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# Region, CAS implement new measures in dealing with cases of child neglect

Both Halton Region and Halton Children's Aid Society have made changes in the way their staff deal with cases of child neglect following a case in which a five-year-old Acton girl nearly starved to death.

Halton Region has strengthened its staff procedures for dealing with cases of child neglect, and staff training regarding neglect situations has also been increased at Halton Children's Aid Society.

"I think it's sad that this happened. We have a responsibility to look at it as a single organization and a system," said Halton Region's acting commissioner of Social and Community Services Karen Chan. She said the region was involved with the child for about a year and provided some parent-infant services to the family. Chan said since the court case dealing with the incident in July the region has put in place all the checks and balances they could.

The region has implemented procedures to ensure there is complete sharing of information regarding cases where other agencies and professionals are also involved, and that regional staff insist on verification that medical and health-related direction given by workers is actually carried out by the family.

She said there were some assumptions made by region staff at the time that directions were being carried out, and staff didn't follow up directly with medical staff.

"In situations where you're dealing with at-risk families sometimes you have to take that extra step," said Chan.

In July the girl's father James Wayne Clayton was sentenced to 21 months in prison for failing to provide the necessities of life and the girl's mother, Maryanne McCutcheon was placed on three years probation for child neglect. The girl and her two siblings are in foster care.

Chan said during the time the region worked with the Acton child "we didn't identify issues related to starvation."

Gail Vandermeulen, acting executive director of Halton CAS said, "the important thing to remember is this case is now several years old."

"We learned by the case of that child. We learn by every case," said Vandermeulen. "I think we weren't able to recognize the indicators of neglect well enough."

But she stressed staff at CAS didn't do anything wrong. She said the area of neglect has been very difficult to deal with because it isn't entrenched in law and is difficult to prove in court. She said had the case been dealt with today it may have been handled differently.

She said Halton CAS staff have undergone more training in recognizing neglect.

John Day, board chair and president of Halton Children's Aid Society said what happened to the Acton child "serves to illustrate the symptoms of the system that existed at that time."

"I'm saying the broader system failed the child," said Day. "The child fell through the cracks."

Chan said she doesn't believe one agency or one person can be blamed for what happened to the child. She said it was a combination of the policy and funding environment of the time, where the pendulum had swung in terms of intrusiveness and this particular family.

When asked if a case like the one involving the Acton child could happen again Chan said "you always hope not. We have certainly strengthened the system."

In addition to procedure changes the region has fully integrated its early childhood programs with the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program. Under that program all infants are screened at birth to see if there are any early developmental or social risk factors.

Components of the program include a single point of access to services for families and children, professional visits to the home soon after the birth, co-ordination of services for the child and family involving all professionals and the provision of long-term mentoring skills by lay home visitors.

"This program coupled with the internal procedures we have instituted, should give us much better tools to support all families and to identify child neglect and intervene earlier," said Halton's Medical Officer of Health Robert Nosal.

Following the court case in July Halton Police sought an opinion from the Halton Crown Attorney's office on whether there was justification for initiating a police investigation into the CAS staff members actions in the case.

Earlier this week Det. Sgt. Jackie Gordon declined to comment on the status of the review but said police will notify the press of their decision whether or not they intend to "investigate the professional agencies and persons involved in the case." She also declined to comment on when that decision could be expected.

—By Lisa Tallyn, staff writer

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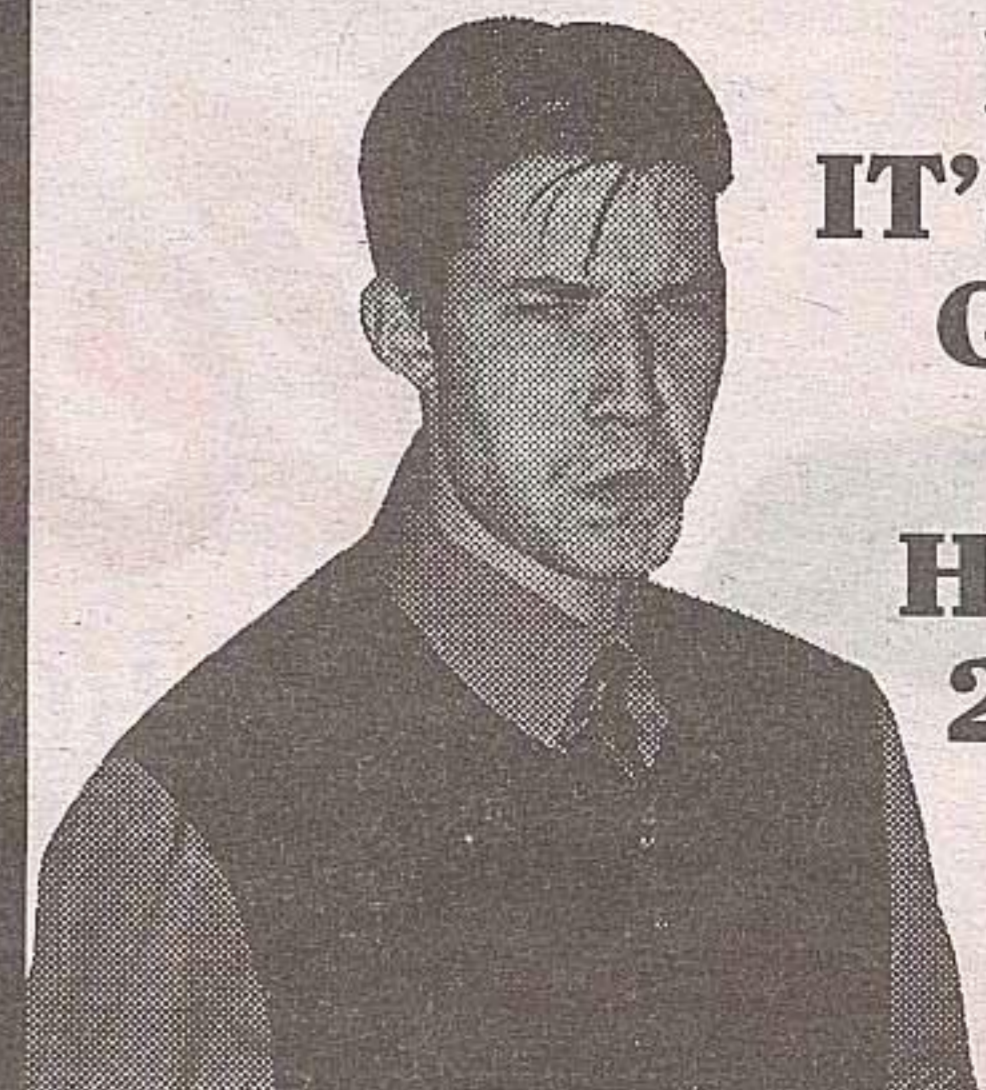
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