

York CAS applauds new 'kids first' law

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

The executive director of York Region's Children's Aid Society is applauding new provincial rules making it easier for the agency to protect abused and neglected youngsters.

"These long-awaited amendments will ensure that the safety, protection and best interests of children will be considered above all else in child welfare matters," Marty McNamara said.

For the first time in Ontario's history, The Child and Family Services Amendment Act puts the safety and best interests of children above the rights of parents and families.

For example, the act allows a parent's past abusive behaviour to be used as evidence in court.

Not only do the new rules, which go into effect tomorrow, give CAS workers more power to remove children suffering from abuse and chronic neglect from their homes, but it punishes people who fail to report violence against kids.

Doctors, teachers, neighbours and others who fail to alert child protection agencies of suspected abuse face a \$1,000 fine.

"I think it's pretty obvious most people would have an indication if a child is being treated in a way that is abusive and would have a concern about it and would be expected to call," McNamara said.

"I think what is at work here is there is a community responsibility (to protect children), not just a responsibility of specific agencies in the community, CASes and the police and social service agencies can't deal with it all alone."

McNamara said the province is responding to seven recent high-profile inquests which detailed how a number of Ontario children died despite being under the care of Children's Aid Societies.

In some cases, doctors, neighbours and others were aware of the abuse.

The cases included:

- Six-month-old Sara Podniewicz of Toronto, who was killed by her crack-addicted parents in 1994. Her father had been jailed years before for causing brain damage to an older son.

- 16-month-old Scarborough toddler Johnny James, who died in January 1993 after a severe blow to his abdomen. He was treated by doctors just a month before, suffering from bleeding ears, a broken leg, a fractured elbow and a burn on one foot. His mother's boyfriend was acquitted of killing the boy.

While none of the cases occurred in the region, publicity resulted in more suspected child abuse cases being reported here, according to York's former CAS executive director Dick Mullen.

The substantial increase in cases resulted in the York CAS reporting a \$500,000 deficit two years ago.

But in addition to committing an extra \$106 million to societies across the province this year, McNamara said the province has changed its funding formula so agencies with higher caseloads receive more financial assistance.

The provincial amendments come at the same time York politicians are considering enacting a Children's Charter.

While not directly enforceable, the bill of rights would articulate that children should be guaranteed freedom from abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Bereaved Families of Ontario
York Region
An association of families who have lost a child through death.

Founded in 1978, under the auspices of the Hospital for Sick Children, Bereaved Families is a self-help organization staffed by bereaved persons. Specialists in the area of grief and bereavement from the professional community serve as a resource both in the development of on-going programmes and in the supervision and training of self-help group leaders.

This co-operation between lay and professionals has enabled Bereaved Families to better respond to the needs of the bereaved and has helped guarantee that the best support is provided.

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