

# Halton Children's Aid Society asks residents to speak up

By Melanie Cummings  
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Join the chorus of the concerned — all 4,434 of them, urges the Halton Children's Aid Society (CAS).

That's how many times someone spoke up last year on behalf of children and youth whose safety they feared was in jeopardy.

In light of October's designation as Child Abuse Prevention Month, the agency reminds residents they too have a responsi-

bility to protect the youngest members of society.

"It takes a community to keep children and youth safe from fear, harm and violence," said Halton CAS Executive Director Nancy McGillivray. "We need people to speak up for people who don't feel they have a voice that can be heard."

Throughout the year, CAS workers regularly spread this message, through 60 to 70 presentations, to those who work with children including teachers, daycare workers, camp

counselors and police officers.

While 90 per cent of CAS staff work in schools, services agencies, police stations and elsewhere, the agency "can't be everywhere all of the time," said McGillivray.

As a result, there were 4,434 referrals about possible abuse and neglect of children and youth to the CAS in 2012, which led to 2,310 investigations.

And as Halton continues to be one of the fastest growing regions in the province, with a 12 per cent increase in its child population — to 100,762 in 2011 from 89,975 in 2006 — more and more, residents will be expected to help shoulder this responsibility to report, too.

Some of the signs of neglect and physical, sexual and emotional abuse people should look for include: frequent absences from school, listlessness, poor hygiene, injuries such as bruising, cuts and welts that are inconsistent with the explanation for them, extreme aggression or withdrawal, age-inappropriate sexual knowledge, seductive behaviour, severe depression and frequent psychosomatic complaints such as headaches and nausea.

Jennifer Binnington, director of community protection services for the Halton CAS, works with families before significant abuses occur. She helps de-escalate situations and builds connections in the community so parents

and their children feel supported, instead of alone, ashamed and isolated.

Almost every parent wants their children to do well, said Binnington, who has known many parents to self-refer or request help on their own.

"Similarly, children don't want to leave their family," said McGillivray, which is why 95 per cent of the cases handled by the agency result in children staying at home. "Kids do better in their own homes."

McGillivray is hoping this reality will remove some of the anxiety residents have about reporting, and eliminate the common equation people draw that reporting means removal. Only five per cent of children are brought into CAS care, she added.

"It can be messy," admitted McGillivray. "Our agency has a lot of power and authority to take kids away, but we wrap services around family," adding that there are plenty of success stories in the Halton CAS's nearly 100-year history. The agency will reach that milestone next year, on February 15.

The Halton CAS provided services to more than 300 families in 2012 and referred 472 families to community partners for service.

If you have concerns about a child, call the Halton Children's Aid Society at (905) 333-4441.

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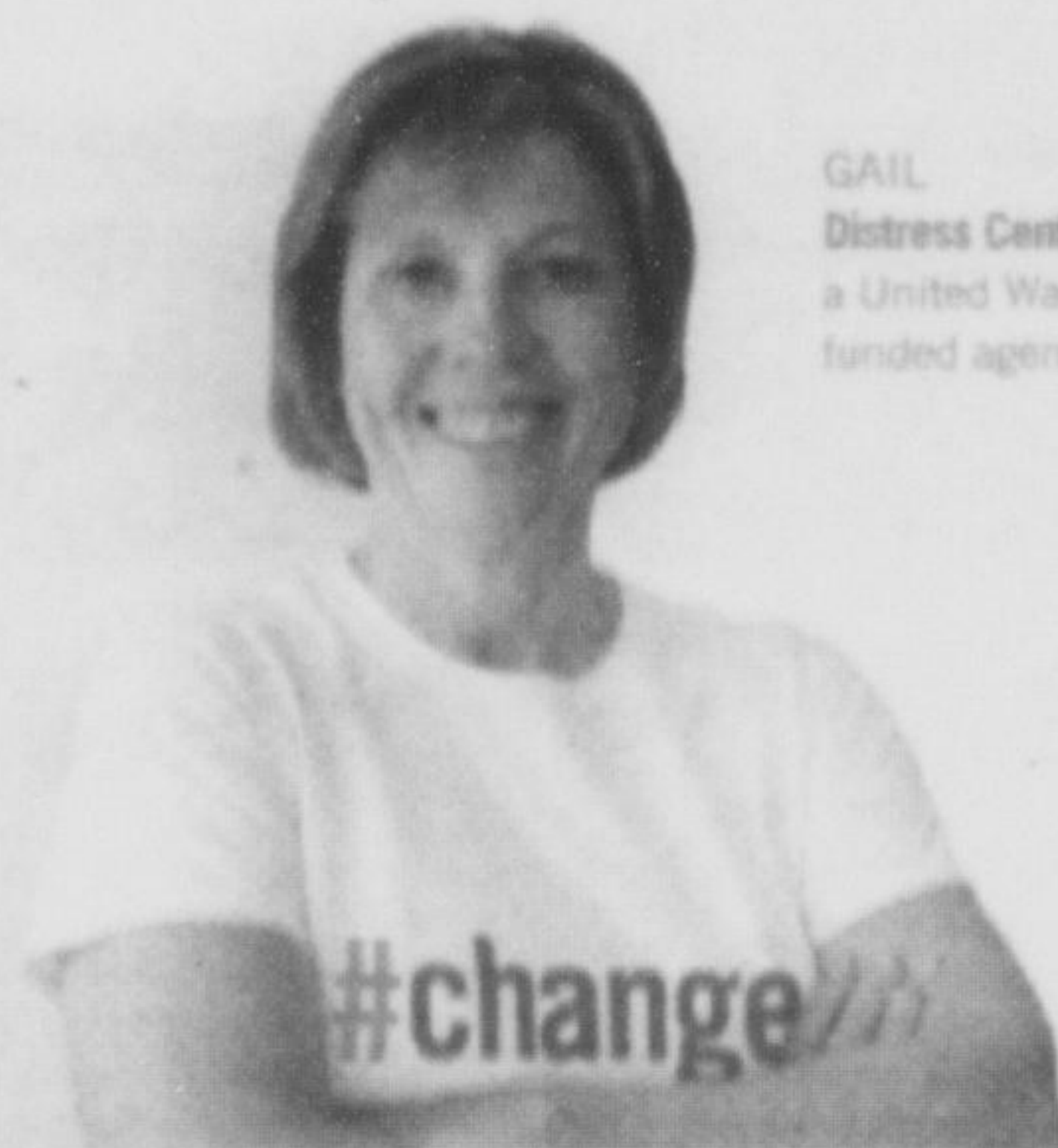
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