



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETIES

2024 *Pre-Budget Submission*

JANUARY 31, 2024

Priority Areas for Action

1. **Bring greater financial stability and sustainability to the Ontario child welfare sector** by providing adequate funding to support the delivery of high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant services, and developing an updated funding formula that aligns with service principles (i.e., early intervention prevention, continued connections to family, kin, and community) and promotes improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.
2. **Ensure children, youth, and families with complex needs have access to adequate, affirming, and inclusive care** by sufficiently funding organizations and service providers to deliver highly specialized, intensive community-based and licensed out-of-home care (i.e., live-in treatment programs, treatment beds).
3. **Adequately support youth from care as they transition to independence** by continuing to fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* and making targeted investments in integrated youth services, housing, employment, as well as sports, recreational, and arts programming.
4. **Prioritize family-based and community-based placements for children and youth** by ensuring kin and alternate caregivers have access to adequate financial assistance and local supports and services.
5. **Strengthen the capacity of organizations and service providers in the human and community services sector** to respond to the increasing level of need from children, youth, families and effectively partner with their counterparts in the child and family services system, including child welfare agencies.



About the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) is a provincial membership organization representing 47 of Ontario's 50 mandated children's aid societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies, as well as 2 pre-mandated Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies. We support members by providing practice tools, educational opportunities, and training, as well as communication and advocacy supports to help achieve improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Introduction

The OACAS 2024 Pre-Budget Submission is informed by feedback from our members and youth with lived experience in the Ontario child welfare system. OACAS held two virtual engagement sessions with young people and gathered written feedback from child welfare sector leadership. Many thanks to everyone who shared their reflections and insights.

Children's aid societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies (child welfare agencies) are part of the network of community-based organizations and service providers that promote the health, well-being, and safety of children, youth, and families across the province. Child welfare agencies ensure families receive the support they need and prioritize keeping children and youth with their families and communities by working closely with kin and alternate caregivers.

The capacity of child welfare agencies to ensure families thrive and stay together, as well as to support kin and alternate caregivers, is linked to the resources (i.e., non-profit organizations and service providers) available in their communities. Unfortunately, community-based organizations and service providers have become increasingly scant, siloed, and splintered due to chronic underfunding. Gaps in community-based care are acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families, including those with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health, addictions, etc.)

Child welfare agencies should be able to easily connect children, youth, and families to adequate, inclusive, and affirming care. They should also be able to connect kin and alternate caregivers with high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant care in circumstances where a young person is unable to remain with their primary caregiver. Placing children and youth with kin and alternate caregivers is an essential part of the work to address the overrepresentation and disparities in outcomes for Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth. But it is more challenging than ever to ensure children, youth, families, kin, and alternate caregivers get access to the right support, at the right time, in the right place.

It is important to note that the demands on the human and community services sector are only increasing as children, youth, and families grapple with the cost-of-living crisis, high

inflation, and continue to recover from the impacts of COVID-19. Strong leadership is needed at the provincial level to strengthen Ontario's social safety net and networks of care in communities across the province.

We urge Ontario to make targeted investments in the human and community services sector through Budget 2024, so community-based organizations and service providers are well funded and staffed to meet the level of need in their communities.

Additionally, we recommend the province take concrete actions to bring greater financial stability and sustainability to the Ontario child welfare sector. The province must ensure the Ontario child welfare sector receives adequate funding to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant services. Bringing greater financial stability and sustainability to the sector must also involve the development of an updated funding formula that better aligns with service principles (i.e., early intervention prevention, continued connections to family, kin, and community) and promotes improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.

The stability and sustainability of the Ontario child welfare sector is also impacted by workload pressures. Recent regulatory and policy changes have changed administrative processes, increasing the level of administrative duties and responsibilities. Increased workload pressures are affecting the capacity of direct service staff to carry out their duties, as well as their overall health and well-being, resulting in increased absenteeism and staffing and retention issues. We urge the province to assess administrative processes and identify opportunities to streamline reporting mechanisms, so direct service staff have the capacity to form meaningful connections with the children, youth, and families they support.

In this submission, we make recommendations related to funding for the Ontario child welfare sector; children and youth with complex needs; supports for transitional-aged youth; kin and alternate care; and the human and community services sector.

