

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services

Operational Review

FINAL REPORT

York Region Children's Aid Society

October 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This operational review was undertaken by Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services staff working in partnership with an external human resources firm, Agree Incorporated (Agree Inc.), to respond to a policy directive issued on July 31, 2020, announcing an operational review of the York Region Children's Aid Society (YRCAS).

The operational review commenced in September 2020 with Agree Inc. conducting a workplace assessment of YRCAS, including a review of human resource policies. Agree Inc. submitted a report on its findings to the ministry in October 2020, which is contained in its entirety within Part 1 of the operational review report.

A team of ministry staff also conducted a review of the society's compliance with the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*, through a review of numerous client files. The report of their findings is contained, also in its entirety, within the operational review report, in Part II.

The ministry wishes to thank the staff and the Board of YRCAS for sharing their insights and acknowledge their commitment to working collaboratively with the ministry and Agree Inc. throughout the review process.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2020, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services launched an operational review of the York Region Children's Aid Society (YRCAS) after receiving troubling allegations of racism, bullying and harassment involving senior management at YRCAS. To support the operational review, the ministry retained Agree Incorporated (Agree Inc.), a consultant with expertise in workplace reviews and cultural audits, to conduct a workplace assessment of YRCAS. A ministry team was also assembled to assess whether workplace issues affected YRCAS' compliance with the requirements under the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017* (CYSFA), its regulations and directives issued under the Act, or the society's service delivery. This includes reviewing compliance with the Ontario Child Protection Standards (2016), Child in Care and Adoption requirements and adherence to the Child Protection Fast Track Information System Policy Directive.

In its review, Agree Inc. found that YRCAS has a strong core of staff that can lead the organization in a positive and healthy direction.

Staff were found to be resilient and caring, but at the same time, were deeply impacted by issues in the following areas:

- Leadership at the Agency
- Overall Workplace Culture
- Racism and Anti-Black Racism

The feedback Agree Inc. received from staff at all levels paint the picture of an organization where staff experienced an autocratic, deficit-based culture of fear that targeted dissent and enabled oppressive behaviours.

Based on its findings, Agree Inc. recommended that a new leadership direction and approach must be put in place quickly, and that actions must be taken to create engagement toward a better workplace culture that is respectful, healthy and collaborative.

Agree Inc. further recommended implementing effective organizational strategies and changes to help build a healthy work environment. Some examples include:

- Adopting clear change management strategies;
- Developing a transparent, open and structured communications plan;
- Prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion in the society's human resources strategy;
- Building and implementing a wellness framework to support staff and reduce work-related stress and burnout;
- Developing strong processes for measuring and understanding the health of the workplace;
- Developing an effective staff issue resolution process; and
- Developing a process for assessing workload issues in all areas so that these issues can be addressed.

Lastly, Agree Inc. included recommendations for the society's board of directors to conduct a full review of its governance structures to ensure that it holds senior staff accountable to the society's strategic plan to develop a robust feedback strategy that can track and monitor the health of the organization.

Agree Inc. concluded that YRCAS can change directions and heal, but how successfully the organization can be turned around will depend on the changes made, and the speed with which those changes are made.

Overall, the ministry's file review found that YRCAS was achieving high compliance with most ministry and legislative requirements that were assessed in the operational review. However, some of the ministry's findings suggest that some of the workplace issues identified in Agree Inc.'s workplace assessment have affected YRCAS' service delivery in the areas of decision-making and timeliness. The ministry has made recommendations to address these two areas of concern.

The ministry was unable to confirm staff concerns raised in Agree Inc.'s workplace assessment relating to workload and racism and impact on service delivery, as the nature of the ministry's

file review process does not yield data relevant to these issues. However, the ministry supports the recommendations made by Agree Inc. that relate to addressing issues of workload and racism, as implementing those recommendations would also help to address staff concerns relating to impact on service delivery.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children and Family Services for York Region, operating as York Region Children's Aid Society (YRCAS), delivers child protection services in York Region under the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act 2017*. Services provided include: investigation of allegations that children may be in need of protection, ongoing supportive services to children, youth and their families, referrals to community organizations, placement and care of children assigned to its care, and adoption services. YRCAS is governed by a voluntary board of directors.

In 2018-19, YRCAS provided services to 5,000 families and more than 10,000 children and youth. During the same period, the society carried out more than 4,000 child protection investigations. The ministry's approved budget allocation for YRCAS in 2020-21 is \$49.6 million.

Allegations of Racism, Bullying and Harassment

In May 2020, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services received an anonymous complaint about leadership and workplace culture at YRCAS. The following month, further troubling allegations of racism, bullying and harassment at YRCAS were shared through feedback from a staff survey carried out by the organization's bargaining agent.

Following discussions with YRCAS senior leadership and the board of directors about steps taken by the society to respond to the concerns, the ministry made the decision in July 2020 to undertake an operational review of the society. The purpose of the review was to look into the troubling allegations of racism, bullying and harassment involving senior management at YRCAS and assess whether these workplace issues affected the society's compliance with the CYFSA, its regulations or directives issued under the Act, or the society's service delivery. The ministry also issued a policy directive to the society that included a requirement that the society

cooperate fully with the ministry's operational review of YRCAS (see Appendix 1: Policy Directive CW006-20: Respecting the Delivery of Child Protection Services under the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017* in the Regional Municipality of York.)

The directive noted that the operational review would include the following:

- Assessment of the society's compliance with requirements in the CYFSA, its regulations, and directives issued under the CYFSA;
- Assessment of workplace culture, including leadership, alleged bullying and harassment of staff, and the diversity and inclusivity of the workplace environment;
- Assessment of the society's change management strategies, particularly with respect to communications, management of change fatigue, and accommodations for staff;
- Assessment of the society's human resources policies and procedures, and the effectiveness of the society's human resources strategy in the delivery of child protection services; and
- Assessment of the society's Human Resources Wellness Framework

To support the operational review, the ministry retained Agree Inc., an external third-party human resources company with expertise in workplace reviews and cultural audits, to conduct an assessment of workplace culture and issues at YRCAS. A ministry team was also assembled to assess whether these workplace issues affected the society's compliance with the CYFSA, its regulations or directives issued under the Act, or the society's service delivery. In order to support the ministry-conducted portion of the review relating to compliance and service delivery, Agree Inc. provided the ministry with regular updates on its progress and findings relating to the workplace.

2. PART I – WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED BY AGREE INC.

The workplace assessment looked specifically at the following areas, as seen and experienced by YRCAS staff:

- Assessment of the society's workplace leadership approach and style;

- Assessment of the society's workplace culture, including staffs experience of harassment, oppression, racism, diversity, inclusion and equity;
- Assessment of the society's change management strategies, processes, communication, and accommodation of staff;
- Assessment of the society's human resources policies, procedures and strategies, along with the Human Resources Wellness Framework.

2.1 Workplace Assessment Process

For clarity and context, a workplace assessment is different than an investigation. An investigation is intended to reach findings that are considered “factual” in a legal context. A workplace assessment gathers feedback and the lived experience of a large majority of staff, at all levels. It reports on the common themes of this lived experience, both what is working well and what is seen as a barrier or problem that must be addressed. Because these findings summarize the lived experience as reported by many staff, they cannot be dismissed as “untrue” or minimized as “inaccurate” – they must be seen as the lived reality of virtually everyone in the organization. While any one individual may have a skewed perception of a given situation, a large majority of staff in a workplace who have strong and similar perceptions must be taken seriously if any change or improvement is to take place. The strong lived experience reported here must be addressed and changed at a fundamental level if the work environment is to improve. The recommendations in the latter part of the report are intended to give some direction to YRCAS on how these changes may start to be implemented.

