

Brant CAS to leave Six Nations office, amid band legal action

By Chase Jarrett
Writer

The Brant Childrens' Aid Society (CAS) will be closing its Native Services Branch (NSB) office at Six Nations at the end of June but will continue servicing the community from its Brantford offices.

The decision to close the office came after the Six Nations Elected Council threatened the CAS with legal action after the CAS ignored a band council motion ordering the CAS to close its office here.

Six Nations Elected Council is in the midst of establishing its own Child Welfare unit and ordered the CAS to leave Six Nations after community complaints were received.

"Our board's made the decision to leave," said Andy Koster, Executive Director of Brant Family and Children's Services (Brant CAS) in a phone call last Friday.

The decision to move comes after the CAS engaged in a game of political pinball

pitting the elected council and Confederacy against each other over whether the office should be closed.

The CAS spat with band council began over a year ago when the band received complaints from community members over the treatment of family members at the hands of the CAS.

Brant CAS has been on Six Nations territory since 1977

The community has been engaged in a take over for the past two years. It's the second time Six Nations attempted to take over the service. An earlier attempt in the 1990s fizzled when the provincial government changed and the budget expected for the service was slashed.

Elected Chief Ava Hill told Turtle Island News in an email: "Six Nations is proceeding with their Child Welfare Designation. Until such time as our own system is fully operating, Brantford CAS will be expected to provide child welfare services to our community, as is their

mandate. We also hope that they will work with us in a co-operative and efficient manner."

Matters became murky for Brant CAS over winter after the CAS was told to leave the community, director Andy Koster appealed to the Six Nations Haudenosaunee Confederacy Chiefs Council to stay.

A Confederacy letter contradicted a SNEC resolution kicking Brant CAS out of offices in Ohsweken, saying the Brant CAS could stay.

Koster said two primary reasons factored into the decision to move. "Part is that financially, to go into a legal situation, is pretty difficult for us. And also we didn't believe the elected council was prepared to negotiate," he said.

About 30 workers, just over two thirds of whom are Six Nations members, will be forced to move to one of three new locations in Brantford this summer.

The Brant CAS service will still be responsible for pro-

viding child welfare services to Six Nations.

A letter was sent to Brant CAS by SNEC last month threatening legal action and charges of trespassing.

"I feel badly for our staff," said Koster. "I still firmly believe it's going to affect our ability to keep kids as safe as we want to."

Koster said he sees the distance as an added barrier to an already tough job. He also questioned having workers who are Six Nations community members commuting to Brantford, only to have to return to Six Nations for calls.

Leslie Brubacher, president of the CAS Board of Directors, has concerns for the about 65 Six Nations children in care between kinship homes, 11 on-reserve foster homes, and resource homes.

She said in an email: "The Board is concerned with child safety, response times, worker safety and community relationships when our agency is no longer operating from within the Six Nations. We remain concerned about reduced efficiency, access and response times once we close the NSB offices."

Meanwhile, with news of the removal spreading, morale has dropped for workers at the Native Services Branch (NSB) in Ohsweken since last week.

"Today I feel a little bit disheartened by the whole process," said Sally Rivers, NSB manager. "I'm really concerned about our staff morale. I think when I walk around and talk to staff, people are feeling hurt, angry, worried," she said.

"It's taken a couple of days to settle in. For our staff that are from Six Nations it's an especially painful message to receive," said Rivers, adding that worry comes from a focus on child safety

She said questions about

the efficiency of service delivered from new Brantford locations, and any changes in Six Nations attitude toward Brant CAS will go unknown until Brant CAS actually moves this summer.

Audrey Hill has been with the Brant CAS NSB since the start. She said Brant CAS was always meant to be an interim service, but has been instrumental in developing Six Nations.

"As CAS was in the community, the agency in Brantford provided social development workers, special assistance, managers helped with daycare services," she said.

"People seem to have forgotten that those relationships are still there. The history of helping start up service—CAS helped set up child and family services, and helped set up the youth lodge."

Koster added that CAS was also responsible for placing children in homes on Six Nations after the close of the The Mohawk Institute in Brantford.

Hill questioned the motives behind making Brant CAS move to Brantford.

"Why do we have to go to Brantford to deliver a service we've always delivered here. That's what I mean by not making sense," she said. "Why are they sending us when they're not ready?"

The designation for a Six Nations run service could take up to three years.

Hill says the only people being hurt by the gap in service are Six Nations children.

"It makes no sense for us to leave. If you were a parent and you had children, and you had children stay with a babysitter for the night—would you call home to your babysitter and say 'go on home we'll be home in a couple of hours?' and just leave the kids? Who in their

right mind does that?"

She said when Brant CAS receives a report, they are obligated by law to follow through. "People seem to think we go handpicking the suffering that will happen to a certain family."

She added that when the Six Nations child welfare service is up and running, they'll get all the same complaints.

"They have to deliver service by the same standards we do. They have to follow the same legislation and same standards we do," she said. "People are never ever happy to see us."

She said concerns expressed by Brant CAS management about response times are legitimate.

"There are all kinds of scenarios. And there are enough to say that yes, our response time is critical. It means a child. It's the safety of a child. You can be damn sure that if we don't get to something in time that's what they'll rant and rave about."

She said people do not know what they're getting into.

"They know the history; they know some of the legislation. But they don't know the technical field, the practice end of it. How could you unless you've done it?"

She said Brant CAS welcomes culture.

She said the attitude was: "If there's a cultural tool, or a cultural strategy, if there's anything in our culture and our community that can help protect a child, use it."

"We were never told we had to just practice by the standards and the laws. We had to comply with them, but we had to do it with great sensitivity and knowledge about our community."

Hill said she hopes good comes from the situation: "I hope the service that is set up is not as toxic as the approach by which they took it."