vision of a sustainable child welfare system. The strategy will evolve over the next two and a half years of the Commission's mandate.

The four tiers in the strategy build on each other. For example, the first tier is absolutely critical to the success of the second tier and so on through to the fourth tier.

## A Four-Tiered Strategy for Sustainable Child Welfare

A modernized child welfare system providing integrated child-focussed services fully aligned with the broader network of children's services to improve outcomes for children and youth.



The **first tier**, reconfiguring the organization of CAS structures and service delivery forms the foundation on which funding, accountability and actual service delivery is based. Reconfiguration will lead to fewer CASs in Ontario and a higher level of shared services between CASs. In some communities, reconfiguration may well lead to a higher level of shared service and integration between CAS and other community services.

These changes are critical to ensure that all CASs have the scale to deliver consistent, high quality, and cost effective services and the capacity to adapt to the fast-paced changes facing children, families and communities.

In some communities, considerations of culture and remoteness must be balanced against these important scale factors. However, opportunities exist in several Ontario communities to leverage and integrate the strengths of current CASs to create even more effective, responsive and sustainable services for the future.

The **second tier** of the Commission's strategy will define the changes that are required in how the system is funded in order to achieve sustainability. The Commission is initiating a project with input from the ministry, CASs and others to develop alternate approaches to funding. Work on this tier will ramp up quickly over the summer and fall so that a phase-in of a new funding approach can begin by 2011/12.

In parallel with the new approach to funding CASs is the **third tier** of a new approach to accountability and overall system management. The importance of a model for accountability was highlighted in the Transformation Agenda and the Commission's strategy moving forward is to harness and build on this important work.

The **final tier** – strengthen and improve service delivery -- will examine the fundamental work of CASs. Efforts on this tier will focus on confirming and increasing clarity on the range of child welfare services; strengthening and improving direct services and streamlining administrative processes to maximize agency and worker capacity for providing services to children, youth and families

Changes realized through all four of the tiers will be of benefit to Aboriginal children and youth. However, because of the unique circumstances facing Aboriginal people additional consideration for advancing Aboriginal approaches to child welfare services for their communities is of prime importance. In parallel, ongoing attention will be given to strategies that will advance broader integration of all services for vulnerable children and families.

## COMMISSION'S NEXT STEPS

With the release of this report, the Commission's work now shifts from examining what needs to change to working with the ministry and the child welfare sector to actively plan to realize these changes.

During these first seven months, the Commission has heard from foster parents, board members, CASs leaders, unions and front line staff, independent residential service providers, leaders of school boards, children's mental health organizations and other community partners, leaders within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and government. All have pledged their commitment to working together to realize the potential of this moment in time. And perhaps the clearest voices among them have been the voices of families and current and former youth-in-care offering their honest and personal perspectives on what would make the biggest difference to them in their lives.

This report represents our commitment to work over the remaining two and a half years of our mandate with this large and diverse team of partners to create a sustainable child welfare system for Ontario – and to make a lasting difference for vulnerable children and youth.