Finally, it will fall to everyone in the organization, from the board to the front line, to assist with making changes, as no one person or role in the agency, including management, can unilaterally succeed in making improvements. Unless all parties commit to learning from this feedback and changing their approach, the culture will likely stay the same to the detriment of everyone. That said, it should be noted that management has the primary obligation to lead and model constructive, collaborative and inclusive behaviour. This is what will set the standard that allows all staff to engage and contribute.

The Agree Inc. team of consultants conducting this workplace assessment is led by Gary

Furlong, and includes Heather Swartz, Cayla Charles and Kabir Ravindra. The team received confidential feedback from a wide range of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with staff at all levels, along with written feedback from staff and interviews with former staff who recently left the society. The Agree Inc. team collected feedback and input from:

- 59 focus groups that included approximately 160+ participants;
- 17 one-on-one interviews;
- Written submissions from current and former staff totalling 43 responses and over 175 pages of feedback.

As stated above, the following themes and issues in this report came out of this extensive feedback process and are named because they are common to a large number of staff. In other words, if an issue was raised repeatedly, or named as a key issue frequently, it will be listed here. In addition, if an issue was strongly raised by an organizational group within the society (i.e. supervisors, front-line staff, etc.), or by a marginalized group (i.e. BIPOC staff), it will be included in this report and noted as such. If an issue was rarely mentioned or only raised by one or two people, it will not likely be raised here unless otherwise noted.

Below is a summary of the feedback, reported by common themes. After the summary of issues, there will be recommendations for moving forward to address the issues and concerns identified.

2.2 What is Working Well

The following themes were strong and consistent among almost all people interviewed:

- Front-line staff – front-line staff were universally seen as dedicated, hardworking, resilient and passionate; they were described as having a strong commitment to the job and dedication to the safety and well-being of families/children.
- Supervisors – a number of supervisors were seen as supportive of front-line staff, and many also seen as dedicated, supportive and passionate about the work.

- Relationships with colleagues – relationships amongst front-line staff were reported as strong; staff relied upon and depended on each other for support. There was similar feedback from supervisors, reporting that they helped and supported each other. Directors also experienced strong and supportive relationships with peers.
- Work with families and clients – Almost all staff, at all levels, reported a deep caring for the families and children served.
- Strong leadership group – in general, supervisors and directors were seen as supportive and reliable by more than half of the staff (subject to the limitations flowing from the senior leadership approach at the society, as detailed below).
- In a crisis – many staff reported that under pressure, everyone pulled together.
- Key changes happening in the organization that were identified as important by staff included:
 - Kids out of care and back to families – this initiative was seen as a both a good thing and the right thing to do (subject to how it was implemented, as detailed below).
 - CPIN implementation – everyone reported that this implementation was handled very well.

Overall, staff presented as resilient and caring. At the same time, they presented as deeply impacted by the issues categorized below.

2.3 Issues, Barriers and Concerns

The following themes were identified as critical areas that need to be addressed and changed. The Issues, Barriers and Concerns feedback received from all levels of staff is organized into three main themes: Leadership at the Society, Overall Workplace Culture, and Racism and Anti-Black Racism. Each of these main themes will be broken down into sub-themes based on

the direct feedback from staff at all levels.

2.3.1 Leadership at the Society

Leadership Approach

This was, by far, the single strongest and most common issue raised. It should be noted that the issues listed in this theme were almost universally named and identified by all levels of staff as a major cause of dysfunction at YRCAS. The leadership and management approach identified by virtually all staff focuses narrowly on the style, approach and behaviour of the senior leadership executive team – almost exclusively the CEO and COO. It was described as follows:

- **Autocratic:** Senior leadership was seen as extremely power-based, and so highly directive that it was frequently described as being a “dictatorship”. Orders were given and expected to be completed without question. Any feedback or pushback from staff was seen as a challenge to authority and was dealt with harshly. The perception of virtually all staff, at all levels, was one of power and control, first and foremost.
- **Fear-based:** The approach of the CEO and COO was described as aggressive, punitive, oppressive, and, at times, abusive. The culture was characterized as one of fear and intimidation with all levels of staff, extending at times to clients and community partners. There were many stories told of blaming, shaming and “public” humiliation (i.e. singling individual staff out during a meeting), along with covert, overt and direct forms of behaviour described as both harassment and bullying.
- **Micromanaging:** The CEO and the COO were seen as taking almost all decision-making away from directors, managers, supervisors and even front-line staff in many situations. Staff at all these levels felt their experience and skills were not respected and they were only there to implement decisions made at the C-suite level. Many staff, again at all levels, reported feeling an erosion of confidence in their professional competency and feeling undervalued by the organization.
- **Controlling:** Budget decisions were reported as being made only at the executive committee level, with little to no input from operational staff.

- **Bottlenecks and Delay:** The reported result of this micromanaging was that decisions frequently sat on the CEO's desk for months, awaiting a decision or a signature that was significantly delayed. Others described the bottleneck as coming from the entire executive committee¹, including the CFO.
- **Targeting:** Many staff described that anyone who fell into disfavour had no future at the society. A small number reported personal experiences of being told this explicitly and directly by the CEO or COO, while a large number of staff stated they had seen a colleague treated differentially by not being offered opportunities in the workplace after an incident that displeased the senior executives. In addition, some staff stated that a few people were given many opportunities if they were in "favour" with senior leadership.
- **Permission-Giving for Inappropriate Behaviour:** A number of staff reported that similar behaviours as seen at the senior leadership level were replicated by other management level staff (specifically some supervisors and directors), as this negative approach was seen as permissible and acceptable.

It should again be noted how strong, deep and consistent these descriptions of the senior executive leadership style at YRCAS were. While this is not a finding of fact, as stated previously, the commonality of the lived experience of the staff in describing the leadership approach of the CEO and COO was striking.

Strategy, Goals and Direction

Almost unanimously, staff reported a complete lack of clear strategy, goals, or direction for the society. When asked in depth about what was known and communicated from senior leadership about strategic initiatives and society direction, virtually all staff, at all levels, described the following:

¹ The executive committee was described as consisting of the CEO, the COO, and the CFO.

- **Reactive:** YRCAS had no known strategy, it simply reacted when issues or problems arose. While YRCAS has a vision and mission statement, it was rarely referenced or discussed, nor linked to any sustained practices that would fulfil the vision or values of the organization. Many initiatives would be stalled or de-railed by the next “crisis”.
- **Optics:** Many staff identified “optics” as the main reason decisions were made; decisions focused on making sure the CEO/COO and the organization “looked good” in any situation, as opposed to actually building strong and sustainable practices in the field.
- **Over-Focus on Details:** Details that were seen as minor, such as spelling and punctuation as per an “unidentified style guide”, consumed many hours of senior executive, director, supervisor and front-line staff time, whereas important initiatives received little focus, or little sustained focus. Multiple drafts of documents sent back for what were seen as simple formatting changes created significant delays that impacted clients.

In addition, some staff noted that important programs and resources within the society were cut with no understanding of why. For example:

- **High-Risk Infant Nurse Program:** This was seen by some as a critical resource for families, yet it was reduced and then eliminated without consultation or a plan for how the needs it filled would be met.
- **Mental Health Worker:** Similarly, the staff mental health worker was part of the society for a time without any clarity as to the role or services offered, then was eliminated without comment.

Change Management

As reported by all levels of the organization, change was constant and overwhelming. Significant directives were given from the executive team with little planning (i.e. no clear strategy to accomplish the change) and even less support to get there.

