



York Region  
Children's Aid Society  

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Société d'aide à l'enfance  
de la région de York

YORK REGION CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY  
OPERATIONAL REVIEW WORKPLAN  
FINAL REPORT  
APRIL 2024

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## Introduction

In the fall of 2020, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) conducted an Operational Review of YRCAS after receiving concerning allegations of racism, bullying and harassment involving executive leadership at YRCAS. To support the operational review, the ministry retained Agree Inc., a consultant with expertise in workplace reviews and cultural audits, to conduct a workplace assessment YRCAS. Recommendations were made in several areas aimed at supporting transformative change within our organization. Broadly, the recommendations aimed to:

1. Reset the Leadership Approach to Restore Trust
2. Implement Effective Organizational Strategies
3. Review Governance Structures of Board

Additionally, 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 resulting in several recommendations around compliance and service delivery and a directive to implement One Vision One Voice.

An Operational Review Workplan was developed in collaboration with staff from all levels of the organization and has guided the work over the past three years. YRCAS viewed the outcomes of the review as an opportunity to build a stronger organization that reflects our commitment to being an equitable and inclusive workplace and service provider and has submitted progress updates to MCCSS since March 2021 reflecting the combined efforts of the Board of Directors and all our staff in the following areas:

- Leadership
- Culture
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness
- Change Management
- Human Resources
- Governance
- Service

## Response to Recommendations

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### Reset the Leadership Approach to Restore Trust

It is important to note that the review found front line staff to be dedicated, hardworking, resilient, and passionate with a strong commitment to the job and dedication to the safety and wellbeing of families/children. Supervisors and directors were seen as supportive and reliable by more than half the

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staff and relationships amongst staff were reported as strong, and dependable. It was further noted that YRCAS has a strong core of staff that [could] lead the organization in a positive and healthy direction.

Resetting the leadership approach to restore trust within the organization demanded the embodying and embedding of the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion and critically applying an anti-oppressive framework, specifically with an anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism lens. Leaders in the organization were prioritized to receive *Equity in Child Welfare* training, followed by a training plan for all staff. A DEI Framework and 360 Organizational Equity Plan were developed in 2021 soliciting broad stakeholder feedback. A team of Equity Integration Specialists supplement and support the integration of equity focused learning and recommendations arising from One Vision One Voice, Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and Sector Commitments, and the 2SLBTQ+ Provincial Report.

In October 2021, our new CEO brought a vision to the organization focused on inclusive leadership, supporting trained professionals from the front-line up to the senior team to make professional decisions and judgements appropriate to their role (*breaking the hierarchy*) and establishing 'one management team'. Her open-door policy has been in place since her first day wherein staff are encouraged to ask questions, voice concerns, and share ideas and successes. Town Halls, All Staff Meetings, Management Meetings, Listening Sessions have become regular opportunities to bring staff together to identify issues, create solutions, and establish trust (*Listen, Plan, Act*).

Since 2021, there have been numerous surveys seeking staff input and feedback including, but not limited to,

- ✓ Healing and Restoration Report (January 2022),
- ✓ Pulse Staff Satisfaction Survey (Fall 2022),
- ✓ Strategic Planning Survey and Focus Groups (Fall 2022)
- ✓ Joint Workload Review (Spring 2023)
- ✓ Internal Communications Audit (February 2024)

The reports arising from these surveys and/or focus groups highlight opportunities for continued enhancements and recognize the successful work that each member of our organization has contributed to over the last three years.

Efforts aimed at building trust with staff and supporting staff to heal from the past was an early priority. Consultants, Gessesse Consulting and FSK & Associates conducted interviews and focus groups with staff at all levels of the organization from August 2021 through October 2021 and identified 44 recommendations for consideration. Many recommendations were similar to those made within the operational review wherein work was in progress. As of April 2024, over 95% of the recommendations have been completed or are in progress.

