

Staying Connected...

An update from the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare

Welcome to our first newsletter

It's been three very busy months since Children and Youth Services Minister Laurel Broten appointed the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare. We've made great progress on our first three objectives – Getting Organized, Getting Connected and Getting Grounded. We've also mapped out an ambitious plan for the months ahead.

This newsletter is a key part of getting connected. It's our way of making sure everyone with an interest in child welfare can keep track of what we're doing. We plan to issue a newsletter at least four times a year. You'll be able to sign up to receive it directly by email, and once our website is up and running – within a few weeks, we hope – you'll be able to find current and past issues there.

Help us build our mailing list

sustainingchildwelfare@ontario.ca

If you know of someone who should be receiving this newsletter — and other information from the Commission — please let us know...or better yet, pass this newsletter along to them and suggest they add themselves to our mailing list.

They can do that by sending an email to sustainingchildwelfare@ontario.ca with the subject line: "Add me to your mailing list."

(Personal information you provide, such as your name and email address, will not be disclosed by the Commission without consent unless required by law. Any personal information collected will only be used to send you news about the Commission).

If you have any questions regarding privacy and your personal information, please contact David Ross at 416-326-7239 or by email at david.s.ross@ontario.ca

About the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare

The Minister of Children and Youth Services appointed the Commission on November 20, 2009. We were given a three-year mandate to develop and implement solutions to promote the sustainability of child welfare in Ontario.

We have the authority to implement change in some areas, including developing strategies to evaluate and improve service delivery, establishing ways to measure performance and, after consulting with the ministry, directing Children's Aid Societies to develop consolidation plans or change business processes.

We also have the authority to make recommendations to the Minister on things like ministry processes, accountability structures, government policy, funding, legislation and changes that affect other parts of the children's system.

We will work with the ministry, Children's Aid Societies, and other partners as we carry out our mandate.



Getting Organized

Getting Connected

Getting Grounded

Looking Back

As a brand new agency, we decided our first three tasks had to be getting organized, getting connected, and getting grounded.

Getting Organized

Working in temporary office space with temporary staff, we've begun the routine process of writing policies and procedures, setting priorities and planning our move to a permanent office.

By the end of March, we'll be moving out of the temporary quarters loaned to us by the government, and into new offices at 401 Bay Street in Toronto. Our email addresses and telephone numbers will remain the same, but we'll send out change-of-address cards as soon as we're ready to move.



Getting Connected

At the same time, we've begun the much more interesting task of meeting the people directly responsible for delivering child welfare services in Ontario. Shortly after our appointment, we met CAS representatives from across Ontario at a meeting of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. Since then, we have travelled all over the province, meeting with Children's Aid Society representatives. By the end of February, we will have met with almost every Children's Aid Society in the province.

We thank the people we've met for their warm welcome. We appreciate the thoughtful comments, and the consistent spirit of goodwill.

We've also been busy getting connected to a wide range of individuals and organizations with a connection to Ontario child welfare, including the Foster Parents Association, the Child and Family Services Review Board, the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario, and leaders of the 2003 Child Welfare Evaluation, the 2006 Child Welfare Transformation and the Child Welfare Secretariat.

We have also met with the Minister and Deputy Minister of Children and Youth Services, and we've had extensive and informative discussions with staff at head office and in most of the ministry's regional offices.

Getting Grounded

An important early step in our work has been to build an understanding of Ontario's child welfare sector, the challenges it is facing, and the factors that will be vital to long-term sustainability. We've received a great deal of information from the Children's Aid Societies we've visited, and we've been reading extensively about child welfare here in Ontario and in other jurisdictions.

We have begun to put together a solid base of facts to help us understand service and spending trends in the child welfare sector, what drives those trends, and how they compare with trends in other sectors. We are also beginning to look at Children's Aid Societies on an agency by agency basis to begin to understand similarities and differences.



This poem was given to us by Family & Children's Services of St. Thomas and Elgin as part of Project Artwork. It has been reproduced with permission of its author, Ben Van Dorp, 20, a former youth in care.

we fight the uphill battle
we push, battered and bruised
we scream, just so someone will listen
we smoke, to relieve the pain

we smile, to hide our real emotion
we laugh, so we have a reason to live
we love, wanting but not expecting it in return
we cry, wishing someone cared

we give, hoping one day karma will prevail
we give, because we understand
we give, only to be taken advantage of
we give, hoping to be loved

we buy, thinking materialism will make us happy
we sell, to eat
we toke, so we won't remember
we hug, wishing it was our mommy

we lie, just so our workers will be proud
we wait, on "professionals" who don't understand the value of time
we hope, only to be shut down by "policy"
we wonder, if our workers even care

we attach, hoping that you might be the one
we detach, because we're used to it
we move homes, like it's our job
we are alone, but at least we have each other

Looking Ahead

Our Immediate Priorities

At the end of January, we completed our work plan for 2009/10 and for the early part of 2010/11, and submitted it to the Minister.

Our work revolves around two overall paths: a "systemic change agenda" and a "cyclical change agenda".