The following were common themes amongst a large majority of staff:

- Changes were done by directive and often in reaction to a problem or crisis.
- There was no evidence of any change management strategies or advance planning, with the exception of the CPIN implementation.
- It was virtually unanimous at the front-line and supervisor level (and to some degree at the director level) that there was no staff involvement, input or consultation for any changes rolled out in the organization.
- Initiatives routinely did not produce results because of a poor change management process, e.g. no accountable person appointed, no implementation plan with resources attached, no metrics developed, no scope of decision-making authority (decisions had to go back to the executive level, and often were delayed), and little to no follow-up. Some initiatives had quotas or final outcomes established but no plan to get there, simply some version of the instruction, “Just get it done.”
- Changes were often abrupt with little to no rationale given and no clarity on where these changes fit into any strategy for the organization.
 - The admissions prevention initiative, for example, was reported by a number of staff at various levels, as follows: launched in late 2018, this was a good concept, but implementation was very poor. The initiative was seen as financially driven since outside paid resource (OPR) care was expensive, there were hard quotas to return children home *at all costs*, there were no secondary support resources provided as promised for families, and safety concerns were ignored or minimized, which put children at risk simply to achieve what were seen as arbitrary numbers or quotas. A number of staff indicated they were required to sign off on returning children back to their homes over their concerns and objections.

Communication

Poor communication was named as a significant issue and was virtually unanimous in all levels of staff interviewed. The main themes named and identified included:

- **No communication strategy or plan:** No one, including staff at all leadership levels, identified the existence of a communication strategy or plan.
- **Moving Target:** The communication function was described as bouncing around internally to various directors and to outside resources with again, no plan and no clarity. Communication decisions were seemingly made at the executive level on a case-by-case basis, resulting in very poor information making its way to staff.
- **Secretive:** Information was seen as strictly controlled by the CEO and COO with limited information given to all other levels. Supervisors largely felt they were given the bare minimum of information, and often at the same time as front-line workers received it. Overall, the executive team was described by many as secretive, opaque, and hoarding rather than sharing information.
- **Team Meetings:** Larger team meetings and town halls were described as infrequent, often cancelled, held selectively (i.e. just with front-line staff, just with supervisors, etc.) with no reasons given. Some reported that it was common to be instructed to not share information with peers.
- **Rationale for decisions not provided:** Supervisors reported being tasked with communicating decisions to their team, without any rationale provided. It was strongly implied that directors also didn't know the reasons or were not permitted to discuss them. This resulted in little buy-in from staff.

Human Resources

Structurally, while there are some basic human resources policies² in place, based on the feedback below, these policies were simply not followed. In addition, there appeared to be important staff-related policies (such as a discipline policy) that simply didn't exist. Most importantly, the majority of staff did not see human resources as playing any significant role in the organization.

Overall, Human Resources (HR) as a department and as a function was seen as problematic by a large number of staff, while being seen as an important and helpful resource by only a small number of staff. It was reported by almost all leadership staff that HR had been cut off and effectively disabled by the executive team for a long time. This was evidenced by an overt directive from the CEO that directors and supervisors were barred from consulting with HR without the permission of the CEO; HR staff were likewise barred from engaging with supervisors and directors without the permission of the CEO. This directive was reported by many in leadership roles. Overall, a majority of staff reported the following:

- There was little trust in HR – it was seen as supporting only the executive team, not staff. (As noted above, however, a small number of staff had positive experiences with HR).
- HR was largely described as having a history of an adversarial relationship with staff.
- HR was reported by a large number of staff to be aggressive, arbitrary, and at times punitive around issues such as leaves, return to work processes, accommodations, and other human resources functions. Some staff reported feeling targeted rather than supported around accommodation and return to work issues.

² The consulting team reviewed a number of human resources policies, including Freedom from Discrimination and Harassment HR6-07 and the Employee Code of Conduct HR4-05. HR strategy documents, such as the Human Resources Framework and the HR Framework – Priority Timeline Chart were apparently in draft form and had not yet been implemented. Recommendations relating to the HR strategy will be made in the Recommendations section of this report.

- It was strongly reported that HR was often not consulted to assess the impact on staff when the CEO/COO made changes at the society, this was only done reactively, after the fact.
- The hiring processes were viewed as biased and unfair. Staff described hiring processes for some positions as “arbitrary” with competitions held sometimes and direct appointments made at other times, with no rationale or reasons given. There were numerous beliefs expressed that friends and past employees of the COO were given preferential hiring treatment.
- Many supervisors and directors reported a lack of effective performance management:
 - There have been no consistent performance appraisals.
 - There has been little support from HR when leadership needs to manage negative performance or behaviour. There was confusion about the policy and process for doing this.
 - A Supervisory Framework Model was introduced, but there was no follow up and it was reportedly not being used.
- Training:
 - It was reported that there is no internal training plan and no training strategy.
 - While senior leadership liked to describe YRCAS as a “learning culture”, that was not experienced from a staff point of view. Many staff reported that it had been years since anything other than a smattering of in-house training had been offered.
 - From a training perspective, there was no investment in staff; no onboarding, mentoring, or cross-training.

- Wellness:
 - When asked about the Human Resources Wellness Framework, not a single staff member knew what this referred to or had seen any evidence of such a framework³.
 - Many reported that in the last few years there were one or two Wellness Fairs that were very well received and appreciated, but these were one-off events.
 - A high percentage of staff reported that work-life balance didn't exist, nor was it valued in the society.

2.3.2 Overall Workplace Culture in the Society

The approach to leadership described above spilled over and created a culture throughout the organization that virtually all staff reported as toxic. While many front-line staff and supervisors reported strong and supportive peer and team relationships, many also reported that all levels of the leadership team (including supervisors, managers and directors) as well as some front-line staff also engaged in behaviour that was autocratic, fear-based, bullying, and oppressive. According to all staff levels this behaviour was modeled by the CEO and COO and filtered down to others in the organization.

Deficit-based Management

In many social services agencies, the approach to working with families is described as either strength-based or deficit-based. Workplace cultures can also be assessed as strength-based or deficit-based. In simple terms, a strength-based management approach is one that focuses on the strengths of the staff members and works in collaboration with them, reinforcing what they do well and using this foundation of strengths to address areas that need improvement. It is roundly considered the most effective way to build a strong and competent workforce within a healthy work environment. A problem or deficit-based management approach is one that focuses heavily or exclusively on criticizing what employees do poorly, what they are not good at or not achieving. It is seen to contradict many management (and social work) principles, often robbing staff of confidence and creating unhealthy or toxic work environments. Generally

³ A workplace wellness policy, HR6-03 exists, but there was no evidence it was being followed. For example, this policy describes a Workplace Wellness Committee which apparently never existed. It is also poorly written, as it lacks clarity as to whether it applies only to non-union staff, or all staff.

speaking, the approach most linked to success is a strength-based approach.

Every single person at all levels of the organization describes a strong and deep deficit-based management approach and culture at YRCAS that originated from the CEO and COO but has spread throughout the organization. This description includes:

- A strong focus on finding and highlighting any and all staff “mistakes”.
- A culture focused on criticism rather than performance improvement, along with lengthy “Lessons Learned” meetings that were described as lasting hours and included public humiliation and reprimanding. This created a deep fear of being targeted, labeled, and possibly fired.
- A culture that rarely, if ever, celebrated successes or provided recognition or acknowledgment for the hard and often successful work of the organization and staff.

Respect/Dignity/Safety/Harassment/Bullying

Virtually all staff levels reported that the culture in many parts of YRCAS was unsafe and disrespectful, and described it as follows:

- Negative; unhealthy; fear-based culture; disempowering; demeaning; disrespectful; made to feel incompetent.
- One that pitted colleagues against one another.
- An executive team that routinely engaged in bullying behaviour and public humiliation of staff.
- Executive team behaviour that condoned and tolerated bullying by others in the organization at all levels.
- Inappropriate behaviour by other staff who felt they had been given permission by the senior management approach, coupled with staff who tolerated and chose not to speak out against inappropriate behaviour as a form of self-preservation.
- A workplace that banned any personalization of offices or desks and made the society feel sterile and impersonal.

