

CAS nearly bankrupt: official

Posted 45 mins ago

Simcoe County Children's Aid Society is facing bankruptcy next month and the fate of more than 400 children in its care is uncertain.

"As of Feb. 28, this agency can no longer pay its creditors," said Midland Mayor Jim Downer, a member of the CAS board. "That raises concerns about whether we will be able to pay the people who care for these children. If that happens, there will be nowhere for them to go."

Mary Ballantyne, the CAS's executive director, said the agency "will continue to try and work with government and our creditors to ensure this doesn't happen. It is not in anyone's interest to put Simcoe County children at risk."

The agency -- whose current annual budget is \$40,949,211 -- served 10,890 children in 2008-09. As of Dec. 31, 2009, there were 442 children in its care.

Mayor Downer, who sits on the finance committee, says the province increased the agency's workload in 2009-10. "At the same time, it cut funding by 10.4 per cent, or \$4.26 million. We're facing a projected \$4.9 million shortfall."

In the past when there has been a deficit, he said the province has come in at the 11th hour and erased it. There's no indication of that happening this time.

The 10-year veteran board member says the province doesn't seem to recognize the agency has no control over the caseloads. We're required by the province to look after children who can't look after themselves.

"I watch spending closely. There are no consultants used. We scrutinize spending every month. I know what the staff face on a daily basis. These people work tirelessly, sometimes all hours of the night on emergency calls."

Downer says two things are contributing to the shortfall: a \$16 gap in the daily funding for children in foster care and a government requirement to provide more services.

"Simcoe County CAS receives \$73 a day for a child in care, but the actual costs are \$89. We absorb that \$16 difference. That amounts to about \$2 million a year.

"Children's aid societies in the Greater Toronto Area receive \$103 a day for a child in care," he noted, saying that he can't get an explanation of why there is a \$30 difference.

"Since the ministry announced funding cutbacks, the Simcoe County CAS has reduced costs by more than \$1.2 million.

"We've clawed back everywhere we can," Downer said. "We've frozen some salaries and reduced administration. We've cut to the bone."

For instance, he said the cost for average case in 2008-09 was \$7,261, compared with a provincial average of \$9,557.

Downer says the province has appointed a three-member commission to advise agencies how they can cut back. While he says the CAS board appreciates the commission's work, he views the move as: "smoke and mirrors."

"The funding shortfall has to be addressed immediately," he said. "Unless it is, Simcoe county's most vulnerable citizens will be at risk."

Simcoe North MPP Garfield Dunlop said he raised the issue in the Legislature in November and was told the government had put money into child care and that there would be no more funding.

"It's evident the CAS needs money right now. You won't raise \$5 million holding a bake sale. These are programs the Ontario government says the CAS must do.

"This government tells people it can do wonderful things for them. They say they will bring in all-day kindergarten. They have a \$25 billion deficit, but will do it anyway.

"Yet," Dunlop added, "when it comes to the most marginalized, most disadvantaged children in the province the same government says there's not enough money to look after them. There's just one contradiction after another. This guy (Premier Dalton McGuinty) has gotta go. His government is out of touch with the public."

Dunlop said he will raise the issue again when the legislature resumes Feb 16, but he is not optimistic the government will act.