Priority Areas for Action & Recommendations

- 1. Bring greater financial stability and sustainability to the Ontario child welfare sector by providing adequate funding to support the delivery of high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant services and developing an updated funding formula that aligns with service principles (i.e., early intervention prevention, continued connections to family, kin, and community) and promotes improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.**

Child welfare agencies are part of the network of community-based organizations and service providers that promote the health, well-being, and safety of children, youth, and families across the province. Child welfare agencies help families who need support and

prioritize keeping children and youth with their families and communities by working closely with kin and alternate caregivers.

Most families that encounter the Ontario child welfare system are not cases of extreme abuse or neglect. Families often face issues such as poverty, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous systemic racism, unemployment, mental health challenges, addictions, or inadequate housing, all of which can create added stressors and complications that impact their ability to care for their children. Indigenous, Black, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families face systems of power, privilege, and oppression wherein they disproportionately interact with child welfare agencies and are overrepresented in the child welfare system.

Child welfare agencies rely on community-based organizations and service providers in the human and community services sector to provide families with the short- and long-term support they need. Organizations making up this sector deliver vital supports integral to early intervention and prevention. For example, services related to health, mental health and addictions, housing, food insecurity, and so on.

Due to chronic underfunding, community-based supports and services are increasingly scant, siloed, and splintered. Systemic gaps in supports and services are acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families, including those with complex needs (i.e. social, i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health, addictions, etc.) Care givers are not failing. Systems are failing caregivers.

While child welfare agencies do their best to get children, youth, and families the right care, at the right time, in the right place, this fractured landscape forces agencies to step in and fill systemic gaps. As a result, agencies are facing untenable financial pressures that undermine the stability of the broader child welfare sector. Through Budget 2024, OACAS urges Ontario to adequately fund the child welfare sector so agencies can effectively and sustainably support the children, youth, and families in their communities.

While adequate and sustainable funding will promote stability and sustainability within the child welfare sector, it is also critical that the province develop an updated funding formula. The current funding formula does not align with sector service principles (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to family and community) and does not distribute funding equitably. This means that the quality of care and services vary by postal code across the province. This creates service gaps and allows outcome disparities to persist. The formula undermines improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Ontario must work closely with the child welfare sector to develop an updated funding formula that:

- Better aligns with service principles, including reducing the weighting of factors such as the number of children and youth in care and focusing instead on other factors (i.e., protection cases screened, prevention, kin and alternate care placements, paths to permanency);
- Offers agencies a clear mandate to direct funding to areas of early intervention and prevention, as well as reconciliation, equity, diversity, and inclusion;
- Factors in outcomes-based metrics by allocating a portion of funding based on the achievement of outcomes, like the funding formula for Ontario hospitals; and,
- Addresses funding pressures faced by child welfare agencies serving children, youth, and families in Northern, rural, and remote areas of the province. The core operating costs of these agencies differ from others given the typically larger geographic areas they serve.

Notably, the inequitable distribution of funding leaves some agencies better equipped to navigate fiscal pressures than others. Child welfare agencies face different challenges, relative to location and population size. There is an urgent need for a funding formula responsive to these regional realities.

To promote financial stability among agencies and the sector, more generally, we also urge Ontario to increase direct funding for targeted subsidies. Currently, the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services is directly funding 25% of the cost, with child welfare agencies funding the remaining 75%. The province has gradually decreased its share of funding for targeted subsidies over the past 10 years. This has exacerbated the financial pressures agencies contend with, which have also been amplified by the persisting affordability crisis. We recommend the Ontario government fully fund the costs associated with targeted subsidies.

To bring greater financial stability to the Ontario child welfare sector, OACAS calls upon the province to:

- **Ensure child welfare agencies receive adequate funding to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant care and effectively provide short- and long-term support to the children, youth, and families in their communities.**
- **Develop a funding formula in collaboration with the child welfare sector that aligns with sector service principles (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to family, kin, and community) and advances improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.**
- **Fully fund targeted subsidies. Currently, MCCSS funds 25% of the cost with child welfare agencies funding 75%.**

Further Considerations

Ontario must also consider the impact of recent legislative and regulatory amendments on the child welfare sector. We appreciate the important steps Ontario has taken to advance system accountability through legislative and regulatory amendments, as well as changes to policy, programs, and directives (i.e., Quality Standards Framework, Ready, Set, Go). We welcome these changes and recognize the critical role a strong legislative and regulatory framework plays in guiding service delivery. However, these advancements have also come with significant increases in administrative duties and responsibilities and contribute to workload pressures.

