

So, what happened next?

Guest Column

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Just weeks ago, Ontario's Children's Aid Societies were front page news. The Auditor General released a report examining practices at four of Ontario's 53 CASs.

York Region CAS was one of these.

Although the story is no longer in the news, many people remember the auditor's findings.

Those that received the most attention related to executive compensation, travel and meal expenses. Others, including those specific to York Region CAS, were about overdue paperwork, efficient scheduling of after-hours staff and adherence to purchasing policies.

Given the level of concern at the time of the report's release, it seems appropriate to update the community on what has happened since.

Since the audit, we have been addressing areas of concern specific to York CAS. In fact, based on early findings, by the time the report was released, we had already made significant improvements in the areas cited.

Now that some time has passed, however, it's important to put the report and our response in context.

The simple truth is the entire child welfare system struggles to keep up with increasingly complex caseloads, recruit and retain skilled staff and balance finances against effective solutions, all while staying focused on the most important thing we do: care for children in need of protection.

For example, we resolved to make it an agencywide priority to meet documentation standards. We realigned staff and created new tools and systems, including an employee task group to support workers to achieve documentation compliance.

That said, we would be remiss if documentation didn't continue to be a lower priority than front-line work with children and their families. This situation puts our front-line workers between the proverbial rock and hard place -- documentation itself is an important part of the clinical work with children and families.

The real problem is resources we have are not sufficient to fully meet and sustain the documentation demands of the regulations. In other words, this issue cannot be resolved simply by more effort on the part of the agency alone.

More to the point, we are increasingly concerned about the pressure being put on our front-line workers. They are caught between unrealistic documentation demands and the safety of children. In other words, there needs to be a more reasonable balance between service to children and their families and documentation that is accountable, yet manageable.

As a result, we have set out to advocate on their behalf around systemic issues such as realistic documentation standards in provincial regulations. York Region CAS, along with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, which represents 52 CASs across Ontario, is asking the province to conduct a third-party workload study to determine appropriate caseload benchmarks and look at the documentation and service standards to determine if they are attainable on a sustained basis.

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