Systemic Change

The work on systemic change is moving ahead on two tracks. One track – which we call System Design Options – is focused on reviewing overall system design in terms of governance, funding, performance management, outcomes, etc. The second track focuses on developing a complete profile of Ontario's current child welfare system.

Outputs from these two tracks will enable us to identify options and recommendations for government on the design of the overall Ontario child welfare system. This will include dimensions like: how child welfare is funded; ways of ensuring accountability; how we measure performance; what outcomes we expect from the system; and how to support the unique needs of children and youth living in and from Aboriginal communities. Outputs from these two tracks will also inform our immediate and long-term change priorities.

We'll be looking for help from the OACAS and the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario on this part of the project, and we'll be asking Children's Aid Societies to take part in reference groups to review the emerging system profile.

Near-term Change

In parallel with thinking about the shape of the overall system, we are looking at near-term change opportunities, such as:

- What changes could we make to help Children's Aid Societies better control the 40 per cent of their budgets that goes toward out-of-home care?
- How can we reduce the administration and paperwork burden?
- What efficiencies can be found through collaboration between agencies within the sector and across sectors? Can we be more efficient through shared services, integrated delivery or agency consolidation?
- Can changes be made to the Child and Family Services Act to make the child welfare system more sustainable?
- What common performance indicators would help drive sustainability in the child welfare sector?



Commission on the Move

In addition to the regional visits we've made over the last couple of months, we plan to visit each Children's Aid Society in Ontario individually. By the end of February, we will have met individually with five CASs. Our goal is to visit as many as possible by early summer.

Before each visit, a Commissioner will call to discuss the agenda with the Executive Director. We'll be looking for advice on who in the community the Commissioner should meet, and we'll agree on an agenda for the day.

These visits will give Children's Aid Societies a chance to tell the visiting Commissioner about things that are unique to their organization or their community. And they will give the Commissioners a chance to follow up in depth on some of the areas in which the Commission has an interest. They will provide an opportunity for the commissioners to deepen their understanding and reach conclusions on key issues.

Look for Our New Website

Please keep an eye out for our new Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare website. We are developing it now, and we expect it to be live before the end of March.

Once it is up and running, you'll be able to get the latest news about where we have been and what we've been doing. As our work progresses, we'll post information about our research and reports. You'll also find frequently asked questions, future issues of this newsletter, and a page where you'll be able to provide feedback on things you've seen on the site, and submit your advice and ideas on our work.

Project Artwork

In late December, the Commission put out a call for artwork to put on the Commission's bare walls. We're looking for something that reflects Ontario's children, youth, families and communities. The pieces from all over the province will help keep us grounded and symbolize the spirit of partnership that is one of the principles guiding the Commission's work.

The response has been terrific.

So far we've received posters, paintings, poems, prints, photos, drawings, a calendar, a model airplane and even a home-made quilt. We still have walls to fill, though, so if you have a piece of artwork you are willing to lend us, we'd love to have it. We promise to return all donated material at the end of the Commission process.



*Left to Right - Commissioners: Wendy Thomson, Ene Underwood, Barry Lewis
with a piece of artwork from the York Region CAS*

A horizontal green bar with a subtle texture, possibly representing grass or a field.

Help Wanted

In coming weeks and months, we will be initiating a variety of processes to create working groups and advisory bodies to contribute to our work. Watch our newsletter, our website, and our direct communications with child welfare organizations for more information on these opportunities to be part of this important work.

Frequently Asked Questions

Will the Commission look at working directly with a “committee” from the field to assist with the very difficult and in depth process over the next three years? If so, how will that committee be established?

We do not plan to establish one single committee. Instead, we are looking at a number of ways to involve the field in the Commission’s work over the three-year mandate. We’ll be putting together reference groups from time to time to look at specific issues, and talking regularly to the OACAS and the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario. We are also establishing a Communications Advisory Committee of communications leaders from Children’s Aid Societies to help us determine how best to reach all the people who want to know about our work.

What is the reporting and control hierarchy for the Commission – lines of authority?

The Commissioners act independently, and at arm’s length from the government. The terms of reference make the Commissioners directly accountable for fulfilling their mandate to the Minister of Children and Youth Services, who is accountable in turn to the Legislature and Cabinet.

The Commissioners are responsible for reporting to the Minister on progress, key findings and conclusions, the Commission’s research and consultation plan, directions issued to CASs and recommendations, and for keeping her informed of issues or events that may concern her in the exercise of her responsibilities.

Beyond that, the Commission has to follow standard government rules on things like procurement, travel expenses, conflict of interest and freedom of information and privacy. The Commission works closely with the ministry to make sure that happens. Furthermore, senior ministry staff are an important source of information on the substance of the Commission’s work.

Will the Commission be issuing a call for submissions and/or holding public hearings?

The Commission is planning to use a wide variety of mechanisms to inform our work on sustainability over our three-year mandate. At this point, we have no immediate plans for a call for submissions process or for public hearings. However, we may well get processes like this underway as our work evolves. We will also be exploring how to make the most of our website to create a forum for two-way dialogue with people with an interest in sustainable child welfare.