Care and Support for Staff

Due to the above-described work environment, a large number of staff reported:

- Feeling very little support from the organization, on any level.
- Seeing very little recognition for staff. There was seen to be a “total and complete” lack of recognition for staff, for any of the good work done. Criticism, however, was constant.
- Feeling emotionally unsafe, including:
 - Fear (staff at all levels afraid of being bullied, shamed, labelled as incompetent, targeted, or fired for minor issues).
 - Public put-downs and humiliation by supervisors, directors, or the senior executive team.
 - Supervisors labelled by senior management as incompetent, creating a lack of faith in the leadership team.

Workload

While workload was not seen as the primary issue at YRCAS, it was clearly seen by front-line and supervisory staff as a very significant issue, one that needed to be addressed. The most common workload concerns from a large number of staff include:

- Workload is very high and is unsustainable.
- A number of staff reported doing unpaid overtime as the only way to serve their families; they felt their jobs were threatened if they complained. This concern was especially true for contract staff.
- Workload issues had been reported and raised many times, with no response from any level. The most common response heard from management was, “It’s just the job.”
- Burnout and stress were common, creating a heavier workload for those remaining.

The impact this overall workplace culture has had on staff health and wellbeing cannot be overstated. In many of the interviews, focus groups and written feedback, staff *at all levels* described high levels of stress, emotional breakdowns, mental health concerns, panic attacks, trauma, and loss of self-confidence that were deeply concerning. A number of former

employees described leaving the organization in fear for their long-term health. All former staff interviewed identified this negative workplace culture and its impact on their health as a primary reason for leaving.

While this negative culture was reported as being created by the executive team, many staff reported that these negative behaviours occurred at all levels and had become accepted in the culture at YRCAS.

2.3.3 Racism, Anti-Black Racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The areas of racism, anti-black racism, diversity, equity and inclusion were some of the hardest for staff to give feedback on. A strong sense of fear pervaded focus groups and individual interviews around these topics, especially for BIPOC staff and staff who identified as LGBTQ+, female, other-abled, Jewish, Chinese, South-Asian, Muslim, and others.

The primary feedback received in this area centered around racism, with a strong focus specifically on anti-Black racism as the highest profile racism experienced. For this reason, reports of a “strong majority of staff” throughout this section will refer to BIPOC staff as the main reference group. While a small number of non-racialized staff also saw what was described as racist behaviour in the society, the feedback reported here is primarily from BIPOC staff. That said, the feedback received from all staff contained in many reports of staff experiencing a range of discriminatory behaviour at YRCAS that included sexism; anti-Indigenous, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim behaviour; ableist and ageist behaviour; and more.

Finally, in this report DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) issues will be used to denote and encompass all forms of bias, discrimination or racism referenced by staff speaking to this issue.

Racism

All BIPOC staff reported experiencing racist behaviour in the YRCAS workplace, and this was supported by feedback from a small number of non-racialized staff who observed and were concerned about this as well.

- Generally, this appeared to take the form of negative, demeaning race-focused comments that went unchallenged; biased or offensive stereotypes used in descriptions of BIPOC families and staff (micro-aggressions); and a lack of support for different needs and concerns that families of different racial and cultural backgrounds would have.
- At times, racist comments would be challenged, only to be dismissed or even ridiculed. It was clear to virtually all BIPOC staff that raising issues of racism in the workplace was not welcome and little to no action would be taken. Worse, there was significant fear that raising these issues could result in being targeted as a troublemaker and would limit career options at YRCAS. This also led to some BIPOC staff not applying for promotions for fear of giving up bargaining unit protections.
- Staff experiencing racist comments and, at times, aggressive racist behaviour from clients reported that their concerns were met with indifference, lack of action and lack of support, even after many requests for help. In most cases, BIPOC staff reported they were required to continue to work with racist-behaving clients, and were told, “It’s just part of the job.”
- Many staff noted that the organization, as directed by the executive team, chose to stop making Aboriginal land acknowledgements, upsetting many.

In addition, it appears there has been no strategy or plan developed or implemented to address racism beyond the basic Freedom from Discrimination and Harassment Policy HR6-07 on the books. It should be noted that such a policy is required by law, and, as such, it is the bare minimum for every organization in Ontario.

Anti-Black Racism

The highest profile experience of racism at YRCAS was reported to be anti-Black racism. In addition to the feedback on all forms of racism above, anti-Black racism was reported on a number of fronts.

- Approximately two years ago, a number of Black staff attended a One Vision One Voice conference from the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies which was focused on disparities faced by African Canadians after coming into contact with the child welfare system. By Black staff accounts this was an impactful experience, and the learnings were brought back by staff and the then-manager of diversity into the society. A meeting with the CEO and COO was held, and clear promises were made by the senior executive team that action would be taken. Unfortunately, despite repeated attempts at follow-up, staff reported that zero action was taken, and no further meetings took place for a year and a half -- until the killing of George Floyd that galvanized action in many countries around the world.
- After the killing of George Floyd, it was reported the CEO directed very quick action to be taken, but even then, nothing concrete took place. This was widely seen by Black staff as an issue of "optics" in that the organization needed to now *be seen* to be doing something but was not seen as a true commitment to bringing a DEI and an anti-oppression lens into the society.
- Many Black staff reported regular anti-Black micro-aggressions not only from the executive level, but from the supervisory level and staff level as well. Reported examples included:
 - Black female staff members being told their "look" (hair, dress, even body shape) was inappropriate for the workplace.
 - Black male clients referred to as "thugs", implying risk of violence based on skin colour.
 - Zero statements of support from the organization for anti-racism initiatives or for Black Lives Matter, or even statements re-affirming commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion, which left Black and BIPOC staff feeling the organization was paying little attention to these issues.

- A smaller number of Black staff reported being reprimanded for calling out anti-Black or anti-Indigenous racism, effectively being silenced.

There were many more individual examples shared during the feedback sessions that are not shared here, to honour confidentiality. It must be noted that the many stories and experiences reported were consistent with the themes identified above.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

At the broadest level, the following feedback on the organization as a whole, was raised by virtually all BIPOC, other identified groups, and the majority of non-identified employees as follows:

- There was no discernable plan, process, training or support for DEI within YRCAS. It was reported that the CEO herself, at a town hall meeting, acknowledged that it simply wasn't (or hasn't been) a priority. This is consistent with the feedback received.
- There were staff within YRCAS who advocated for and designed training, conferences and other learning opportunities around DEI initiatives. The consistent and universal feedback from BIPOC staff was that these staff (including the former manager of DEI and staff assigned to work in the DEI space as part of their role at YRCAS) were ignored, sidelined, and their initiatives starved for resources.
- Racist behaviour was seen to clearly be condoned by the lack of action on specific cases and behaviours and reinforced by what was seen as a lack of attention or caring for anti-racism, anti-Black racism, or just about any other DEI initiative. While it was acknowledged that a small number of staff were recently investigated and terminated, allegedly for racist behaviour, this was viewed as far too little too late. This is also completely speculative since all such personnel matters are strictly confidential, and no actual information on personnel matters has been shared. It was noted, however, that before, during and after these investigations and regardless of the findings or outcomes,

no broader action (other than one “Chai and Chat” Town Hall) was taken in the organization to build a DEI culture in YRCAS.

- Hiring practices were seen to be biased against or indifferent to equity issues. Strong perceptions were expressed in all directions, including systemic bias against BIPOC candidates along with perceptions of tokenism if a BIPOC leader was appointed to a position without a competition.
- It was reported that there was significant disrespect for workers who have English as a second language, especially Asian and South Asian staff who reported they were told regularly that they “need to learn how to speak English properly.”
- Staff reported that the CEO and COO hindered the work of the Anti-Oppression Committee by limiting monthly meetings to 1.5 hours and not allowing staff any time outside of the actual committee meeting time to perform anti-oppression work.

Overall, staff reported a culture where anti-racism and anti-oppression initiatives were ignored and unsupported, and where issues of racism and anti-Black racism were allowed and enabled. In addition, virtually all BIPOC staff reported that racist and oppressive behaviour was seen as taking place at all levels of the organization, not just at the top.

2.3.4 Staff Input and Feedback

Essentially, at all levels, staff in the society felt that their voice was not listened to or heard. The following was voiced by the vast majority of staff.

- **Team meetings:** There was a wide range of reports on team meetings. A number of staff reported that meetings on their own team (their supervisor and peers) were supportive and very helpful, others indicated few team meetings took place.
- **Town Halls:** While a small number of Town Halls were held in different configurations, they were not seen as safe spaces to speak. In addition, there was no understanding of

why different Town Halls were held (some only held with supervisors, some with staff excluding supervisors). Since they were not safe spaces for most staff, they were not seen as contributing to staff voice or input.

- **OPSEU:** For front-line staff, the union was seen as the only safe avenue to be heard but given the somewhat adversarial relationship between YRCAS and OPSEU this avenue was not seen as effective in having employee voices heard.

2.3.5 Service Delivery

All staff at every level of the organization reported that the culture at YRCAS had a negative impact on the quality of service given to clients. All staff indicated they did their best to continue to serve families regardless of the organizational culture, but also indicated that it impacted service quality in a number of ways.

- **Decision-making:** A large majority of staff indicated that decisions about families and care were taken away from front-line staff, supervisors, and at times even directors, and were made at the senior executive level. Because of this, it was felt strongly that the voice of the front-line staff member who had the most experience with a family was often ignored, resulting in poor quality decisions at times.
- **Timeliness:** Because decisions were moved far up the organizational hierarchy, decisions were dramatically delayed preventing timely service to clients. Numerous examples from staff were given where adoptions in some cases took up to eight years to be finalized due to senior management reviewing and editing adoption papers, refusing to sign off for months or years at a time.
- **Workload:** Due to high workload levels, many staff reported not having time to properly engage with families to make the best decisions for children. Home visits were scheduled and then were cut short due to caseload. Many staff reported caseloads that were simply unmanageable.

- **Racism:** Due to a lack of focus and training around racism and anti-Black racism, BIPOC families and children were treated differently and negatively compared to non-racialized families and children.

2.3.6 Other Issues

Other issues were raised with less profile than the above issues yet deserve to be noted. They include:

- **Impact of COVID:** Virtually all staff indicated that the society's initial response to COVID was chaotic and unorganized. That said, virtually everyone identified that all the issues outlined in this assessment existed long before COVID became a reality, and that none of these issues were caused by the COVID pandemic. It was certainly seen that COVID magnified the stress and pressure everyone felt, but that COVID was not the cause.
- **Staff Morale:** It should be clear from the previous sections of this report that staff morale was seen as extremely low. Contributing to this, beyond the major themes described above, a number of staff also reported that specific programs that staff engaged in and supported were terminated without staff input and resulted in a major negative impact. The primary one mentioned by a number of staff was the Holiday Program, where staff helped raise donations and then met as a team to support families during the holidays. The termination of this program, with no consultation or care for the impact on staff and clients, was seen as removing an important positive activity staff loved to contribute to and participate in.
- **Role Clarity:** Because of the level of micromanaging, role clarity and decision-making authority was reported as very unclear for staff. A number of staff indicated that decisions on families and care that would typically be made by the caseworker(s) and possibly the supervisor were decided by directors or above -- often, it was felt, without a clear grounding in the first-hand experience of working with the particular family. In addition, some staff reported that files that involved numerous players, such as child

services, family services, legal, etc., didn't have a clear and collaborative process for making good decisions, also impacting the quality of client care.

2.4 SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

The feedback summarized above, which came from all levels of staff, paint the picture of an organization where staff experienced an autocratic, deficit-based culture of fear that targeted dissent and enabled oppressive behaviours. It should be noted clearly that these themes were highly consistent and virtually universal among staff at all levels.

It must be noted again that these are not findings of fact, nor are there any conclusions to be drawn that there was, or is, any intentionality that is attributed here. What is a fact, however, is that virtually all staff perceived and experienced the YRCAS workplace this way, and that this lived experience must be taken seriously and addressed quickly.

2.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to help build a safe, strong, and effective framework for a healthy work environment in the society.

2.5.1 Re-set the Leadership Approach to Restore Trust

It is clear from the strength and consistency of the feedback that the entire approach to leadership at YRCAS must change. Past behaviours as detailed by staff in this report must be acknowledged, and a new direction and approach demonstrated. Actions must be taken to start the process of healing and repairing the damage to trust in many working relationships at YRCAS. Specifically, it is recommended:

- **Leadership:** Going forward, staff need to see clearly that a new approach is being taken. This report makes no recommendation on staffing at the executive level, but identifies clearly that, given the depth of feeling among the staff at all levels, only a profound change or shift of some kind will create engagement toward a better workplace culture. The clearer the change in direction, the sooner staff will begin to

move forward effectively. Any hint of a return to past approaches will derail movement toward a healthy organization.

- **Restoration and Healing:** First and foremost, the lived experience of all staff, as detailed in this workplace assessment, must be acknowledged and validated. This should start with an all-staff Town Hall led by the interim CEO to review these findings, to answer questions, and to give everyone an opportunity for feedback and voice. In addition, other activities that allow the majority of people to draw a gentle curtain on the past and focus forward should be planned in collaboration with staff. These other activities or processes need to be chosen carefully, likely with the help of outside resources and with the input of YRCAS stakeholders.
- **Guiding Principles and Values:** Leadership must engage all staff in a review and commitment to the guiding principles and values of YRCAS. All staff, beginning with senior management, need to commit to key principles such as true collaboration, staff engagement, and a strength-based approach in the workplace.
- **Healthy Workplace Audits:** As part of the re-set, a simple but direct process for auditing the health of the organization needs to be put in place permanently. This process must be transparent, confidential, and reported regularly to all staff, the board, and the Ministry as a way of ensuring that what is described as a toxic culture is not enabled again.
- **Complaint and Whistleblower Processes:** The organization needs to demonstrate there are meaningful complaint processes in the agency that take concerns seriously. These processes should be reviewed, and changes made to ensure staff are able to bring complaints that fall within the scope of the policy forward, that those complaints are investigated independently, and concerns about reprisal are addressed. It is also strongly suggested that YRCAS and the board consider using an outside resource, such as an ombudsman service, for a period of time to assist with the trust-building process.

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** The organization must identify decision-making authority at all levels of the organization as a way to allow trained professionals from the front-line up to the senior executives to make professional decisions and judgements appropriate to their role.

These are broad recommendations, quite simply because the leadership approach reported here has impacted the organization very broadly. These recommendations should be seen as a starting point and a direction; it will be a demonstration to all staff that a new and collaborative leadership approach is taking hold and leading the organization forward.

2.5.2 Implement Effective Organizational Strategies

Given that many pieces of the puzzle related to strategy and direction appear to be missing, the following are specific recommendations that will guide the society toward the fundamental changes it will need:

- **Vision, Direction and Strategy for YRCAS:** First and foremost, senior leadership needs to set the direction, strategy and goals for the organization, and this needs to be communicated to all staff. The strategy needs to be driven to the implementation level and implemented in a way that is consistent with the established values of YRCAS.
- **Change Management Strategy and Plan:** YRCAS needs to adopt a clear change management framework for each significant initiative that identifies the change being made, the rationale, timeframes, accountabilities, supports and resources, and metrics. The society-wide change management plan needs to identify all projects and demonstrate that the pace and volume of change is achievable before initiating new projects.
- **Communications Plan:** Communications within the organization are absolutely critical to keeping staff informed and engaged. A transparent, open and structured communications plan needs to be developed, and communications needs to become a key component of all change management initiatives. In addition, regular channels for

communicating to staff, the union executive and to community partners need to be developed collaboratively to ensure an open and transparent⁴ environment is both created and modelled.

