

Ontario throws children's aid \$27M lifeline

February 13, 2010

Tanya Talaga

Queen's Park Bureau

Ontario's cash-strapped children's aid societies will get a \$26.9 million bailout to keep the agencies afloat until the next fiscal year.

Children and Youth Services Minister Laurel Broten told the *Star* 26 of 53 provincial societies will receive the money immediately to "put them on a stable footing."

"This infusion of money is a direct response to my commitment that we will not put kids at risk."

An announcement is expected Monday.

For the last few months, Broten has insisted the agencies must cut costs and find ways to get on a more solid financial footing as the province battles a \$24.7 billion deficit.

Children's aid societies have argued the funding they receive is based on outdated projections and say if they are not given more, services for Ontario's most vulnerable kids will be reduced.

Last year, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services established a three-person committee of experts to examine why the agencies continue to have money problems at the same time each year and whether the current funding model is working.

"You can't solve these issues in the 11th month of the fiscal year," Broten said.

"We've assessed these funds are needed."

Without proper funding, the agencies warn they will not be able to meet the mandatory standards of seeing children every month, and case workers will assess children's safety and well-being less frequently.



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

Payukotayno James and Hudson Bay Family Services received \$2.3 million, allowing the agency to stay open until the end of March 2010 after 120 staff faced layoffs due to lack of funding. (Dec. 9, 2009)

Of the \$26.9 million, \$2.5 million is earmarked for First Nations children's aid societies in order for them to handle fiscal pressures other agencies do not face – such as high travel costs to get to at-risk kids in fly-in communities, and the exorbitant cost of living expenses in the North.

In December, the *Star* reported on the teen suicide epidemic plaguing the communities around the James Bay basin. Last year, 13 First Nations youth committed suicide, all by hanging.

The children's aid society in Moosonee – Payukotayno James and Hudson Bay Family Services – has struggled to cope with the suicide crisis while under constant threat of bankruptcy.

Broten came to the aid of Payukotayno in late December, giving it \$2.3 million in emergency funding.

The agency's credit line was maxed out and pink slips had been sent to all 120 staff members. The funding bridged the agency until March.

"There are also broad, big, complicated issues we need to continue to work on with these (children's aid societies) and that is why these funds have been allocated," Broten said.

However, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies say 49 of their agencies were experiencing a \$67 million funding shortfall.

Some of the \$26.9 million will go to the York Region Children's Aid Society, which faced a \$6.6 million projected deficit and cut 18 positions last year. The Simcoe County agency will also receive funding.

By law, the agencies are mandated to protect children, investigate allegations of abuse and neglect, and provide care and adoption services.