Agree Inc suggested that YRCAS and the Board consider using an outside resource (i.e. Ombudsman) to oversee internal complaints for a period. This recommendation was explored and based on analysis of the experiences of other organizations who were using an ombudsman approach, it was evident

that the Ombudsman did not have the effect of increasing transparency and trust, but instead, took the power to resolve difficulties and settle misunderstandings outside of the agency and did not lead to positive relationship-building. YRCAS opted for a more empowering, inclusive (less colonial), and fiscally responsible approach to issue resolution and partnered with The Neighborhood Group (TNG) in June 2023 to provide objective 3<sup>rd</sup> party mediation and conflict resolution services. Partnering with TNG has been in addition to an investment in communications through open forums and listening meetings and the development of a consultation and decision-making framework to support staff complaint resolution and restoration. These have all been critical to enhancing transparency and addressing the concerns underlying the recommendation related to taking issues outside of the organization for adjudication by an Ombudsman.

The YRCAS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Framework, outlines the organization's commitment to supporting employee resource/network groups (ERG) to further facilitate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within the organization, and support the strategic directions and priorities as it relates to integrating equity. As of April 2024, the Society has 8 formal and 2 informal Employee Resource Groups that are sponsored and supported by the DEI Team.

The Society is committed to ensuring diverse representation on agency planning and advisory forums. Diverse representation means having a range of people with various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, various lifestyles, lived experience, and interests, various work experience, education/training/certifications. When a Call for Participation is initiated, a memo is sent to all staff outlining the details of the opportunity and inviting those interested to submit an expression of interest.

YRCAS has opened its doors to leaders, elders and community service providers who have supported deeper conversations and introspection, and we are set to launch our new Equity, Innovation and Community Engagement Department in April 2024 leading efforts to build and create even stronger partnerships with community-based agencies and services.

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## Implement Effective Organizational Strategies

Supporting change has been a constant over the past three years as we have managed new projects and implemented new strategies. Key to this support has been the development of a robust communication strategy, ensuring open, clear, and regular communications with staff and stakeholders. New communication tools have been introduced to engage staff more widely, including an internal newsletter (*the Buzz*), an external newsletter (*the Pulse*), open staff forums, monthly staff meetings with staff participation/leadership, and a MS Teams channels for staff communication. A new Intranet platform is in development, seeking broad staff consultation to ensure that the platform meets the needs of all staff.

The agency's People and Culture Department have actively supported acknowledgement and recognition of staff efforts, a healthy and positive work environment and culture change within the organization.

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Working with the agency's DEI Team, recruitment and hiring practices have been reviewed and enhanced, a performance management system (Success Maps) was instituted for all staff. Homewood Health, a new provider for the Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) was secured, offering trauma and depression counselling and support to staff who may need this additional support. Staff Recognition events have been hosted annually for the past two years with planning underway for our next event in the fall of 2024.

The People and Culture Department report data on indicators of staff wellness and engagement to the Board of Directors quarterly and this information is subsequently available to all staff. Information reported includes turnover rates, 'time to fill' rate for vacancies, workforce planning data (i.e. retirements, medical leaves), participation rates in organizational wellness initiatives etc.

Numerous policies have been written or updated that specifically support cultural change within the organization. A system is in place to give the opportunity to all staff to review key policy drafts, inviting feedback and suggestions in advance of their final approval. Some key policies are:

- ✓ Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Framework
- ✓ Employee Code of Conduct
- ✓ Fair Employment Opportunity
- ✓ Recruitment and Selection
- ✓ Employee Resource Groups
- ✓ Right to Disconnect
- ✓ Harassment Discrimination and Workplace Violence Policy
- ✓ Discrimination and Harassment by Service User, Community Service Provider or Vendor
- ✓ Triage Reporting

Wellness has been established as a priority. Annual Wellness Days, accompanied by a monthly Calendar of wellness activities and ideas aims to keep staff informed regarding wellness initiatives, upcoming and past Homewood Health Lunch & Learns, Employee & Family Assistance Program, Trauma and Depression Care, Work Perks, Financial Wellness Series, LIFT Exercise sessions, staff socials, and more. Staff participation in wellness activities is high with over 92% participation in the third quarter of 2023/24.

In our ongoing journey toward organizational excellence and in response to employee feedback, we embarked on a comprehensive workload review aimed at understanding and addressing the evolving workload demands within our agency. The goal of the review was to do the following:

- Establish a baseline understanding of current workload pressures; anticipate future challenges as our work landscape continues to transform.
- Provide information to help inform process efficiency and resource allocation; and
- Establish a legacy tool to assist in future evaluations of workload.

