



May 29, 2017

## **Recent Deaths in Residential Care: Statement of The Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care**

The Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care represents Child and Youth Care Practitioners across Ontario. Our members are educated professionals, committed to a code of ethics and providing quality Child and Youth Care services to young people and their families.

The recent article in the news about the fire at a Kawartha Lakes Foster Home raises numerous concerns. Regulations in residential care facilities should be about safe environments that create the best possible circumstances to provide care to our provinces children. However, some of the recent situations have left us questioning the safety of some of these environments for young people and for Child and Youth Care staff. We want to be clear, before we move forward to raise concerns about the system, that we recognize the many professionals, service providers, program operators, ministry staff members and many others who work very hard with integrity and ethics to care for the children and youth of Ontario. We are not interested in blaming. We would like to raise concerns for discussion and collaboration, in the hopes that system changes will be identified to improve this situation for all and ensure the safety of our young people.

Residential care is part of the large, complex, child welfare system. In the past group homes were operated by 'workers' serving the most at risk children in the system; while foster homes provided family based care to children with less risk and more stability. However, what is now being described in the media is a mixed modality home that has been developed outside of these norms: some residential facilities, serving the highest risk and most vulnerable youth in our province, are being operated in accordance with foster care standards and regulations while they are functioning as 'staffed' programs. Given the severity and complexity of the needs being presented by these vulnerable youth, within a high risk milieu, this shift in standards is highly concerning.

The residential care being provided by the Ministry, regardless of the context, must be a safe place to live. From a Child and Youth Care perspective, sound crisis management planning or intervention involves knowledge of the strengths and needs of all of the young people, the resources available, and the relationships of those in the environment who will be providing supervision and support in these critical moments. Providing life space intervention requires a specialized skill set. Subsequently, those hired to work with young people in residential programs, should have pre-service qualifications in Child and Youth Care. Further, they should receive ongoing supervision and professional development opportunities that recognize this expertise. Remuneration of this standard of work must also be improved to ensure earnings are greater than a living wage. It is time to invest in this workforce and to regulate Child and Youth Care.



These tragedies have made this discussion more urgent. Together we need to have open dialogue about how we are safeguarding children and youth in terms of: **placement matching, staffing ratios, regulated pre-service qualifications, supervision models, crisis management, regulations and investigations, professional development, models of residential care and funding.**

It is time to examine our assumptions about the system and the young people who depend on it. We must discover and discuss what is truly happening and make a commitment to make changes for the safety of the most vulnerable and high risk young people in Ontario. This will take courage and solution focused minds. This will also require the financial investment to properly fund these programs. We can do better on all levels from Ministry, to service providers, and to front line CYC's. We cannot emphasize enough the need for safeguards for all children and youth in Ontario. They are **our** young people and we need to do better now.

***The Ontario Association for Child and Youth Care joins the Ontario Provincial Advocate's office and the OACAS in support of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation's (NAN), urgent request that the Office of the Chief Coroner call a discretionary inquest into the deaths of the two young people in residential care settings. Furthermore, we also support that an inquest be called anytime a child dies or a staff person dies performing the duties of their job in a residential care setting in the Province of Ontario.***

We ask the Ministry of Children and Youth Services:

- 1) **To clearly set out definitions and expectations** for foster care and staffed group homes including specific attention to the media identified mixed modality homes to clearly identify the regulations and safe guards.
- 2) **To assemble teams of experienced and educated Child and Youth Care Practitioners** to provide immediate itinerant services to staffed group homes (including the mixed modality homes) across the province to support and improve the quality of care.
- 3) **To immediately invest in residential care** to ensure that the needs of young people are met, that staff are hired and retained with CYC qualifications, that supervision is available to all front line staff, and that staff have the equipment necessary to provide an enriched living environment for young people in care.
- 4) **To immediately fund the provision of Child and Youth Care services**, within the natural life space of rural and remote Indigenous youth considered high risk, to maintain family and cultural connection and support during the process of healing.

The OACYC Board of Directors