

Cuts won't impact families: CAS

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A \$5.5-million provincial budget cut to York Region Children's Aid Society will not immediately jeopardize core services to families and children, executive director Patrick Lake said.

The agency, serving 1,200 families, 2,400 children residing in their own homes and up to 474 kids in the agency's care each year, learned of the cut in June.

Children's Aid Societies are mandated to perform certain tasks under legislation and are required to have a balanced budget approved by the Minister of Children and Youth Services at the beginning of each year.

York's is among a record 36 of the 51 societies that have filed Section 14 reviews, a mechanism to appeal the government's cutbacks.

With a fiscal year beginning April 1, the timing of the cuts was somewhat fortuitous.

Originally, Mr. Lake and his board determined \$43.5 million was needed to balance their 2009 mandate with their budget. Had the province chopped the budget at the beginning of the fiscal year, the agency faced the specter of cutting services and staff by a third, Mr. Lake said.

The agency has filed for review and is expecting to learn outcomes next month. To temper the financial setback, Mr. Lake has met with Children and Youth Services Minister Deb Matthews.

"We've been told that changes to funding could takes years.

"We recognize the province is in a severe financial crisis and is facing increased demands and decreased revenues. We know they're between a rock and a hard place and that they don't expect us to cut core services."

"We hope the ministry will work with us and the cuts will be done over time."

Ontario's conduct is "unconscionable", Conservative Newmarket-Auora MPP Frank Klees said, particularly in light of yesterday's auditor general report concluding Ontario wasted billions on electronic health records with little to show for it.

"The government has no sense of priority on how tax dollars are invested," he said.

"The underfunding of the York Region CAS is the ultimate in irresponsibility and the province has no idea how to be a good steward of public funds.

"I've repeatedly tried to impress upon (Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur) that they need to be advocates for the most vulnerable — our children."

Ontario's children's aid funding cuts fly in the face of policy, Mr. Klees said.

"CAS services are mandated by the provincial government and then they don't fund it," he said. "They turn a blind eye and aren't held accountable. Ultimately, they'll be held accountable by the electorate. Unfortunately, there's two years to go."

Calls to Liberal Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Helena Jaczek were not returned.

York's agency is now in cost containment mode, Mr. Lake said.

Hopeful its review and multi-year plan will be approved, the society is renegotiating equipment and third party service contracts related to overhead and discretionary budget items.

"We've not yet arrived at the end of the process," Mr. Lake said. "We're looking at every cut before any cuts to service."

"If we reach the point where our options are exhausted, we, like all agencies, will have to have the board grapple with how we balance the budget and shift resources."

Both Mr. Lake and Mr. Klees suggest part of the problem is the region's accelerated growth and Ontario's reluctance to fund resources proportionately.

"Funding has not kept up," Mr. Lake said.

“All those who provide social services are struggling. Our budget is less than what we had in 2007 when there were 100,000 fewer residents in York Region.”