The workload review was undertaken in collaboration with our union partners, front-line staff, supervisors, directors, managers, and administrative staff. The review was conducted by a third party, Lowes Barnes Consulting Group (LBCG), who has provided us with insights, data, and recommendations

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into the intricacies of workload pressures across various roles within the agency. The review focused on union-represented case-carrying roles, alongside administrative assistants. This targeted approach enabled us to do a deep dive into the unique challenges faced by these critical operational functions. Engagement and input from those doing the work ensured that our review captured the diverse perspectives and experiences that enrich our organizational culture.

The workload review is one of several components of YRCAS' ongoing and shared responsibility for workload management. These efforts have enhanced our projection models for workload and informed new aspects of staffing needs. To date these changes have resulted in a reduction of caseloads in areas that were understaffed. For example, in 2023, a revised hiring formula was implemented with focused recruitment to address challenges related to workload concerns primarily impacting the Intake & Assessment Department, the largest direct service area in the agency representing a significant front facing area of service and the area where workload concerns were among the highest. The work done at Intake Screening and Intake & Assessment establishes a standard for service delivery across the organization and is among the most impactful to families receiving service in York Region as it determines organizational response initiating a trajectory of intervention. The aim of the changes sought to create increased stability in the provision of service, reducing the degree of fluctuation of case volumes throughout the course of the year while creating enhanced opportunities to improve the client experience. The outcome has resulted in caseload averages that decreased significantly (32%) between 2022 and 2023 with a 41% reduction in caseload averages when comparing January to April of 2024 with the same period in 2023. The organization additionally made changes to the hiring designation of staff, creating a more general Child Protection Worker "designation" improving the organizations' ability to become fluid and flexible in response to agency pressures. This change paves the way forward to reallocating resources more easily from one service area to another in periods of high service demands and unforeseen circumstances such as the recent pandemic. Staff feedback notes that these commitments have translated to increased time for family engagement, increased positive outcomes and greater staff retention and wellness.

A learning and development strategy is in progress with a diverse staff Learning and Development Committee in place to support an integrated learning and development plan for all staff. One component of the strategy is to build in-house capacity to deliver and facilitate learning sessions, as we recognize the benefits for the staff facilitator, the learner and the organization as we strive to build a sustained learning culture.

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## Review Governance Structures of Board

As recommended in the Operational Review 2020, the Board worked with the Institute on Governance (IOG) to review their governance structure through 2021/22 to ensure that they were designed to properly hold senior staff accountable to the strategic plan of the Society. With the support of IOG, a full review of all Board policies, procedures, and bylaws was undertaken. Additionally, the Board established

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an Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Anti-Racism (IDEA) Committee to provide oversight, guidance and leadership with respect to DEI in the organization and each Board member participated in DEI training.

A robust feedback strategy is in place to support the Board in tracking and monitoring both the financial performance and health of the organization in a transparent and accountable manner. Monthly CEO Reports containing information and metrics related to Child and Family Wellbeing, Community Relations, Communications, DEI, Culture Transformation, Wellness, and a Financial Forecast are shared with the Board and staff. The Board has identified several Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that require data to be reported on an ongoing basis. While some of the KPIs will be included in the CEO Report, we have created an interactive dashboard that the Board can navigate as necessary. Senior staff regularly attend Board meetings to share contextual information and field questions posed by the Board.

An independently administered Staff Pulse Survey was conducted in the fall of 2022, yielding a very high staff participation rate and positive results. The majority of staff commented that the organization was heading in the right direction and a second phase of the survey process (Staff Engagement Survey) will be administered in April/May 2024. Information gathered from the survey will continue to inform our operational strategies as they relate to our overall strategic plan.

Consulting for Impact Inc (LBCG) supported the Board through an inclusive Strategic Planning process which involved community stakeholders, service recipients, staff, and volunteers. A new Strategic Plan was launched in June 2023. The Society launched a child-friendly version of the Strategic Plan in January 2024.

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## Compliance and Service Delivery

As noted in the Operational Review 2020, "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." To support continued compliance with all Child Protection and Child in Care Standards, as recommended, the agency's Quality Assurance Team has worked diligently over the past two years to create dashboards to support staff with monitoring, managing, and improving their compliance with meeting due dates and documentation requirements. Standards Quality Improvement Plan (SQIP) results submitted to the MCCSS in February and September of 2023 reflect achievement of well over our 80% compliance goal in many areas. In areas where we did not achieve 80%, we are shown to be in line with the provincial average with a couple of areas requiring more focused attention.

