

# CASe Notes



the quarterly newsletter of the York Region Children's Aid Society



Family Service Worker Ian Brailsford, right, with Ivan Peters, Director of Services for Families

## Playing to their strengths

It's an idea, Ivan Peters says, that began with aboriginals in New Zealand. It was – and is – such a great idea that it's made its way around the world – all the way to York Region.

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is essentially a different way of working with families to resolve differences about keeping children safe.

“Going to court to resolve situations is deficit-based, not strength-based. When we go to court with a family, we are in the position of identifying all of the deficits. It's adversarial – it's difficult to build a relationship with the family after

that,” Peters, Director of Services for Families for the York Region Children's Aid Society, explains.

An example might be a family with young children in foster care because there are substance abuse concerns. “We might like to return the children to their family but they have yet to resolve the issues to the agency's satisfaction. The family may be able to come up with a plan that meets the agency's requirements. A grandmother might move in for six months. An aunt could drive parents to their counselling. A family friend might take the children every weekend. In other

*continued on page 2*

## Five agencies hold shared AGM

Having Our Voices Heard, a shared annual meeting, brought together five community agencies serving children and families in York Region.

Blue Hills Child and Family Centre, Family Services York Region, Women's Support Network of York Region, Yellowbrick House and York Region Children's Aid Society planned the June 25 meeting.

“We want to serve our community better by learning to work together more closely,” says Pat Lake, Executive Director of York CAS. “And, just as importantly, we need to learn to speak

with one voice when it comes to adequate funding for children's and family services in York Region.”

Elisha Laker, Executive Director of Family Services of York Region says the joint Annual Meeting was “an opportunity for people in all roles in our organizations to work together, from frontline staff to our Boards of Directors. Organizing an event like this means that we are getting to know each other better. Now when you call one of the other agencies about a client, it's like calling a neighbour to ask for help.”

He says the shared annual meeting

also provided an opportunity for each organization's staff and volunteers to better understand the role of the other agencies.

“Teamwork is everything. A better understanding leads to better co-operation. We are beginning to develop a collective approach and that is the beginning of a seamless system for helping clients. That's exactly what we want.”

More than 300 persons attended the event which included a networking dinner and an address by former Ontario cabinet minister Charles Beer, Vice Chair of York Region's United Way.

*Please turn to page three for photos.* ●

from Pat Lake, Executive Director

# Bracing for impact



Social service agencies in our community are bracing for impact – the economic recession that we've been reading about and hearing about through 2008 and 2009 is about to hit home.

Here's what I mean. When I worked in Northern Ontario, a mine in Kirkland Lake closed, putting 700 people out of work in a community of 30,000. Eighteen months later, the fallout peaked and, at the Children's Aid Society, we began to deal with the stresses on children and families.

Domestic violence, child abuse and child neglect had increased and families were breaking apart.

Here and now, while media and government attention has been focused on major events like bankruptcies and plant closings, the most vulnerable members of our community have been suffering outside the limelight. The three waitresses who supported their families with wages from the coffee

shop that closed. The five part-time retail workers who are laid off when sales at the discount store drop.

In other words, the families that suffer first and most are those in ancillary industries. They don't have the same access to services as those who work in a large or unionized environment that supports workers or provides access to supplementary income.

There is disproportionate pain for low income earners. People who have never earned enough to build up savings or RRSPs they can cash. People who don't even have connections to people or organizations that can help them. Whatever links to resources do exist are worn through quickly. Recent immigrants suffer in the same way, doubly penalized by not having a long, stable Canadian employment history.

For these families, things can spin out of control very quickly. Once that's

happened, it's often too difficult to come back because of the damage that's been done. It's a really long fall when there is nothing to catch you.

So while governments are crafting bailouts for major industries, they should be investing in our collective future in another way – ensuring there are strong mental health and counseling services for marginalized families.

As individuals, we can also help. Keep an eye out for families who are struggling – children going to school without lunch, sharp words exchanged. Volunteer with any social agency to drive, to be a support to families, to donate food. Most, advocate with your provincial and municipal governments to increase – not cut – budgets for York Region children's and mental health services.