- **Human Resources:** The Human Resources function must be fundamentally changed from what has been seen as solely a resource to the senior executive team into being a resource for all staff in the organization. To do this, a detailed HR framework and strategy must be built and shared in the organization. This framework needs to include:
 - **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:** DEI must be one of the first and highest profile parts of the HR strategy at YRCAS. There are significant resources available in the child services sector including OACAS and numerous sister organizations that can be used as a source of best practices. A clear DEI plan with goals and metrics must be implemented and supported from all levels of leadership. This should clearly include the structure, resources and reporting for critical committees such as the Anti-Oppression Committee, PRIDE Committee, etc. to achieve what is needed for YRCAS.
 - **Hiring Processes:** Part of the HR strategy must also be to establish clear hiring processes that are fair, open, and eliminate any perception of bias or favouritism. A critical part of any fair and open hiring process needs to be a commitment to equity in hiring and be directly linked to the DEI strategy above.
 - **Performance Management:** A clear process for performance management needs to be established, and all leadership staff be trained in conducting performance reviews and giving performance feedback. In addition, if one does not exist, a clear discipline policy focused on changing behaviour as the goal must be developed and communicated to all staff. In addition, core

⁴ It must be noted that transparency does not mean all information is shared all the time. There is information that is confidential and must remain so at any given point in time. Transparency includes being transparent and open about what cannot be shared, and why. This approach builds trust; silence and opacity undermines it.

competencies, such as conflict resolution, need to be identified and added to all job expectations to support a healthy workplace.

- **Wellness Framework:** A clear framework for supporting staff and reducing work-related stress and burnout needs to be built, implemented and communicated to all staff.
- **Training:** A training plan for the organization and staff needs to be developed to ensure competencies continue to develop and grow for all staff at YRCAS. Appropriate resources for necessary training need to be identified to continuously build the skills and abilities of staff to deliver services to clients.
- **Other HR Policies:** A full review of all other HR functions, including leaves, accommodations, and return to work processes, needs to take place. These critical functions, similar to hiring, need to be applied in a fair and balanced way.
- **Draft Human Resources Framework:** In reviewing the draft Human Resources Framework (HRF), we have the following comments:
 - Overall, the draft HRF is a detailed and appropriate framework that can serve as the starting point for the organization.
 - It is recommended, however that the following changes/additions be made:
 - The commitment to DEI appears in the HRF, but should be given a higher priority, given the feedback in the workplace assessment. It should become one of the five or six primary priorities for the society, given the population it serves. This priority should then be reflected into all appropriate policies, including equity in hiring.

- A Healthy Workplace Audit measuring employee engagement and morale needs to become a high priority. Strong processes for measuring and understanding the health of the workforce need to be developed and tracked on an ongoing basis.
- A staff issue resolution process should be developed and incorporated into the culture of the organization, whereby issues can be raised and resolved at the lowest level in the society without fear. Effective issue resolution is critical to a healthy work environment.
- **Staff Feedback and Input:** Leadership needs to make sure it is hearing from staff on important issues and creating an environment where staff input is both sought in appropriate ways and valued when received.
- **Workload:** The workload issues raised by many staff are troubling but lack any clear data or information that would diagnose specific problems and help with solutions. A process for assessing workload for all areas of YRCAS should be initiated immediately to collect data on caseloads, complexity, other workload issues, overtime and unpaid overtime and employee sick leave and stress-related issues. Once a baseline of information is collected, workload issues can be properly addressed.

2.5.3 Role of the Board of Directors

Overall, it is the role of the board to hold senior staff accountable for operating the society effectively by delivering against the objectives as set out in the strategic plan. To accomplish this, the board, regardless of whether they choose to position themselves toward the operational end or the governance/strategy end of the spectrum, must ensure they are not overly insulated from the organization. They must always have good information on not only whether the strategic goals are being met, but also whether the organization, as a whole, is in a state of good health. This includes the level of employee engagement and the level of staff morale. It is recommended that:

- The board conduct a full review of its governance structures to ensure these structures are designed to properly hold senior staff accountable to the strategic plan of the society.
- The board develop a robust feedback strategy to ensure that in addition to financial performance, the health of the organization is also tracked and monitored.

2.5.4 Summary

The York Region Children’s Aid Society has a strong core of staff at many levels that can lead the organization in a positive and healthy direction. The entire direction and approach to leadership must change and change quickly. Leadership and a leadership approach that has credibility with staff must be in place quickly, and actions must be taken that demonstrate a respectful, healthy and collaborative approach with all stakeholders, including staff, OPSEU, the board of directors, clients, the community, and others.

What is captured in this report is strongly worded to reflect the reality that staff at all levels reported to Agree Inc. The degree of unanimity for even the most troubling themes cannot and should not be underestimated. In fact, numerous experiences reported from a few staff were even more disturbing than what is reported here. We state this to ensure there is no minimizing or discounting the frequency and similarity of the experiences of many, many staff at all levels.

This organization can change directions and heal. It will depend on the changes made and the speed those changes are made, to determine how successfully this organization can be turned around.

3. PART II – MINISTRY REVIEW OF COMPLIANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY ISSUES

As part of the operational review of YRCAS, the ministry completed an assessment of the society’s compliance with requirements in the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017* (CYFSA), its regulations, and directives issued under the CYFSA.

3.1 Purpose of the Review

The purpose of this assessment was to determine if the culture of the organization was having

an impact on the society's compliance with requirements in the CYFSA, its regulations, and directives issued under the CYFSA and/or affecting the society's delivery of services to children, youth and families.

3.2 Approach and Methodology

The review team developed lines of inquiry aligned with the scope of the file review. Lines of inquiry were determined by service delivery issues identified through feedback received directly by the ministry through emails, letters and phone interviews, and feedback received from Agree Inc. obtained during its workplace assessment.

Based on the case data provided by the society, a stratified sample of child welfare cases across all relevant service categories, teams and workers between October 1, 2019 and December 31, 2019 was selected for review. A five to 15 per cent sample was selected in each of the following service areas: intake and investigation, ongoing family services, child-in-care services and adoption services.

The file review included an assessment of the society's compliance with child welfare standards and legislative and regulatory requirements. In total, there were 139 cases reviewed across the multiple service areas (71 investigation cases, 33 ongoing cases, 22 child in care cases and 13 adoption cases). The review team also utilized additional information available at the time of the review including:

- Results from Child in Extended Society Care Reviews
- Standards Quality Improvement Plan results
- Quarterly budget submissions provided to the ministry by the society

3.3 Key Findings and Recommendations

Overall, the file review and review of ministry data and reports identified that the society was achieving high compliance with most requirements assessed in this review. Areas of non-compliance are highlighted in the findings below. The review team is unable to comment specifically on interactions between caseworkers, supervisors, foster parents and senior

leadership or between caseworkers and clients through an assessment of documentation in case files or by analyzing ministry data and reports. Nevertheless, the review identified certain areas where the culture of the organization may be affecting service delivery in the service areas identified above.

Intake and Assessment

Children's aid societies (societies) are required within 24 hours, after receiving information that a child is or may be in need of protection, to search the ministry Child Protection Fast Track Information System (Fast Track) for information that may be relevant in determining whether or not there are reasonable or probable grounds to believe that the child or any other child in the same family is in need of protection. Fast Track is a ministry database that societies use to complete record checks when a community referral is reported about a child's safety. Societies search Fast Track to determine if a person is currently receiving a service or has received a service from a society in the past. The ministry Fast Track policy directive authorizes societies to access Fast Track in very limited circumstances. As noted above, societies can search the Fast Track database when a referral about a child's safety is reported to the society or when screening certain types of prospective caregivers.

