



Making do with 1992 dollars

By Patrick Lake

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Children's mental health services in York Region are starving. And York Children's Aid Society is partly to blame.

Thanks to the transformation agenda that is rethinking and restructuring the work of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario, York CAS is now required to shift its focus to families and children most in need of child protection services.

Rather than this agency serving clients with more moderate needs, cases are shifted to other agencies in the region through our community link service.

We are now the largest single referral point to a number of children's mental health and family counselling services in the community.

This is not a bad thing.

The only problem is the province hasn't put additional resources in place on the other side. Shifting the parameters of child welfare to control Children's Aid Society costs is creating a crisis in other parts of the system.

In 2006, Senator Michael Kirby, then chairperson of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, said there is a stigma surrounding mental illness, particularly in children.

If mental health services generally are the orphan of the health care system, then children's services are the "orphan of the orphan", he said. They are at the bottom of government's priority lists.

His case is clearly illustrated by the fact, in Ontario, children's mental health services have, in the past 15 years, only twice received percentage increases in funding to cover base programs. They're still making do with 1992 dollars.

Why is this the case when there have been huge increases in other health and education spending?

I believe an important reason is families in crisis are reluctant to speak out about the need for children's mental health services. They have not demanded government investment.

In other words, it may be shame stands in the way.

Now that we're facing an unknown financial future, this blind spot in our public conscience is even more frightening.

We already know those who are in last place for resources are the first ones to lose them when times get tough.

Because of a history of funding neglect and the population explosion in the 905 area, most

service agencies receive a tiny portion (often half to one-third) of funding per child in the community, compared to what is received by similar agencies elsewhere in Ontario.

In our agency's case, for example, being funded to the provincial average per child in the community would require a budget of \$132 million. Our allocation is about \$40 million.

Similar gaps affect every type of service, including children's mental health.

That means children are going untreated. And that's a shame because early intervention, support and treatment work.

Primary prevention programs pay huge dividends and these children would go on to have healthy, normal lives.

If these purely humanitarian grounds are not reason enough to invest in children's mental health, let me give you a reason that impacts every one of us.

The recent Ontario Roots of Youth Violence report by the Hon. Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling says health issues, such as mental health and substance abuse, can be viewed as direct roots of the immediate risk factors for violence involving youth.

Children with untreated mental health issues often meet society, not in the arenas of health or social services, but in the justice system. Community safety is at stake here.

Finally, not least, with appropriate mental health services, it's not a stretch to imagine children at risk have more chance of staying in the family home than being taken into care.

In York Region, we have kids on waiting lists for mental health services and, more important, children who are not being identified because they tend to be invisible until it's too late.

Lest you think this worry is disproportionate to the problem, remember one in five children experiences a mental health disorder that is diagnosable and treatable.

Now, only 20 per cent of those one in five is actually getting help.

If only 4 per cent of children with any other health need were receiving treatment to address their problems, we, as a society, would be outraged. We should be outraged about this.

Shouldn't our children have the same access to service as children elsewhere in Ontario? Shouldn't they matter as much?

Patrick Lake is the executive director of the York Region Children's Aid Society.