



In defence of child welfare workers



Child welfare is one of Ontario's most hard-pressed sectors, with limited resources, overwhelming caseloads — and workers dedicated to preventing tragedies that inevitably occur, *says Jeanette Lewis*

The recent tragedy in Barrie has once again shone a spotlight on Ontario's child welfare system. When a child dies, we all want answers: How could this have happened? How could it have been avoided?

For child welfare workers, these questions are particularly agonizing. These trained professionals devote themselves to the protection and safety of vulnerable children; when tragedy strikes a child, they feel tremendous shock and grief. They want to know what went wrong, and what lessons can be learned.

With this horrible event fresh in our hearts and minds, there is a need to improve public understanding about the child welfare system, its challenges and limitations, and how concerned citizens can make it work better.

Child welfare is one of Ontario's most hard-pressed sectors, with limited resources and overwhelming caseloads.

Children's Aid workers conduct more than 82,000 investigations a year and provide in-care services for more than 30,000 children, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. While every tragedy is devastating, the system does improve the safety, comfort and prospects of tens of thousands of children every year.

Ours is a highly regulated sector — as it should be. Children's Aid Societies are subject to multiple review mechanisms within the Child and Family Services Act. Each agency is accountable to the ministry of children and youth services

and to the courts, and overseen by boards of directors from its community.

Privacy laws limit disclosure: Ontario's strict privacy laws protect children and their families, particularly when there are health records involved. Due to the sensitive nature of child welfare cases, the full details are rarely made public.

This is frustrating to a public which, for good reason, wants to know exactly what happened. It is also frustrating to child welfare workers, who frequently cannot explain their decisions without compromising a family's privacy.

Children's Aid Societies do not make decisions in isolation. They work with many partners in creating comprehensive support plans for vulnerable children and their families.

These partners can include women's shelters, schools, counsellors, hospital psychiatric departments and community services. Together, these specialists help evaluate, assess and recommend appropriate paths for service.

This can lead to family or community support for parents, the involvement of mental health professionals, and a range of other interventions.

In some cases, the result will be the removal of a child from the family. This is a serious step that involves a difficult assessment of the potential trauma involved, with the child's safety and well-being always paramount. The decision to remove a child must be reviewed in child welfare court to ensure that the individual needs protec-

tion; this decision cannot be made by the CAS without court review.

Yet it is a tragic truth that there will be times when even the combined efforts of these professionals cannot predict a troubled person's behaviour.

Just as hard-working police cannot prevent every crime, and talented surgeons cannot prevent every death, we must move to a more realistic understanding of the limitations on child welfare workers.

It is, of course, critical that every tragedy be thoroughly examined, so that we can identify and address failures in the system. The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies supports every opportunity to examine child welfare practices, and this has led to major reforms in recent years.

A recent survey tells us that more than 87 per cent of Ontarians know they have a duty to report actual or suspected cases of child abuse, and that more than 71 per cent support the work of their local CAS.

However, the same survey also revealed that 55 per cent said it would be difficult to report actual or suspected child abuse involving someone they knew.

This discomfort is understandable, but it must be overcome. In a society that still has serious social problems and too much violence directed at children, our workers need help.

That is why a child's family, friends, neighbours and the general public must be the eyes and ears of the child welfare community.

Nothing can bring back the children who died so tragically in Barrie. But with broader public understanding, and greater vigilance by each of us, we can do much to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Jeanette Lewis is the executive director of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies.