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Reforms 'overtax' children's workers

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

New provincial rules that beefed up protection of abused and neglected children have resulted in too much red tape for overworked front-line workers, their union charges.

Deb Spicker, president of OPSEU Local 304, said the new regulations are creating so much paperwork, face-to-face contact with clients is suffering.

While cases of abuse and neglect are being properly investigated, she said workers are spending 70 per cent of their time at computers and only 30 per cent seeing children and families. That

means preventive and follow-up work is not getting the attention it deserves.

"For York Region, I think people are receiving service, but I expect the clients we do visit have noticed a major difference in their contact with the worker, in how the worker is helping them with issues," Spicker said.

"Some families are probably pleased by that because they don't want us there any way. But some people work with us."

Last week, workers handed out pamphlets, "Do children come first at Children's Aid?", to alert the public to the problem.

"Excessive workload has been an issue in children's aid societies across Ontario for more than a decade."

The situation was made worse by the new regulations, according to the union.

"While many of these reforms were welcomed by front-line staff, they have unfortunately created a layer of bureaucracy and red tape that is unnecessary and unacceptable."

The province introduced the regulations 18 months ago in response to seven high-profile inquests that looked at the deaths of children under the care of children's aid societies.

The cases, none of which occurred in York, included:

- Six-month-old Sara Podniewicz of Toronto who was killed at the hands of her crack-addicted parents in 1994. Her father had been jailed previously for causing brain damage to an older son.

- Johnny James, a 16-month-old toddler from Scarborough, who died in January 1993 after a heavy blow to the abdomen. He had been treated just a month before for bleeding ears, a broken leg, a fractured elbow and a burned foot. His mother's boyfriend was acquitted of killing the boy.

In response, Queen's Park adopted the Child and Family Services Amendment Act, which, for the first time in Ontario's history, put the safety and interests of children above the rights of parents.

The rules gave CAS workers more authority to remove children from abusive homes and punished people who fail to report violence against youngsters.

But Spicker said red tape means provincially regulated response times to complaints of abuse and neglect "are taken to the maximum much of the time."

"If a school calls, before we would have been there the same day. Now, if an immediate response isn't needed, it's the next day."

Front-line staff are experiencing burnout and CAS agencies are having a tough time recruiting and retaining staff, she said.

Last year, York CAS executive director Marty McNamara praised the new rules. While he still believes they better protect children, he has seen the challenges of putting them into practice.

Stressing the ministry is working with societies to address concerns, McNamara agreed front-line workers are under increased pressure because of the new law.

"People do feel it's quite an onerous task," he said. "We're challenged all the time to handle these cases coming through the door and youngsters being brought into care."

The new regulations have also resulted in a tremendous increase in residents, schools, police and agencies reporting cases to the CAS, McNamara said. Last year, the society received 1,629 calls asking it to investigate abuse or neglect. In the first seven months of this fiscal year, there have already been 2,143 calls.

In 2000, the society admitted 278 children into foster or group home care. In seven months this year, that has jumped to 326 children.

"It's like we're continually trying to catch up to a moving target," McNamara said. "There is this incremental sense that we never catch up to where we need to be. It's a fluid situation, it's never static."

At the same time, McNamara said the Tories have acknowledged York's increasing caseloads, boosting the budget to \$18.7 million this year. That's up from \$14.2 million last year and \$10 million the year before.



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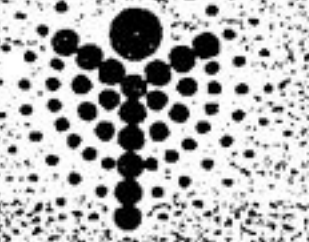
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