If we all pull together, we can come out of this recession with our most vulnerable families intact. ●

## *Family Group Conferencing continued from page 1*

words, the family comes together to keep the child safe while the caregivers are dealing with their issues.”

FGC is strength-based, bringing together a family group to hammer out a plan to keep a child safe while the parents or caregivers deal with the issues that brought them to the CAS.

“An objective outside co-ordinator pulls a family conference together by talking to the family and agency about the issues. The co-ordinator is provided with the agency's bottom line – what we need to safeguard the child. The co-ordinator also meets with the family to identify

supports – other family, friends and professionals. Then the family conference takes place without either the agency or the co-ordinator at the table. They come up with a plan and then the co-ordinator brings together the family and the agency to review the plan and see if it meets the agency's objectives,” Ivan Peters says.

If the plan meets the agency's objectives for the child and it's approved, families are more willing and able to follow the plan because they own it.

At York CAS, Ivan Peters says, the hope was that FGC would be a useful model for high conflict/low resolution

families but “we're starting to see this would be useful even for families who do not have a high conflict relationship with the agency. There are useful aspects of this for all families.

“It's beginning to be seen as a useful intervention that's in line with the strength-based approach to child welfare that is mandated by the provincial transformation agenda,” Ivan Peters says. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services transformation agenda is designed achieve better outcomes for children and youth while promoting their safety, well-being and permanency. ●

# York Region Agencies hold shared Annual General Meeting



*York Region CAS President Denise Bilisland and Vice President Rev. M.J. Perry*



*York Region CAS Executive Director Pat Lake presents guest speaker the Hon. Charles Beer with a child's painting*



*Networking to share ideas and information*



# Community Partnering with York Region LGBT Outreach

They attempt suicide at three times the rate of the rest of the youth population. They abuse substances at three to five times the rate of others. And, compared to 19 per cent of the straight population, 41 per cent of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young persons have been sexually harassed. About 25 per cent of LGBT teens whose parents react negatively are forced to leave home.

“In spite of these statistics, organizations across York Region tell us they’re not seeing these people. That means we’re doing something wrong.”

Barb Urman is co-ordinator of the York Region Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Outreach Project, a project she piloted a dozen years ago when she was doing undergraduate work at York University and doing a practicum at a regional organization.

“In those days, no one imagined a lesbian lived north of Steeles,” she laughs.

She proposed a project to look at gaps in services and her professor and employer agreed.

“I pulled together a small advisory group which included the York Region Abuse Program, the Domestic Assault Unit at York Central Hospital, a psychiatrist and representatives from public health. We put on a conference in exactly the same location we’re having a conference this year,” she says, adding that the first conference hosted 25 participants and the 2009 version hosted 200.

Making a Leap2, Pathways to LGBT Service Competency, took place in June, sponsored by the York Region LGBT

Community Outreach Project, itself a Trillium-funded initiative developed by Addiction Services for York Region and Family Services York Region a decade after Barb Urman’s early work.

In its three-year existence, LGBT Community Outreach has trained about 500 persons within the social service non-profit sector.

“The objective is to do systemic training and education so that we have a comprehensive, culturally appropriate service delivery system to meet the needs of LGBT persons and their families in the region,” Barb Urman says.

The work has centred around the development and implementation of training and education programs and the elimination of discrimination

and oppression on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity within the human services sector.

“These kids have a higher drop out rate than other kids and very few go to college. Yet we’re still not seeing them in our agencies. Where are these kids?”

Barb Urman says that she experiences a “certain frustration” because even though agencies have been wonderfully supportive, “I would have loved to see programs and services integrated more openly and more quickly.

“As much as York Region is 10 years behind best practices in Toronto when it comes to recognizing and serving LGBT persons, this project is well ahead of every other community in Ontario. It is happening.” ●



Barb Urman receives funding support from York CAS Executive Director Pat Lake for a LGBT youth event.



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Our masthead painting was made by former foster child Jerome who is seven years old. He calls it “a sunny day”