Members have expressed deep concern regarding how the workload pressures associated with regulatory and policy changes are undermining the capacity of direct service staff to form meaningful connections with the children, youth, and families they support. Moreover, staff directly delivering services are sharing concerns related to mental health and well-being and psychological safety, resulting in increased absenteeism, staffing, and retention issues. OACAS and our members remain committed to an enhanced, accountable child and family services system that consistently provides high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant care. However, there is a need to find efficiencies across administrative processes and reporting systems to bring relief to direct service staff.

2. Ensure children, youth, and families with complex needs have access to adequate, affirming, and inclusive care by sufficiently funding organizations and service providers delivering highly specialized, intensive community-based and licensed out-of-home care (i.e., live-in treatment programs, treatment beds).

The organizations and service providers that families and caregivers rely on to support their children and youth with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health, addictions, etc.) are lacking in communities across the province. Systemic gaps and barriers to adequate, affirming, and inclusive community-based and out-of-home care are pronounced in the child and youth mental health and addictions sector, as well as the developmental sector. Systemic gaps and barriers to care in these spaces are acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families.

Families and caregivers with nowhere else to turn end up approaching child welfare agencies for support because they believe agencies are better placed to fill systemic gaps and navigate barriers to care. In circumstances of acute need and/or crisis, some enter into care agreements with their local child welfare agency. For others, they are no longer able to care for their child or youth safely in their home due to their acute and/or chronic needs. But child welfare agencies are encountering the very same challenges.

When children and youth with complex needs access services from child welfare agencies and/or come into care, agencies are struggling to find organizations and service providers with the capacity to offer highly specialized, intensive support. It is challenging to refer to local, highly specialized, intensive services and access licensed live-in treatment programs and treatment beds. Quite simply, there are not enough licensed organizations and service providers; those that are in operation are not sufficiently resourced (i.e., funded, staffed) to provide consistent, connected, and comprehensive care across the continuum and/or care responsive to the level of need.

With respect to live-in treatment programs and treatment beds, when there is capacity, licensed organizations and providers sometimes deny referrals and/or placement requests from agencies. They often cite exclusionary admission criteria (i.e., high risk behaviour, recent self-harm, problematic substance use, severe/complex personality disorder, etc.) or inadequate human resources.

In dire circumstances where agencies cannot find a live-in treatment program or bed, they are forced to pursue temporary, supervised placements in hotels or motels, or even in their offices, for children and youth with complex needs. These are placement options of last resort for children and youth in care. Where placements in hotels or motels are the only available option, child welfare agencies put in place a harm reduction approach to support the safety of the young person. Accommodations and sufficient staffing in unlicensed settings come with significant financial challenges that compromise the financial stability of agencies.

When agencies can secure a licensed out-of-home care placement for a young person with complex needs, they encounter high per diem rates and expensive special rate agreements. It is important to note there are inconsistencies with respect to per diem rates and that higher per diem rates and/or special rate agreements do not always guarantee high quality care. There is a need for provincial leadership and oversight when it comes to rate setting. If Ontario fails to step in, child welfare agencies will continue to face expensive placements that undermine their financial stability.

Challenges connecting children, youth, and families with high-quality, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant community-based and licensed out-of-home care are compounded by location. Child welfare agencies in Northern Ontario and rural and remote parts of the province face even greater challenges in providing equitable, timely, and quality care to children and youth with complex needs. Ultimately, there are children and youth across the province going without care vital to their health and well-being and there is an urgent need for action.

While child welfare agencies do their very best to navigate the strained, siloed, and splintered care landscape faced by children and youth with complex needs, as well as their families, they are putting patches on persisting systemic problems.

Through the Ontario 2024 Budget, we urge the province to:

- **Continue to make enhanced investments to help children and youth with complex needs, as well as their families, access specialized, intensive supports and services closer to home.**

Children, youth, and families should be able to readily access high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant community-based care responsive to their level of need, including those living in Northern and rural and remote areas of the province.

- **Make enhanced investments to better support licensed organizations and service providers that deliver and operate live-in treatment programs and treatment beds so they can provide children, youth, and families with complex needs the care they need.**

Again, children, youth, and families should have timely access to high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant licensed out-of-home care responsive to their level of need, including those living in Northern and rural and remote areas of the province.

