



Creative collaboration best method

Patrick Lake

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ary Smith called York Regional Police earlier this spring to report her 10-year-old son, Harry, had struck her when she tried to tell him how to dress for the day. Harry told the police his mother struck him back.

The police constable contacted the Children's Aid Society to report the argument.

When the front-line worker phoned to get more information, Mary said her son was often angry, especially when he didn't get his way, yelling and screaming for hours.

She asked for help for her son, telling the CAS worker she felt the situation was "out of control".

There was a decision to try to link the family to mental health services.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to arrange a timely appointment because these services are already over-burdened.

York CAS opened a case file for Harry.

York police were called to the home of Olga and Dobry by a neighbour who heard a loud argument.

The neighbour was concerned for the safety of the couple's five-year-old daughter, Rula.

Police reported to the CAS the little girl appeared upset and frightened.

A CAS interview of the mother revealed there was an argument about incomplete repairs to the apartment.

Olga reported she and her husband were frustrated and language barriers often caused conflict.

In this case, they couldn't communicate their problems to their superintendent and were fighting about a broken window.

The family has been in Canada for three years, but has no social support network and no extended family.

When the CAS worker suggested counselling, Olga welcomed the idea, but wanted a counsellor who spoke her native language.

The worker called more than a dozen agencies before locating one willing to provide telephone counselling to Olga when she needed help, had questions or just wanted to be able to talk in her native language.

It was not necessary to open a child protection case.

Every child is entitled to grow up in a safe, secure and caring environment. Parents should be loving, supportive and kind.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

There are inequities in families — lack of skill, lack of will, lack of resources, lack of stability — that lead to children at risk.

To reduce that risk, communities create organizations that can provide the resources families need to do a better job of raising children or, in some cases, to provide an alternative home in which children can safely grow.

Unfortunately, just as there are inequities in families, there are inequities between communities and, as a result, the needs of some vulnerable children are not uniformly met across the province. Studies show York is one of the regions of Ontario suffering from funding inequities.

Child welfare funding in York Region is, on a per- capita basis, only 40 per cent of the average community in Ontario.

In fact, York CAS serves 8-1/2 per cent of the province's population with only 2-1/2 per cent of the funding, a situation faced by many other organizations serving children in York Region.

What is the impact of this chronic underfunding of our regional social services?

The answer begins with "differential response".

Differential response mandates that, whenever possible, rather than taking a child into care, families are linked to community services that can provide resources to help the family in a less intrusive way than a traditional CAS approach.

In York Region, I'm proud organizations and agencies are willing to work together to make a positive difference in the lives of vulnerable children.

Being willing, however, isn't quite enough. All of those who come to the table to help a family also need to be able to contribute, to commit resources.

Over the past months, we've sponsored case conferences where as many as 25 organizations – a school, children's mental health services, family services and many others – come together to try to develop a tailored plan to meet the needs of one child.

The organizations collaborate, doing amazingly creative things with little scraps of money, creating a beautiful patchwork quilt of services in which to wrap the child and family.

Sadly, however, it's becoming increasingly difficult to find even those tiny scraps of money and the children suffer.

When a "differential response" is not possible, we must return to the more traditional and intrusive approaches that may pull the family apart.

As you have seen from the stories above, "Harry" has become a CAS case while "Rula" is safe at home with her parents.

If we want more Rulas than Harrys, it's important we continue to remind our elected representatives York Region deserves to be funded on par with other communities in Ontario.

Patrick Lake is executive director of the York Region CAS

Get in touch:

- Call York Region CAS at 905-895-2318, 1-800-718-3850
- E-mail at inquiries@YorkCAS.org