

# CAS can't protect all children; but YOU can

BY PATRICK LAKE

## GUEST COLUMN

If you're not a York Region Children's Aid Society community partner or volunteer, it's likely that the only time you hear about the CAS is when it's in the news.

It's almost never good news.

That's too bad, because if there were government reports and news stories about the day-to-day successes – and, from time to time, miracles – the Children's Aid Society achieves, you might have a better picture of who we are and what we do.

As it is, thanks most recently to the report of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, you probably think what we do is fail the children of Ontario.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Every day, we support and strengthen families so that children can stay in healthy, nurturing environments with their parents or members of their extended family.

Every day, based on information from family members, teachers or police officers, we rescue vulnerable children from situations that put them at risk.

Every day, we educate new parents about how to make sure their babies sleep safely.

Yet the February 23 report of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth – 90 Deaths: Ninety Voices Silenced - suggests that 90 children in the care of Ontario Children's Aid Societies died, that their deaths were preventable and that there is no systemic review to guide the system to prevent deaths. None of this is true.

The 90 child deaths to which the advocate – Irwin Elman – refers were based on the 2008 Report of the Pediatric Death Review Committee (PDRC) of the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario. That same

report says "involvement of CAS is not a factor in the vast majority of child deaths in Ontario; for those children who died while receiving CAS services, most deaths could not have been foreseen or prevented by a CAS".

In fact, of those 90 deaths in 2008, the only involvement of Children's Aid Societies in 36 cases occurred because CAS was called to the hospital at the time of the critical injury.

There was no prior involvement. Fourteen of the 90 children died because of natural causes. Forty deaths are currently being reviewed by the PDRC but, of the total number of deaths, only 14 children were in the care of Children's Aid Societies.

Fourteen is too many. One is too many. But, before we are assigned responsibility, it's worth looking at the statistics for 2007.

In 2007, there were 37 child deaths reviewed by the Ontario Coroner's PDRC. Only four were in CAS care and none of the deaths were found to be preventable. Why the advocate chose to report child deaths in this manner is anyone's guess.

For your peace of mind, however, let me be clear.

There is a comprehensive child death review process in Ontario. It is led by the Office of the Chief Coroner

and involves a multi-disciplinary team which includes coroners, pediatricians, pathologists, police and independent child welfare experts. It investigates all medically complex deaths, deaths of children under five years, and reviews all deaths of children who were receiving services from Children's Aid Societies.

It produces a detailed, public report annually. These are the people who said that "most deaths could not have been foreseen or prevented by a CAS".

More, along with the other professionals, agencies and policy makers in child welfare, Children's Aid Societies work tirelessly to prevent children from abuse. In rare, tragic cases where death occurs, we change practices so other deaths can be prevented.

That said, Children's Aid Societies do not have the capacity or the power to protect all children in Ontario all the time.

Collectively, you do.

If everyone in Ontario would take on the personal responsibility for reporting concerns – you don't need proof and you can remain anonymous - about the safety and well-being of any child, there would be fewer child deaths.

Call us today at 1-800-718-3850 if you have a concern about the safety of any child.

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

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