

## transforming child welfare services in the 90s

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### INTRODUCTION

This article is intended to address the transformation of child welfare services in the 1990s as illustrated by many of the changes that are occurring in the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto. As a necessary first step, we must dispel the child welfare myth that the families served by child welfare agencies are usually hostile, angry, involuntary and hard to serve. It would appear that actually less than 10% of the families who come to our attention fall into this categorization. As part of the need for a paradigm shift that will enable us to work with families more effectively, we must recognize that people generally respond positively to a caring and concerned approach and negatively to an approach based on pure power and authority. Essentially, we have found that our families (the consumer) appreciate their services being provided in a holistic, respectful and participatory manner. This, in turn, is founded upon a process of internal collaboration (team work) and an external partnership with the community.

While the observations expressed in this article by the three co-authors are still preliminary in nature, we represent both the clinical and legal perspectives and possess forty-four years of collective child welfare experience. While we do not purport to have formulated an instant recipe for success, we do wish to describe the kind of approaches and initiatives that have worked at the Catholic Children's Aid Society. Our intention is to stimulate discussion and develop a network of contacts, whereby mutually concerned professionals can share related experiences with one another. In this regard, we would both welcome and encourage feedback from our readers.

### USER FRIENDLY SERVICE

Because Child Welfare services are mandatory and legislated, and since they can at times provoke anxiety on the part of the family, a first step toward the transformation of Child Welfare Services in the 90s is the creation of an atmosphere that is user friendly.

According to William Davidau and Bro Wittal, the largest cost of providing great services is that of

creating infrastructures/networks of people, physical facilities and information that support the production of customer service.

The following are essentials to the office environment

- a receptionist who is warm, sensitive, friendly and supportive to customers
- he/she must be fluent in the spoken languages of the individuals and families
- as the reception area tends to be a very public place, a private waiting room is important
- relevant and language specific magazines should be displayed
- access to a telephone in a private area for making personal calls
- beverages such as coffee, tea, water and soft music can be comforting
- a child focused environment, the availability of age appropriate books, toys, videos and a reception area with visual access to the toy/play room
- children-specific sinks, toilets and other fixtures

## INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS, CAREGIVERS AND CHILDREN

In keeping with its Mission Statement (to provide social services that protect children and strengthen family life) and the "least intrusive" philosophy of the Child and Family Services Act, the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto (CCAS) has, over the past three to four years, undertaken various new initiatives. One such initiative is the Parent Advisory Groups which are geared to ensure adequate involvement of families and children. In addition to providing a supportive environment for parents, these groups develop partnerships with families and children. Through these meetings the Agency obtains feedback regarding the appropriateness of current service delivery systems. Parents and Agency staff discuss specific service needs and determine how these needs might best be addressed and the most effective method of service delivery.

Collaboration with community agencies, advocacy, self-help, parent mutual aid, and education are also integral parts of discussions at parent advisory group meetings. The educational component

includes providing parents with a better understanding of the Child and Family Services Act, the Agency's philosophy of service delivery and the development of strategies for problem-solving around common concerns.

In keeping with the Agency's philosophy of tapping into the strengths of individuals, both parents and youths are encouraged to serve as volunteers, e.g. as parent helpers, volunteer group leaders and assistants, tutors and respite-care providers. They are also encouraged to sit on various Agency Committees, and to participate in various social events.

Another initiative is case conferencing. The importance of families' participation in decisions that affect their lives has been well documented. The case conferencing format adopted by the Agency is seen as one further step in this direction. This exercise is intended to bring all the parties together

- to share information as to progress and plan strategy for further work; and
- to discuss appropriate goals and objectives

Individuals are identified who will be responsible for the facilitation of goal achievement and target dates are set for goal attainment.

Case conferences routinely take place at the juncture when case recordings are due, thereby serving an additional function for the social worker. "Emergency" case conferences can be requested by any party. At the conclusion of a case conference, each party receives a copy of the goals and objectives identifying the individual(s) responsible for goal achievement. Within this new philosophy of service delivery, complaints and/or challenges "to the way things are" are seen as opportunities for dialogue and, where possible, for implementation of changes.