The review team was informed that staff reported that senior leadership was directing staff to search random names of children and families that appear in the media or amber alerts in Fast Track and the Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) without receiving information directly from a referral source about a child's safety. While this allegation could not be confirmed through the file review process, this practice may not only be a breach of privacy but is also prohibited under the ministry Fast Track Policy Directive.

Based on a review of 53 closed investigations with no further protection concerns, the review team noted that the information in the case files was well documented with timely supervision of case decisions.

A review of ministry data revealed that at YRCAS, there was a 16 per cent increase in the number of "Completed Investigations, No Further Protection Concerns" over a seven-year

period (2013-14 up to and including Q3 of 2019-20). Across the province, over the same seven-year period, there was a slight decrease of approximately 0.4 per cent in the number of “Completed Investigations, No Further Protection Concerns”. This disparity in data calls into question whether the society is unnecessarily opening and completing full investigations on families that may not require this level of intervention.

The review team observed that except for child exposure to partner violence referrals, the society appeared to be appropriately opening and closing investigation cases with no further intervention required. The review of case files indicated that the society may be taking an overly cautious or possibly intrusive approach to investigating child exposure to partner violence referrals and may be opening and completing full investigations on families where an investigation may not be required. According to a concern reported to the ministry, this approach to investigating child exposure to partner violence referrals may be related to a situation in the past where the society did not investigate this type of referral resulting in a tragic outcome. It was reported that possibly by promoting a lessons-learned approach for staff to gain an understanding of what happened and how the society could improve in this area in the future, staff felt that a senior leader currently employed by the society managed this tragic event by what was described as blaming, belittling and humiliating the caseworker.

Investigations in situations of domestic violence should also be consistent with local Children’s Aid Society/Violence Against Women (CAS/VAW) Collaboration Agreements as noted in Child Protection Standard #2 Planning and Conducting a Child Protection Investigation. Child protection standards are the mandatory framework within which child protection services are delivered. The following eight standards clarify expectations regarding the minimum level of performance for child protection workers, supervisors and societies:

1. Intake: Receiving a Referral and Determining the Appropriate Response
2. Planning and Conducting a Child Protection Investigation
3. Conducting a Safety Assessment and Developing a Safety Plan
4. Conducting a Risk Assessment
5. Concluding a Child Protection Investigation

6. Transferring a Case
7. Ongoing Service Case Management
8. Closing a Case

When societies receive a referral and determine that a child protection investigation is necessary, they are required to meet the requirements set out in Child Protection Standard #2 and utilize the practice notes to guide their work. Domestic Violence Case Considerations are included in this standard.

The file reviewers could not determine if YRCAS was using its CAS/VAW collaboration agreement when planning for investigations related to child exposure to domestic violence. It was further reported by a community service provider that YRCAS may have strained relationships with some VAW service providers and YRCAS staff and management could benefit from training in this area. It appears that the effectiveness of the YRCAS/VAW Collaboration Agreement may require further attention by the society.

The file review of 18 investigations that transferred to ongoing family services showed that YRCAS achieved a moderate level of compliance to concluding investigations within legislative timelines. This was an improvement from the results reported to the ministry in the society's 2019-20 Q1 Standards Quality Improvement Report. The review further identified that children and youth remained in the care of their families in all cases that transferred to ongoing services. Based on the documentation in these case files, there was no indication that these children required a place of safety.

Recommendations

1. The society should review its policies, processes, and practices to ensure it completes record checks in accordance with the ministry Fast Track Policy Directive and that it ceases any practice of requesting that staff complete record checks in the absence of child protection referrals. The society should also follow up with any incidents where staff completed record checks in the absence of child protection referrals and ensure that it has complied with the requirements in Part X including those for addressing

unauthorized collection, use or disclosure of personal information under section 308 of the CYFSA.

2. The ministry recommends that the society review a larger sample of investigations completed with no further protection concerns related to referrals that are coded as child exposure to partner violence to determine if a less intrusive approach could be used to mitigate risk.
3. The ministry recommends that the society review and assess its CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreement to guide decision-making with respect to child exposure to partner violence and reach out to its community VAW service providers to assess how well the CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreement is working in York Region with a view to enhancing communication, collaboration and coordination of services with these organizations.
4. The ministry recommends the society aim to complete investigations transferring to ongoing family services within legislated timelines and where not possible, provide a documented rationale for departing from this requirement.

Ongoing Family Services

A review of 33 open and closed ongoing family service case files identified that there was less consistency in the quality of documentation as compared to intake and investigation files. Supervision of case files was timely, but the documentation often focused on caseworker tasks that required completion, rather than on a clinical assessment of how well the family was addressing identified safety and risk factors. This observation may align with some staff reporting that they are bullied and demeaned in supervision sessions resulting in inadequate case planning for the children and families being served.

When closing ongoing family service files, the documentation did not always comply with the requirements of Child Protection Standard #8 Case Closures that sets out the following minimum criteria which must be met when a decision is made to close the case:

- There have been no recent occurrences of child abuse or maltreatment.
- There is no evidence of current or imminent safety threats.
- A recent risk reassessment confirms that factors that were identified as contributing toward risk in the earlier risk assessment/risk reassessment documents no longer exist or have been reduced significantly enough that they no longer pose concerns to the direct safety and/or well-being of the child.

In some cases, there were no recent risk reassessments documented prior to closing the file or the most recent risk reassessment on file rated families at an overall moderate level of risk, with no clear documentation of how the risk factors were significantly reduced to support the closure of the file. In all cases reviewed, children remained in the care of their parent(s). The file review team further noted that the case review and termination documentation was not completed within legislative timelines in half of the cases reviewed.

Recommendations

5. The ministry recommends that the society review a larger sample of ongoing family service files to determine if the current supervision approach aligns with the society's service delivery model and includes a clinical assessment of the family's progress to addressing risk and safety factors.
6. The ministry recommends that supervisors ensure that all case closure documentation complies with Child Protection Standard #8 prior to approving a case for closure.

Child-in-Care Services

When reviewing ministry data, it was noted that the percentage of children-in-care decreased by approximately 30 per cent at YRCAS over the seven-year period identified above, with a significant decrease in the number of children-in-care in the 2019-20 fiscal year. Overall, the province has seen about a 27 per cent decrease in children-in-care over the same seven-year period. Some staff noted that direction from senior leadership to reduce the number of children-in-care and place those children and youth requiring a place of safety with extended family members has not always been in a child's best interest. The review team saw evidence

in the case files of significant efforts to locate extended family members for children requiring out-of-home placements. Staff further reported that a senior leader in the organization is often responsible for making the final decisions about children's out-of-home placements without considering caseworker assessments or children's wishes.

Some foster parents reported to the ministry that they have observed the urgent push to return children home at YRCAS and advised that the society does not always take into consideration the wishes of the child when considering placement or permanency options. It was reported by foster parents that were interviewed by the ministry that they do not feel valued or supported by the society, and their thoughts and concerns about the children in their care are ignored, disrespected or not taken seriously by some caseworkers and supervisors when planning for children. A foster parent advised the ministry that society staff can be punitive towards foster parents when they raise concerns or complaints about services to children-in-care. In addition, a foster parent reported that they felt that caseworkers are stressed and traumatized by their work environment.

Of the 22 children-in-care files reviewed, children and youth were discharged from care in 13 (59 per cent) cases. Of the 13 cases reviewed where children and youth were discharged from care, in one case the rationale for returning the youth home was unclear and there was no documentation to support that the risk and safety factors were adequately addressed prior to returning the youth home. Overall, reunification assessments were completed where appropriate. In the remaining 12 cases, the documentation indicated that appropriate support services or court orders were in place to monitor safety when children and youth were discharged from care. These findings are based on a small sample and cannot necessarily be generalized across the agency.

