
Hastings CAS working to save money

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The Hastings Children's Aid Society is hoping a sustainability commission appointed by the province can get fledgling member agencies back on their feet before the whole system falls apart.

Len Kennedy, executive director of the local CAS, said the commission will work in tandem with children's aid societies and the ministry to conjure up new cost-saving ways to do business, without threatening the services provided to the children who need it.

"They have just under three years to achieve that," Kennedy said during the monthly board meeting at the new Dundas Street West office. "Changes will be rolled out as they progress."

Kennedy and a local delegation will get their shot at voicing concerns to the commission, spearheaded by Ene Underwood, Barry Lewis and Dr. Wendy Thompson. That will happen during the commission's first meeting "to promote dialogue" with the eastern region next Thursday at a

conference hosted by the Frontenac CAS in Kingston.

The commission was appointed after a string of agencies had to terminate several position in order to close the gap on a cumulative \$67-million budget shortfall. Those cutbacks have jeopardized the quality of service provided by agencies in several fly-in-communities in Northern Ontario, which are battling a shocking spike in youth suicide rates.

But, the ripple effect could undermine the province's entire children's aid society network.

Kennedy said the local CAS offered to loan some personnel expertise to those struggling agencies but with "no favourable response" for financial backing from Queen's Park, all plans to help those "critically-affected" fell through.

Kennedy said Canada is still getting a failing grade in its attempt to alleviate the high level of families battling poverty, "with the situation being worse for native children."

Kennedy said many cash-strapped agencies are on the brink of running dry if they don't get bail-out cash soon.

Viable agencies such as Hasting CAS, who are running in the red, with a \$850,000 deficit, need a rapid cash infusion before that debt load has a crippling effect. Despite those grim statistics, the commission's first order of business will not be funding issues, Kennedy added.

"They (the commission) said its not their job to put out our financial fires," said Kennedy. "They're here to create a feasible system and get rid of bureaucracy."

The Hastings CAS has seen substantial improvement in its year-end financial forecast and Kennedy said that is largely due to the better management of cost related to children's care. He said the society has been successful in transferring children from the more expensive group homes into foster homes. Only \$150,000 of the \$850,000 deficit came from this year's shortfall the rest was carried over from last year.

"Were confident that we can manage that and see it diminished further by year's end," he said.

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