Further Considerations

In addition to the above investments, we strongly encourage the province to examine and respond to unintended consequences of exclusionary admission criteria of licensed organizations and service providers that deliver live-in treatment programs and/or treatment beds.

We also encourage the province to focus on promoting system cohesion and service system planning. The Ministries of Health (MOH) and Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) might consider issuing a joint policy directive that instructs organizations and service providers delivering care to children, youth, and families across the continuum of care to participate in integrated planning tables focused on case management and service system planning.

Finally, we urge MOH and MCCSS to examine and respond to administrative barriers to Complex Special Needs (CSN) funding. Members have shared accessing CSN funding is challenging and cumbersome, and the administrative barriers can delay access to critical financial assistance. In some instances, such delays can jeopardize placements for children and youth with complex needs.



3. Adequately support youth from care as they transition to independence by continuing to fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* and making targeted investments in integrated youth services, housing, employment, as well as sports, recreational, and arts programming.

The disparity in outcomes for young people who have transitioned out of the care of a child welfare agency, compared to their peers, is well documented. It includes high rates of leaving high-school or post-secondary early, under- or unemployment, mental health challenges and substance misuse, and precarious housing. Systems of power, privilege, and oppression that Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ youth face compound the disparity in outcomes.

We know transforming outcomes for children and youth is a shared priority for OACAS and the Ontario government. OACAS is grateful for the province's efforts to help youth better prepare for and transition from care through the *Ready, Set, Go* program launched last year. The investment of \$170 million over three years to support this new program and the decision to expand the age of eligibility from 21 to 23 years old are commendable. *Ready, Set, Go* will help youth build on their unique strengths and skills so they can successfully transition from care.

However, this program alone cannot deliver improved, equitable outcomes for children and youth transitioning from care. If we want better outcomes for transitional-aged youth, we must do more.

Through recent engagement sessions with youth, we heard about the importance of a whole-of-government approach to meeting the needs of young people transitioning from care. Youth called on the province to work across ministries to ensure that each and every young person has access to housing, employment, and adequate, inclusive, affirming community-based care focused on promoting their health, well-being, and safety. With respect to youth-centric policy, youth emphasized the need to ensure that programs are flexible, responsive, and low-barrier.

Youth also called attention to how systems serving youth leaving care can be confusing, stressful, and overwhelming to navigate. They stressed that youth-serving organizations should be well resourced (i.e., funded, staffed) so direct service staff can form stable, meaningful relationships with young people and help them navigate this critical period.

Additionally, young people pointed out the important role youth-serving organizations play in fostering a sense of overall belonging and community. They noted that youth-serving organizations function as an essential "third place" outside of school/work, and home where they can build and strengthen relationships with trusted adults and peers.

Facing a soaring cost-of-living, compounded by high inflation, it is essential youth-serving organizations in communities across the province have access to adequate funding so they can retain skilled direct service staff. Without this funding, organizations will continue to struggle to build and maintain teams that can effectively support children and youth in building relationships with kin and alternate caregivers, as well as coordinate services that truly meet young peoples' needs. Child and youth workers play an important role in building out a network of care that promotes the health, well-being, and safety of a young person and improved, equitable outcomes.

Youth shared that they rely on Ontario's human and community services sector. They stressed the need for timely access to wraparound supports and services that respond to their unique lived experiences. The pressing need to ensure community-based organizations and service providers are well-resourced (i.e., funded, staffed) across the province to deliver programming in their communities is undeniable.

To ensure young people successfully navigate the transition from care to independence, OACAS calls on the province to:

- **Fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* beyond three years, and make investments that will increase the number of Youth in Transition Workers and Education Liaisons working across the province.**

Increasing the number of Youth-in-Transition Workers and Education Liaison is essential to the successful implementation of *Ready, Set, Go*. With agencies connecting with youth earlier to prepare, they need community partners ready to come to the table and help deliver connected, consistent care that will ensure youth successfully transition to independence.

- **Continue to invest in initiatives focused on promoting the health, well-being, and safety of young people by connecting youth to the right services, at the right time, and in the right place.**

The province needs to continue to invest in integrated youth services for transitional-aged youth. Under this model, it is easier for youth to access an array of supports and services specific to their needs. These include mental health and addictions, primary care, education, employment training, housing, and food insecurity. Every young person across the province, including those living in Northern and rural and remote parts of Ontario, should be able to access a youth serving organization offering high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant supports and services.