## USE OF ALTERNATIVES TO COURT PROCESS

The legal process is an integral part of Child Welfare practice. Where appropriate, effort has been made to utilize the following alternatives to the court process:

- A temporary care agreement is a prescribed form and can be used where the Society contracts for the transfer of a child into its care and custody on a purely consensual basis. The use of such an agreement will allow the parent to negotiate and have some input into the terms of the agreement,

while reducing the potential for an adversarial relationship between the parties.

- A special needs agreement can be used to secure the voluntary transfer of a child's care and custody to a Society. A "special need" is broadly defined in the Child and Family Services Act as "a need that is related to or caused by a behavioural, developmental, emotional, physical, mental or other handicap". One advantage to this type of agreement is that there is no prescribed maximum time period, but any such agreement will expire upon the child attaining eighteen years of age.
- A voluntary services agreement is an internal form that may be devised by a Society, but is not a prescribed form. This form of therapeutic contract sets out the terms under which a Society agrees to provide voluntary services to a person, including the Society's expectations of that person in relation to a child's care. While this form of agreement may not be technically enforceable in law, it may represent a useful alternative to seeking a Supervision Order in Court.
- Mediation in child protection matters may be a valuable tool in resolving certain disputes outside of the Court process. Child protection mediation is a relatively recent phenomenon, but can be instrumental in facilitating a consensus result, which the parties perceive as fair and are more personally invested in seeing succeed over the long term. This service is available through the Centre for Child and Family Mediation in Toronto.
- In an effort to assist families in exploring consensus and less restrictive alternatives to a child's admission to care, social work staff should be prepared to inquire as to the possibility of a voluntary placement of a child with a relative, neighbour or other member of the child's community.

## USE OF COURT MORE CONSTRUCTIVELY

- It is preferable to consider the provision of voluntary services to a family as an alternative to obtaining a Supervision Order. There should be a selective use of Supervision Orders which ought not be used in a reflex manner, whenever there is a termination of a Society Wardship or Crown Wardship Order.
- Use of Conflict Resolution Meetings can occur during the course of litigation, but prior to trial.

The purpose of such meetings is to attempt to resolve outstanding contentious issues, with a view to reaching some settlement, if possible. This is not a disclosure meeting and should occur only after the completion of all disclosure.

- All evidence presented by a social worker, be it oral or in writing, should be balanced and fair-minded. A description of the parent's circumstances should include a reference to his/her strengths, as well as his/her weaknesses. Where a social worker is perceived by the Court to be punitive, he/she will lose his/her credibility with the Court.
- Where it is justified, the social worker should consider an application to terminate an outstanding protection order well in advance of the stipulated expiry date. Even where a review date has been set by the Court, the Society has the authority to commence a Status Review Application at any time.
- The social worker should consider taking a temporary care agreement within the five day period subsequent to an apprehension occurring. This option should not be foreclosed by virtue of an intervening apprehension. The exercise of this option means that it is unnecessary to proceed to Court.
- Wherever possible, the social worker should attempt to make greater use of oral testimony, which promotes heightened client participation in the court process. The practice of relying upon written documents, such as Affidavits and Agreed Statements of Facts, tends to have an alienating effect on clients, particularly where the parties become entrenched in their written positions and opinions.
- The social worker should take out and provide to his/her clients a copy of any Court Order where the subject-matter may be difficult to understand or remember. This should be done where a Court Order contains many terms and conditions, particularly where they result in significant expectations being placed on the parents.
- When preparing documents and giving testimony, social workers should exercise caution not to use technical language unnecessarily, and where necessary, it should be properly explained. This will enable both the Court and the other parties to have a clearer understanding of the issues and expectations being identified by the Society.

- The social worker should consider shorter time periods for Supervision Orders and establish the duration of such Orders on the basis of the time required for its objectives to be achieved, rather than to use a longer time period as a "safety net". The minimum statutory time period for a Supervision Order is three months.
- "Winning" and "losing" are terms that should be foreign to child welfare proceedings. While a social worker may "achieve" his/her objective or "succeed" in his/her application, there should be no sense that the social worker has "won" or that the parents have "lost". Winning and losing contribute to the adversarial nature of the Child Welfare System.

