

An important part of the village

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An old proverb dictates it takes a whole village to raise a child.

Aurora resident and director of intake and assessment with the York Region Children's Aid Society, Nancy French, would likely agree with that logic.

After all, it pretty much describes the spirit behind the current thinking surrounding child welfare in Ontario that Ms French helped design, down to a T.

The approach, called differential response, permits the CAS and other organizations to evaluate each situation individually and choose an appropriate response. It's Ms French's hope the method will alter the misconceptions some have surrounding the CAS so they can see it as an organization there to assist them.



Nancy French was behind differential response, an approach that permits the Children's Aid Society to evaluate each situation individually and choose an appropriate response. STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

"We don't want people to be afraid of us," Ms French said. "Differential response is meant to help the CAS play more of a role in the community."

Prior to differential response, which Ms French helped develop between 2005 and 2007, the society focused very heavily on risk assessment and didn't take into account some of the other factors that may have been in play. Differential response corrects that so it provides tailored assistance to families for a much better fit whenever the CAS gets involved, Ms French said.

The risk factors, naturally, aren't ignored, Ms French said, adding they're just part of the bigger picture. In many ways, the new approach really borrows from several methods utilized by the society in the past. Ms French said she and her colleagues jokingly said they were really going "back to the future" when developing differential response.

"It's not that we dismiss the risks or the stressors in a family, but we look at the strengths too," she said.

"We strive to make necessary changes so children can be safe and still live with their parents in an atmosphere of well being; that's the hope."

The approach seems to be getting positive feedback from those the society helps.

Even in cases where it is necessary to remove the children from the home, the families

involved are saying the feel as though they are receiving the help they need.

"The feedback from users was skeptical at first and they were fearful to have the CAS in their life, but when we started to break down some of those things clients started to see the CAS as helpful and supportive," she said. "Even in the case of families in conflict they at least felt they were being heard."

It's all toward furthering the idea that the CAS is a part of the community and meant to provide help and support to families. In some situations, the CAS limits its involvement after an investigation and instead refers the family to another organization that might prove more beneficial. The one thing that remains constant, however, is that child safety is always the No. 1 priority.

Garnering the experience needed to develop this new approach to child welfare didn't happen overnight. It was a long road from there to here and one that began in high school.

Ms French wasn't exactly sure what she wanted to with her life when she was younger, but had always been interested in what made families tick, she said. That was why the prospect of entering the social work field was appealing to her.

"It was something that had interested me just toward the latter part of high school as I was getting ready for the next level of education," she said. "I was really interested in systems and how families functioned ... I was curious about that and the social work profession allowed me to explore that."

After graduating from Ryerson University, Ms French entered the field in 1979 first working with the Metro Catholic Children's Aid Society and also working in the crisis and emergency unit of a Toronto hospital. It gave her plenty of opportunities to see all kinds of families up close and personal.

Working in the hospital allowed Ms French to help families cope with some of the most stressful and traumatic times that life can conjure up. It wasn't always an easy thing to be apart of, she recalled.

Similarly, working with the CAS and witnessing some of the more tragic cases of abuse first-hand could be equally, if not more, heart-wrenching. The challenges and emotional strain put on oneself when they insert themselves into a dysfunctional family unit and try to help is something a person really cannot comprehend until they are forced to confront it.

"There were definitely surprises and they were that there is a real privilege when you do enter into a family system," she said. "It can be very painful in some cases ... My own experience didn't prepare me for that."

Nor, did her experiences prepare her for when she came face to face with cases involving very disturbing abuse. It could be very upsetting at times.

"They can't prepare you for that," she said. "You experience it and you rely on the support of your colleagues and your boss to get through it."

Fortunately, such cases of nightmarish abuse were relatively rare. More often than not, the people Ms French assisted were good people who had lost their way.

"A lot of the cases the families were just good people who wanted to be good parents, but maybe didn't know how and needed a little help," Ms French said. "You could still feel there was a common ground between the family members."

It wasn't all doom and gloom, however. The job allowed Ms French to witness some incredibly uplifting moments as well that helped balance out the tough times.

"You also get to see the reuniting of a parent with their children," she said. "That's something not a lot of people get to see."

Over the years, Ms French has been involved in countless cases since starting with the York Region CAS in 1985. She moved to Aurora a few years prior in 1983.

She has been here ever since, except, of course, for when she has on one of her world hopping odysseys. So far she's been to Italy, France, Mexico among other destinations and this fall she plans on going to Vienna for the first time.

"I love to travel," she said. "My passion is Paris."

Despite her fondness for travel, Ms French insists she loves Aurora too. When she can be found at home, Ms French spends her time gardening and playing with her cats.

"I assure you, I'm not the typical old lady living alone with the two cats," Ms French said with a laugh.

And travel isn't Ms French's only love. The other is her work.

"I'm very passionate about the work I do," she said.

A big part of that passion has been helping to implement differential response and ensuring the image of the CAS as the boogeyman changes so people see it, instead, as an organization that legitimately wants to work with parents and caregivers to help. That change is happening, Ms French said, although it does take time.

"You can't turn a 747 on a dime," she said. "The child welfare system is like that; it doesn't change overnight. It's a process, but we're well on our way."