A portion of investments should be earmarked for organizations delivering integrated youth services tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and

2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families. Funding should also be earmarked for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations and communities governed under Indigenous law.

- **Invest in identity-affirming and inclusive sports, recreational, and arts programming that helps youth develop new skills, build on strengths, and enhance their knowledge of and connections to community and culture.**

Sports, recreational, and arts programming create opportunities for young people to build and/or strengthen connections that are integral to their well-being, namely culture and community, as well as meaningful relationships with their peers and kin.

A portion of this investment should be dedicated to organizations delivering programming that is specific to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families. Funding should also be earmarked for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations offering culturally relevant sports, recreational, and arts programming.

- **Ensure young people transitioning from care have access to safe, appropriate, and secure housing through targeted investments under the Homelessness Prevention Program.**

Investments should support housing programs specifically designed to support youth. For instance, models that offer a holistic range of wraparound supports and services focused on continued life-skills and social development, employment and education, health and well-being, and connections to culture, identity, and community.

Young people who participated in the engagement sessions with OACAS suggested funding housing programs designed like university and college campuses. They shared that young people transitioning from care would benefit greatly from such models as they would promote a sense of belonging and community and ensure accommodations and integrated services and supports (i.e., health, mental health and addictions, employment, recreation, etc.) are nearby for youth to access, as needed.

- **Support young people in care successfully enter and thrive in the labour market by making targeted investments focused on employment and skills development.**

Create and invest in a program that provides funding to small businesses and organizations across the province so they can create employment opportunities for young people.



This program should prioritize the needs of youth facing unique barriers to employment and skills development, such as early leavers from high school, single parent youth, youth living in low-income households, Indigenous, Black, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, youth experiencing precarious housing, and youth in or from care.

4. Prioritize family-based and community-based placements for children and youth by ensuring kin and alternate caregivers have access to adequate financial assistance and local supports and services.

When it is not possible for children or youth to live with their primary caregiver(s), child welfare agencies first look to kin and community for placement options. Kinship and alternate care placements can involve biologically related kin, members of cultural communities, or individuals with other social, emotional, or community connections to the child or young person, such as teachers, coaches, or neighbours.

In 97% of child welfare investigations, children and youth remain at home with their families. Of the 3% of investigations resulting in a change of residence for children and youth, most are placed in kinship service or customary care (2% of investigations), and fewer are placed in kinship care or other placement types like family-based foster care and group care (1% of investigations).¹

Research shows that broad kin networks are directly linked to better outcomes and positively contribute to the well-being of children and youth receiving services from and/or in the care of a child welfare agency. Family engagement, kinship networks, and lifelong connections for children and youth promote their health, well-being, and safety, as well as their sense of identity and belonging. The involvement of kin early and consistently also helps prevent placement disruptions.

Members of kin and community networks often do not expect to become caregivers. Children and youth are typically placed with members of their kin and community networks on an urgent basis. Kin and alternate caregivers suddenly find themselves in a new role they did not plan or prepare for.

As they welcome a new child or young person into their home, they may need community-based supports and services related to health, mental health, housing, childcare, education, and so on. Kin and alternate caregivers should be able to easily access the support they need, including those living in rural and remote areas of the province and Northern Ontario.

¹ Fallon, B., Filippelli, J., Lefebvre, R., Joh-Carnella, N., Trocmé, N., Black, T., ... Stoddart, J. (2020). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2018 (OIS-2018). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

The ability of family, kin, and alternate caregivers to support a young person is also linked to their access to adequate financial assistance (i.e., Ontario Child Benefit, Ontario Works Temporary Care Assistance). Given the critical role kin and alternate caregivers play in the lives of children and youth, it is incumbent upon the province to ensure they have the support they need.

Prioritizing family and community placements is also an essential part of the work to address the overrepresentation and disparities in outcomes for Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth. By placing children and youth with a caring adult they are connected to, they can maintain connections integral to their well-being, including culture and community, and receive identity-affirming care.

To address the overrepresentation and disparities in outcomes for Indigenous, Black, racialized and 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth, the Ontario government must continue to support initiatives focused on affirming placements and the development of new models of care and service delivery that are inclusive and affirming. OACAS commends the province for their support for the One Vision One Voice (OVOV) program and urges the province to continue to provide ongoing funding. OVOV's work is integral to dismantling anti-Black racism and supporting improved outcomes and equitable services for Black children, youth, and families.