### SOME CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO USING ALTERNATIVES TO COURT PROCESS

- Today, social workers have the opportunity and flexibility to be creative in exploring options which may be available in a given case, rather than viewing Court as the appropriate "formula" response. With new knowledge and a changing culture that supports a "solution-focused" clinical approach and the application of "conflict management" techniques, there is a greater tendency to build on the strengths of one's clients, rather than to use Court as a vehicle to address their deficiencies.
- Social workers generally feel more comfortable using alternative mechanisms to Court proceedings, providing counsel are available and have advised that the legal criteria for such usage have been satisfied.

### CLINICAL DIRECTION

Underlying the principle of service delivery, is the assumption that any involvement in the life of an individual should be experienced by that individual as supportive, helpful, least intrusive and geared toward the strengthening of individual and/or family life.

The clinical direction of the Agency has focused on the use of intervention models that are respectful of the strengths of each child and his/her family. Family members are viewed as experts on their family situation and their knowledge is utilized in creative ways in problem resolution. Emphasis is placed on the relationship with the family even when the involvement is initially involuntary.

This new direction recognizes the windows of opportunity inherent in crises, and maximizes this opportunity through more extensive assessment and therapeutic intervention. It emphasizes an increase in the number of staff at the initial stage of intervention, thereby ensuring

- improvement in referral process to community
- improvement in assessment during initial stage
- provision of short-term counselling
- more emphasis on clinical intervention
- early access to family support services when it is more likely to have impact
- focus on more intensive service during extended intervention
- consistency of social worker

The Agency has endorsed the Brief Solution-Focused Therapy approach. A number of front line and supervisory staff, through a collaborative project with Oolagen Community Services and The Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee undertook a year-long training period. This group, in collaboration with Oolagen and The Hincks Treatment Centre, has established training opportunities across the agency to enhance the clinical skills of staff and increase their sense of professionalism.

### MANAGEMENT STYLE

Change in one part of a system affects all other parts of that system. The management style at the agency has also been shifting over the last several years. The style of management is inching towards transformational leadership and away from participative management.

Under this style of management, peer consultation is seen as a viable option for acknowledging and utilizing the skills and expertise of experienced staff. Various teams are exploring the possibility of becoming more self-directing, and group supervision is being utilized to varying degrees.

This style of leadership operates on a number of assumptions, namely

- the agency can protect children while working with their families on a voluntary basis
- children and families should experience the agency as helpful not as controlling
- service delivery must be respectful of families
- service should be client-focused and every intervention should be clinically therapeutic
- supervisor/manager is viewed as coach/team leader
- the manner in which work is done cross-agency should be more global in focus and less territorial
- planning should occur in a bottom-up/top-down manner
- available resources should be shifted to critical intervention points - meaning that the system must remain fluid and amenable to change

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Inherent in the transformation process is the belief that responsibility for the protection of children must rest with the total community and not one agency. This belief emphasizes

- community based service delivery i.e. partnerships with local organization
- consultation with and involvement of representatives from the community's diverse ethno-racial population
- collaboration with all relevant stakeholders

In keeping with this, the Agency has embarked on a number of initiatives, which are as follows

- Collaborative ventures with school boards, Metro Toronto Housing Authority, Children's Mental Health Centres, Public Health Departments, Parks and Recreation and Day Care Centres.
- Strengthening of communities through community development activities. One example is a camp experience for families from specific neighbourhoods. This creates community networking and provides for mutual aid among families.

- Family Partners program, geared to providing alternate care within the community to children at risk. This program facilitates partnership building between natural parents and alternate care providers and allows children to remain in their local schools.
- Family Builders program which provides intensive, short-term crisis intervention to families in order to strengthen family life and avert admissions to care.

## CONCLUSION

It would appear that traditional service delivery models have diminished in their effectiveness for child welfare customers. The Catholic Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto has embarked upon a process of transforming child welfare services in the 90s. It focuses on shared responsibility for child protection, a user friendly environment, greater parent/caretaker involvement, more creative use of the court process, a shift in clinical direction, a changing management style and more extensive community partnerships. We invite our readers to join with us in our initiatives to transform child welfare services in the 90s. In this way, the topography of child welfare services in this Province will hopefully be redesigned so as to provide a solid, fertile and nurturing foundation for our prospective families of the twenty-first century.

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a child that you would like  
to see featured in the  
OACAS journal -

please provide the picture,  
the name of the child and  
parents and written consent to  
publish the picture.