Recommendations

7. The ministry recommends that the society complete a review of child-in-care files across a larger sample of files to ensure that risk and safety factors are appropriately addressed prior to returning children and youth home.

8. The ministry recommends that the society review its internal decision-making processes as well as roles and responsibilities of staff at all levels of the organization to address concerns related to both admitting and discharging children from care, and to ensure decisions are made in the best interests of the child, including taking into account the child's wishes.
9. The ministry recommends that the society put policies and procedures in place to address foster parent concerns and complaints related to child-in-care services and put processes in place to enhance relationships with foster parents.

Adoption Services

A review of the annual ministry child in extended society care review (CESCR) results from 2017-20 indicated that overall, the society was achieving high to full compliance with most standards for children placed on adoption probation. Completing six months plans of care within legislated timelines was an area that was consistently in low or moderate compliance over three of the four annual reviews. This is an area that can be addressed in the society CESCR Quality Improvement Plan.

Adoption probation begins when a child is placed in a home with a prospective adoptive family they are matched with, and it provides time for the child to integrate into and adjust and attach to the prospective adoptive family prior to finalizing an adoption. According to the YRCAS website, "Once the child is placed in an adoptive home, a period of adoption probation begins which typically lasts up to 12 months". The ministry heard from staff that adoptions were not being finalized in a timely way due to senior management's rigorous and unreasonable expectations for completion of the required documentation to finalize an adoption.

Based on the 2017-20 CESCR results, it was noted that on average children and youth were remaining on adoption probation longer than the 12-month period identified above, including: 21.3 months in 2017, 16.8 months in 2018, 15.1 months in 2019, and 18.8 months in 2020. When analyzing CECSR provincial results for this specific measure, it was determined that the average length of adoption probation at YRCAS was higher than the provincial average

ranging from two to five months longer over the four-year review period. A review of 13 adoption files noted that adoptions were delayed for many reasons, including waiting for documentation to be approved by senior management and the ministry.

Recommendations

10. The ministry recommends that senior management work with adoption staff to develop guidelines and clear expectations for completing adoption finalization documentation.

11. The ministry recommends that senior management work with adoption staff to better understand the reasons for the delays in finalizing adoptions and develop strategies to finalize adoptions in a timelier way.

Conclusion

The ministry's service delivery review findings suggest that some of the workplace issues identified in Agree Inc.'s workplace assessment may be having an impact on YRCAS' service delivery. For example, the consultant's workplace assessment identified a concern by staff that inappropriate involvement by senior executives in case level decision-making was impacting the quality and timeliness of those decisions. This issue was also identified by staff in submissions made directly to the ministry, with foster parents echoing concerns about decision-making around returning children to their families. The ministry's review revealed one case in which the reunification of a youth with family was not adequately supported by documentation indicating that risk and safety concerns had been addressed, which could be indicative of a placement decision being made by individuals other than front-line staff. As well, the ministry's review confirmed a pattern of delay in finalizing adoptions, which was attributed in some cases to waiting for senior management approval of documents. The ministry has made recommendations to address these two areas of concern.

The ministry was unable to confirm staff concerns raised in Agree Inc.'s workplace assessment relating to workload and racism and impact on service delivery, as the nature of the ministry's file review process does not yield data relevant to these issues. However, the ministry supports the recommendations made by Agree Inc. that related to addressing issues of

workload and racism, as implementing those recommendations would also help to address staff concerns relating to impact on service delivery. The ministry also expects the society to follow through with its workplan to implement the One Vision One Voice program, once approved, in order to address staff concerns related to services provided to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC).

3.4 One Vision, One Voice

Item #7 of the ministry's policy directive (see Appendix 1) also required that YRCAS "by August 14, 2020, provide the ministry with a workplan to implement One Vision, One Voice protocols developed by Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), and once the workplan has been approved by the ministry, to implement these protocols in accordance with the workplan."

The One Vision, One Voice (OVOV) project provides society staff and caregivers with anti-oppressive and anti-racist clinical practice guidelines, with a focus on anti-Black racism, to support culturally appropriate service delivery for Black/African Canadian children, youth and families involved with the child welfare system. One of its primary purposes is to address the overrepresentation of African Canadian families involved with the child welfare system. The ministry has supported this project, co-led by the child welfare sector and leaders of the Black and African-Canadian community, since 2015.

YRCAS submitted its workplan by the date set out in the policy directive, outlining its efforts to date to implement OVOV's Practice Framework. Within its workplan, YRCAS identified its key priorities for embedding an anti-Black racism approach within the context of its broader anti-oppression framework, and identified activities, achievements, and go forward actions associated with each of the race equity practices under the Practice Framework.

YRCAS is accountable to the broader Black and African-Canadian Community that it serves, and to the OACAS as the project lead, for the successful implementation of the OVOV Practice Framework.

The ministry will continue to support YRCAS in enhancing its workplan to implement the One Vision, One Voice Practice Framework. The ministry also encourages the YRCAS to continue to engage with Black and African-Canadian community members and use the OVOV Implementation toolkit, which was developed by OACAS and is designed to support societies develop a plan to implement the 11 OVOV Race Equity Practices.

APPENDIX 1 – POLICY DIRECTIVE CW006-20: Respecting the Delivery of Child Protection Services under the *Child, Youth, and Family Services Act, 2017* in the Regional Municipality of York

This policy directive is issued to Children and Family Services for York Region, operating as York Region Children’s Aid Society, under s. 42 of the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017* (CYFSA)

EFFECTIVE DATE:

This policy directive will come into effect on July 31, 2020.

REQUIREMENTS:

Children and Family Services for York Region (“the society”) is directed to:

1. Cooperate fully with the Ministry of Children, Community and Society Services (the Ministry) in the Ministry’s conduct of an operational review that will include, but not be limited to the following:
 - a. Assessment of the society’s compliance with requirements in the CYFSA, its regulations, and directives issued under the CYFSA;
 - b. Assessment of workplace culture, including leadership, alleged bullying and harassment of staff, and the diversity and inclusivity of the workplace environment;
 - c. Assessment of the society’s change management strategies, particularly with respect to communications, management of change fatigue, and accommodations for staff;
 - d. Assessment of the society’s human resources policies and procedures, and the effectiveness of the society’s human resources strategy in the delivery of child protection services; and
 - e. Assessment of the society’s Human Resources Wellness Framework.
2. To make available to the public the final report of the operational review immediately after it is provided to the society.

3. Within 30 days of receiving the final report of the operation review, to submit a workplan to the Ministry which sets out the actions that the society will take in response to the findings and recommendations arising from the Operational Review.
4. Upon receiving Ministry approval of the workplan referenced above, the society shall immediately make the workplan available to the public.
5. Take steps to ensure that the appropriate governance and leadership structures are in place to permit the society to adequately support and comply with the operational review process, and implement any corrective actions required to respond to the findings and recommendations of the operation review.
6. Provide regular updates to the Ministry, as requested by the Ministry, throughout the operational review process, the development of the work plan, and the subsequent implementation of actions and deliverables identified in the work plan.
7. By August 14, 2020, provide the Ministry with a workplan to implement the One Vision, One Voice protocols developed by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, and once the workplan has been approved by the Ministry, to implement those protocols in accordance with the workplan.
8. Immediately terminate the retainer with the communications firm that was retained by the society in May/June 2020.
9. By August 7, 2020, provide the Ministry with all documentation, including correspondence, prepared and received by the society and the society's board of directors regarding the procurement process for the communications firm that was retained by the society in May/June 2020.

ISSUANCE OF POLICY DIRECTIVE CW006-2020: July 31, 2020



David Remington
Assistant Deputy Minister
Child Welfare and Protection Division
Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services