We are also grateful for Ontario's investment of \$822, 399 to help develop new, inclusive, and gender affirming services and supports that improve outcomes for 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system. We strongly urge the government to continue to fund this work beyond 2024. An increasing number of 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth, especially trans and non-binary young people, are interacting with child welfare agencies due to a lack of support and identity rejection by their primary caregivers. Amidst rising anti-2SLGBTQ+ hate, especially anti-trans hate, continued support is vital.

Through the Ontario 2024 Budget, we urge the province to:

- **Ensure kin and alternate caregivers have access to adequate financial assistance** by increasing the Ontario Child Benefit and the Ontario Works Temporary Care Assistance available to kin and alternate caregivers. The Ontario Child Benefit and Temporary Care Assistance rate must be raised to align with the current cost-of-living.
- **Invest in Ontario's human and community services sector to ensure they are well resourced (i.e., funded, staffed) to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant community-based care to kin and alternate caregivers, as well as the children and youth in their care.**

Kin and alternate caregivers rely on local organizations and service providers to navigate new responsibilities and meet the unique needs of the child and/or youth in their care. They must have timely access to high-quality, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant options. Priority areas of investment include:

- Health;
- Food insecurity;
- Education;
- Childcare and early childhood education;
- Mental health and addictions;
- Affordable housing;
- Gender-based and intimate-partner violence; and,
- Legal Aid.

A portion of investments should be earmarked for organizations delivering community-based care tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families. Funding should also be earmarked for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations and communities governed under Indigenous law.

- **Continue to provide funding for initiatives focused on building sector capacity to facilitate identity-affirming placements with family, kin, and alternate caregivers and promoting models of care that will support improved, equitable outcomes for Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families.**

Further Considerations

The capacity of child welfare agencies to prioritize kin and alternate care placements is also impacted by the totalizing framework of the *Child, Youth, and Family Services Act, 2017* (the Act). The Act and its associated regulatory framework do not differentially regulate child welfare agencies and family-based, kin, and alternate care from for-profit operating groups. There is an urgent need for reform to address unintended consequences. As Ontario evaluates next steps following the 2023 legislative review of the Act, we strongly encourage the government to explore amendments that would allow for a more nuanced and responsive legislative and regulatory framework for kin and alternate care placements.

5. **Strengthen the capacity of organizations and service providers in the human and community services sector to respond to the increasing level of need from children, youth, families and effectively partner with their counterparts in the child and family services system, including child welfare agencies.**



The human and community services sector plays an essential role in community-based care. As previously mentioned, organizations and service providers that make up this sector deliver vital supports related to health, mental health and addictions, housing, food insecurity, and so on. Child welfare agencies rely on these organizations and service providers as partners to ensure children, youth, and families get the short- and long-term support they need to stay together. Partnerships with this sector are integral to early intervention and prevention.

Agencies should be able to connect children, youth, and families with community-based organizations and service providers with ease. But this is not the case. Community-based supports and services are scant, siloed, and splintered across the province due to chronic underfunding. As a result, child welfare agencies are struggling to connect children, youth, and families with the right support, at the right time, in the right place. It is more challenging than ever to ensure children, youth, and families have access to adequate, affirming, and inclusive supports and services that are high quality, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant.

Children, youth, and families are not receiving consistent, connected, and comprehensive supports and services across the continuum of care responsive to their level of need. This is acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families, including those with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health, addictions, etc.)

The difficulties child welfare agencies encounter are compounded by location. Child welfare agencies in rural and remote parts of the province and Northern Ontario face even greater challenges in providing equitable, timely, and quality care. Ultimately, the access to community-based care varies by postal code. This is unacceptable. Children, youth, and families across the province should be able to access high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant community-based care, regardless of where they live.

Demands on local organizations and service providers will only increase, with Ontario grappling with a soaring cost-of-living and high inflation. More and more children, youth, and families are turning to community-based organizations and service providers for support. Organizations and service providers are struggling to keep up and families will continue to encounter stressors that impact their capacity as caregivers, increasing the likelihood of an interaction with a child welfare agency.

While emergency pandemic investments were instrumental in stabilizing the human and community services sector, the toll of the pandemic and the persisting challenges children, youth, families, and community-based organizations and service providers face cannot be ignored.

