



CAS Cuts Impacting Northwestern Ontario

Written by James Murray

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QUEEN'S PARK – NDP Leader Andrea Horwath says the McGuinty government is starving Ontario's child welfare and protection system and needs to come up with an immediate resolution to the Children's Aid Society (CAS) funding crisis the government has created. With representatives of Children's Aid Societies looking on from the public gallery during today's Question Period, Horwath stressed the urgency of the situation.

"Agencies are on life support," stated the NDP leader. "The CAS budgets aren't enough to provide for the growing number of children coming into their care. Forty-nine Children's Aid Societies have told the Minister they are in a \$67-million deficit position".

In Northwestern Ontario, the situation on the Pikangikum First Nation, is especially serious. Family & Children's Services is responding to an urgent request for assistance from Tikinagan Child and Family Services in Sioux Lookout for Pikangikum First Nation. They have made a 12 member committee, which is working hard to collect donations throughout the community.

Pikangikum has a population of approx 2,400 with an average age of 21. 74% of the population is under the age of 15 years. The community is characterized by desperate poverty resulting from a limited economic base that has led to very high unemployment, standard housing, overcrowding, inadequate community infrastructure. In addition, there is a very high rate of alcoholism that has led to family instability and breakdown.

Apart from very significant children protection issues, there are also high suicide and solvent abuse issues affecting children as young as six years of age.

The community of Pikangikum First Nation is in a crisis and the children have become the victims. Emergency request for : baby formula and food, flour, sugar, blankets, carnation milk, childrens winter clothing, diapers, non-perishable food items.

Anyone seeking further information can contact Martene Nelson, at 274 7787 ext 267.

That is just one of the situations that explain how the cuts to services are impacting communities in the North.

Horwath warns that things are about to get worse. "The McGuinty government made a reckless \$23-million budget cut to CAS's and First Nations agencies last June. Now the Ministry is advancing them next month's funding allocations to pay last month's bills. Those advances are going to run out at the end of February and children will suffer," she explained.

Horwath's comments come on the heels of yesterday's Auditor General's report showing that the government has squandered billions of dollars. "The McGuinty government has shown an ability to waste incredible sums of money on scandals and boondoggles, yet there is no money for some of

Ontario's most vulnerable," Horwath stated. "I am deeply troubled by the glaring lack of a plan for dealing with the growing CAS budget crisis – a crisis created by the McGuinty government".

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