The file review conducted by MCCSS as part of the Operational Review was a relatively small sample and it was recommended that a larger sample of file reviews be conducted by the agency in several areas. The Society seconded a supervisor from a sister child welfare agency from June-December 2021 to lead a file review in the recommended areas of service. The file reviews were conducted using a staff reference team and consultation with community partners and foster parents was completed to seek their feedback and input. Recommendations arising from the file reviews were shared with agency staff and appropriately actioned.



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Additional recommendations arising from the MCCSS File Reviews conducted as part of the Operational Review have all been actioned or are in progress. Policies have been developed or enhanced to support engagement and complaint resolution with foster parents and adoption processes have been reviewed and strengthened. The agency's Resource and Child in Care Policies were updated and reviewed by all staff in advance of the July 1, 2023, implementation date of the new regulations as outlined in the Quality Standards Framework, including an enhanced Admission to Care Policy.

One of the recommendations arising from the internal file review was to develop a specialized team of staff to respond to and assess cases involving intimate partner violence (IPV). The agency launched its IPV Team in January 2023 and they work closely with VAW service providers to ensure coordination of services.

In April 2022, the Society committed to a Whole System Implementation of Signs of Safety over a three-to-four-year period and hired a Change Management Lead to support the implementation process, inclusive of learning, leadership, organizational alignment, and creation of meaningful measures. Specific to service delivery, Signs of Safety (with Equity) implementation has been embedded into the Society's Operational Plan wherein the agency's Supervision Framework and Conferencing Model will be reviewed and developed as part of the organizational alignment process. We are embracing the Signs of Safety approach and are confident that it will support us to continually improve service delivery with positive benefits and outcomes for the children, youth, and families that we serve.

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### One Vision One Voice (OVOV)

One Vision One Voice implementation has been a key marker of change over the past four years with focused activities in all 11 race equity practice areas. The Board of Directors has recognized their role in the implementation of OVOV and established an IDEA Committee, engaging in courageous conversations at the Board level to address disproportionalities and disparities and leading strategic level organizational change. Mandatory staff and resource parent education sessions, DEI consultations, intentional embedding of equity into the Signs of Safety approach, and DEI collaborations with the People and Culture Team have contributed to our internal awareness and integration of OVOV race equity practices. The Society has engaged mandated referrers in facilitated education sessions on their impact on the over-representation of Black and Indigenous families in Child Welfare and established a Trite Reporting Policy. YRCAS has established and nurtured strong relationships with elders and organizations serving the Black community and is able to connect children, youth, and families to community-based organizations and resources such as York Region Alliance of African Canadian Communities (YRAACC) - Sankofa Program, Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association (NACCA-YSSI program), Markham African Caribbean Canadian Association (MACCA), African Canadian Coalition against Hate, Oppression and Racism (ANCHOR), and Parents of Black Children (POBC).

## Truth and Reconciliation Child Welfare Calls to Action

While not a specific recommendation arising from the Operation Review, YRCAS has prioritized actions towards the 9 sector commitments arising from the Calls to Action made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015. YRCAS maintains strong partnerships with Dnaagdawenmag Binnoojiiyag Child & Family Services and the Chippewas of Georgina Island. An Honouring Indigenous Commitments Committee, established in 2021, provides oversight to a workplan that outlines key activities and actions, many of which are supported by our DEI Team. Actions include file reviews to ensure indigeneity is explored and identified, connecting with Bands and/or Indigenous partner agencies as mandated, training/learning opportunities, networking and community building with local Indigenous agencies, and consultation with Elders.

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## Moving Forward

As an agency, we understand that sustainable transformative change will be achieved through action related to our new strategic plan priorities. We continue to build on the significant actions that have been completed to date and devote time and attention to cultivating our new inclusive leadership model that aligns equity, staff care, innovation, and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders as reflected in our Operational Plan. We centre children, youth and families in our practice and acknowledge the inherent right of families to heal with our support, expertise, and guidance. Those who have practiced in this humble and respectful way, are stepping into leadership as we listen, learn, and provide-space for staff and stakeholders to share their valuable insights and perspectives.