If Ontario does not make targeted investments in the human and community services sector, organizations and service providers will be unable to meet the increasing level of need from children, youth, and families across the province. The capacity of child welfare agencies to effectively support children, youth, and families to thrive and stay together will be undermined. Additionally, the province will risk the successful implementation of the Ontario Child Welfare Redesign Strategy. *Pillar 1: Supporting Child, Youth, Family and Community Well-Being* hinges on a well-supported (i.e., funded, staffed) human and community services sector.

Through the Ontario 2024 Budget, OACAS recommends the province:

- **Take a cross-ministerial approach to strengthening the human and community services sector. Make targeted investments to ensure organizations and service providers are well funded and staffed to deliver high quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant community-based care to children, youth, and families and effectively partner with child welfare agencies to prioritize early intervention and prevention.**

Child welfare agencies depend on local organizations and service providers to help children, youth, and families thrive and stay together. We urge Ontario to prioritize investments in organizations and service providers delivering support in the following sectors:

- Health;
- Food insecurity;
- Education;
- Childcare and early childhood education;
- Mental health and addictions;
- Affordable housing;
- Gender-based and intimate-partner violence; and,
- Legal Aid.

Again, portion of investments should be earmarked for organizations delivering community-based care tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families. Funding should also be earmarked for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations and communities governed under Indigenous law.

- **Convene a roundtable with child welfare agencies and child and family service system partners, people with lived experience, and key partners in government (i.e., Ministry of Health, Mental Health and Addictions, Housing, Education, Women's Social and Economic Opportunity, and Community, Children, and Social Services) regarding early intervention and prevention-focused supports and services.**

Systems serving children, youth, and families are not well integrated. Organizations and service providers across the province are operating in siloes and not able to effectively identify and respond to the needs of children, youth, and families as partners.

Recommendation Summary

1. Ensure child welfare agencies receive adequate funding to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant care and effectively provide short- and long-term support to the children, youth, and families in their communities.
2. Develop a funding formula in collaboration with the child welfare sector that aligns with sector service principles (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to family, kin, and community) and advances improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.
3. Fully fund targeted subsidies. Currently, MCCSS funds 25% of the cost with child welfare agencies funding 75%.
4. Continue to make enhanced investments to help children and youth with complex needs, as well as their families, access specialized, intensive supports and services closer to home.
5. Make enhanced investments to better support licensed organizations and service providers that deliver and operate live-in treatment programs and treatment beds so they can provide children, youth, and families with complex needs the care they need.
6. Fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* beyond three years and make investments that will increase the number of Youth in Transition Workers and Education Liaisons working across the province.
7. Continue to invest in initiatives focused on promoting the health, well-being, and safety of young people by connecting youth to the right services, at the right time, and in the right place.
8. Invest in identity-affirming and inclusive sports, recreational, and arts programming that helps youth develop new skills, build on strengths, and enhance their knowledge of and connections to community and culture.
9. Ensure young people transitioning from care have access to safe, appropriate, and secure housing through targeted investments under the Homelessness Prevention Program.

10. Support young people in care to successfully enter and thrive in the labour market by making targeted investments focused on employment and skills development.
11. Ensure kin and alternate caregivers have access to adequate financial assistance by increasing the Ontario Child Benefit and the Ontario Works Temporary Care Assistance available to kin and alternate caregivers.
12. Invest in Ontario's human and community services sector to ensure they are well resourced (i.e., funded, staffed) to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant community-based care to kin and alternate caregivers, as well as the children and youth in their care.
13. Continue to provide funding for initiatives focused on building sector capacity to facilitate identity-affirming placements with family, kin, and alternate caregivers and promoting models of care that will support improved, equitable outcomes for Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families.
14. Take a cross-ministerial approach to strengthening the human and community services sector. Make targeted investments to ensure organizations and service providers are well funded and staffed to deliver high quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant community-based care to children, youth, and families and effectively partner with child welfare agencies to prioritize early intervention and prevention.
15. Convene a roundtable with child welfare agencies and child and family service system partners, people with lived experience, and key partners in government (i.e., Ministry of Health, Mental Health and Addictions, Housing, Education, Women's Social and Economic Opportunity, and Community, Children, and Social Services) regarding early intervention and prevention-focused supports and services.