



Many Halton children, families in dire need of help, reports CAFH

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After 20 years in the region, the Children's Aid Foundation says the community is finally recognizing the need among Halton's youngest residents.

"When they see a need, they dig in deep to try and help," said foundation executive director Tina Blatchford. "Halton is a beautiful and wealthy community, but there are children and families in dire need of help."

Founded in 1990, the non-profit Children's Aid Foundation of Halton (CAFH) recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Provincial funds cover shelter, clothing and food for kids and teenagers in the Children's Aid Society's care. As the fundraising arm of CAS, the foundation provides "non-essentials" which include college and university bursaries, tutoring programs, day camps, recreational activities and birthday gifts.

In Halton, 1,400 protection cases result in around 260 children being in care at either foster or group homes throughout the region at any given time.

"I thought going into care was horrible, but I learned so much about how to be an adult, how to manage my money and got my high school diploma and now enrolled in college," said Kaley, a 21-year-old Niagara College student who had been in CAS care in Halton Region since the age of five.

Kaley was one of 22 CAS youth who received bursaries for post-secondary education last year.

Blatchford said the increase in youth applying for education bursaries, up from 16 in 2008, and the increase in Crown ward teenagers graduating from high school, are a good indication that CAS courses, including tutoring, sports and life-skills programs, are working.

"Growing up in care causes a lot of emotions. For kids that haven't had a great childhood, to focus on school is very difficult," said Blatchford.

"These programs help kids deal with issues. We're looking at the future of our community and giving all kids the opportunity to find what they're good at."

The foundation provides \$250,000 yearly to Halton CAS to administer the non-essentials. Along with education bursaries and tutoring programs, CAFH funds an eight-week summer day camp for more than 100 children with special needs, sends children in care to Camp To Belong, a camp based out of Kentucky that reunites siblings who are not being raised together, and provides access to after-school music, sports and programs.

The foundation also owns three properties in the region that provide a safe haven for teenagers while their cases are being assessed or until foster parents can be found.

A life-skills program to help connect youth to their communities is also administered by the foundation. Volunteer mentors and caseworkers help youth deal with money management, peer pressure, healthy nutrition and safe sex.

"If it wasn't for CAS, I think my life would be the total opposite of what it is today," said Kaley, who took part in CAS's summer camp and sports programs. "I don't think I would have ever finished high school, let alone gone to college. There were so many opportunities."

Kaley said she benefited from meeting with other foster children who shared similar experiences.

Blatchford said the biggest problem currently facing Halton CAS is funding. Late last year, the organization was reporting a \$900,000 deficit.

"One per cent of the population of Canada uses Children's Aid Society, the same is true of Halton. As the population increases, so will the number of kids in care," said Blatchford. "The need is definitely growing. To maintain the quality of care in Halton, we need more money to make sure the lives of these kids are normalized."

For more information about the Children's Aid Foundation of Halton, visit www.cafh.ca.

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