

Executive Summary



2SLGBTQ+ ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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Summary

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere thanks to the child welfare staff across Ontario who shared their time and insights, ensuring an accurate understanding of current 2SLGBTQ+ initiatives across the sector. We are deeply grateful to the **OACAS 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth Council** for grounding this work in lived experience and the **OACAS 2SLGBTQ+ Committee** for their leadership and feedback throughout the development of this report.

Background and Purpose

The 2025 2SLGBTQ+ Organizational Self-Assessment Survey provides a province-wide overview of the current state of inclusion, affirmation and equity related to 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, families and staff within Ontario's child welfare sector. Building on the *Ontario Child Welfare LGBT2SQ+ Organizational Self-Assessment Report (2021)*, this assessment examines progress over the past five years while identifying persistent gaps, emerging priorities and opportunities for system-wide improvement.

The assessment examined organizational policies, practices, culture, leadership and service delivery related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression (SOGIE). Areas of focus included governance and accountability, organizational climate, workforce development, and direct service practice with children, youth and families.

The survey was distributed to all staff across children's aid societies and Indigenous child and family well-being agencies. Nearly 800 responses were received across all organizational levels including frontline staff, supervisors, managers, executives and equity (EDI) leads. This breadth of participation offers an unprecedented view of staff awareness, experiences and perceptions of 2SLGBTQ+ affirming practice across the sector.

Survey responses were collected from child welfare staff; however, the questions were developed in collaboration with 2SLGBTQ+ youth who are part of the OACAS 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth Council. To ground these perceptions in reality, this summary also incorporates key insights from informal interviews with youth currently or formerly in care, providing a "lived experience" lens to the quantitative data. In addition, the assessment did not examine clinical decision-making, legal determinations, or case-specific practices beyond staff-reported awareness and experience.

These findings are intended to inform system-level planning, policy development and organizational development, rather than serve as an audit, inspection, or compliance review of individual agencies or practitioners.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings indicate meaningful progress since 2018. Many agencies report increased participation in SOGIE-related training, stronger leadership engagement, greater visibility of affirming practices and the integration of inclusive policies and procedures. Nevertheless, the data reveals continued variability in practice, uneven implementation across service areas, and significant gaps in staff awareness in relation to governance, resource, placement practices, legal services and community partnerships.

The headings below reflect a summary of findings based on the three major areas that the survey assessed:

Service Delivery and Practice

While staff report growing understanding of the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families, gaps remain in how affirming practices are applied across different service areas. Continued training, supervision and collaboration with community partners were identified as critically important to translating policy and awareness into consistent day-to-day practice.

The findings suggest that while the sector has made important progress in awareness, training, and cultural visibility, further work is required to move toward consistent and accountable practice. Sustained leadership, clear communication and system-wide alignment will be essential to ensuring that all 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, families and staff experience safe, affirming and equitable child welfare services across Ontario.

Lived experience data suggests that youth are frequently forced to become their own researchers and



advocates for gender-affirming care due to a lack of proactive knowledge among direct service workers.

LIVED EXPERIENCE:

"Whenever I talked to my caseworker about transitioning, I had to be the expert. I was rarely talking to someone who actually knew how to help me. It would be, 'let's sit down together and look at what you can access'. I never really got someone who was actually experienced in doing this."

– Anonymous youth

Finally, collaboration with 2SLGBTQ+ community partners varies across the sector. Some organizations reported strong relationships and integrated approaches, while others identified limited engagement or uncertainty about available supports. This variation highlights opportunities to strengthen partnerships and alignment in support of consistent, affirming practice across Ontario's child welfare system.

Environment and Organizational Climate

Staff awareness of 2SLGBTQ+ issues has increased alongside expanded use of inclusive language, symbols and communication. Respondents identified ongoing gaps in representation, internal communication and the consistency of affirming environments for both service recipients and staff. Standardized tools, shared guidance, and clearer evaluation frameworks were identified as key drivers towards a more inclusive organizational culture.

While affirming environments are increasingly visible, the findings suggest that visibility does not always equal consistency in operational practice. Progress in training and organizational messaging has not yet translated uniformly into day-to-day service delivery across intake, assessment, placement, and legal contexts. Respondents described a growing understanding of the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families, alongside continued challenges in applying affirming approaches consistently across all points of service.

Governance and Leadership

Agencies demonstrate some leadership commitment to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, however, more consistent integration of SOGIE considerations into governance structures, data practices, accountability measures, and performance planning is needed to ensure sustainability and consistency across the sector.

Leadership commitment to affirming practice is evident across many organizations, especially through public statements, senior leader participation in training, and expressed support for inclusion. However, the findings also highlight ongoing variability in how this commitment is translated into practice. Implementation remains uneven across organizations and service areas, with differences in the consistency, visibility, and application of policies, procedures, and supports.

Staff awareness was notably lower in areas related to governance and accountability, including board-level oversight, data collection and use, placement practices, and legal and court-related processes. High proportions of "I don't know" responses across these domains suggest gaps in internal communication and shared understanding, rather than an absence of activity. These patterns point to opportunities to strengthen transparency, clarify roles and responsibilities, and better embed SOGIE considerations into organizational systems and decision-making processes.

Equity and Intersectional Insights

Across all areas of the survey, respondents highlighted the importance of understanding 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion through an intersectional lens. Staff noted that experiences of sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped by race, Indigeneity, geography, disability, faith and socio-economic context, and that affirming practice must account for these intersecting realities. Although awareness of intersectionality as a core principle has grown since earlier assessments, its application remains inconsistent. This is important to note given the current realities for Ontario families who are living through an affordability crisis and the increased system pressures for children and youth with complex special needs.



An intersectional analysis of the findings ought to be grounded in well-documented disproportionalities within Ontario's child welfare system. Indigenous children and youth continue to experience profound and distinct forms of overrepresentation rooted in colonial policies, systemic racism and the ongoing impacts of historical and current harms. While these realities require their own specific legal, policy, and accountability frameworks, they underscore the broader imperative to understand that the backdrop of heterosexism and cissexism with Indigenous communities is a product of colonization.

OACAS' One Vision One Voice (OVOV) program is a community-informed initiative that provides a critical foundation for understanding the overrepresentation and disparate outcomes experienced by Black children, youth and families in Ontario's child welfare system. OVOV works to address anti-Black racism and support improved outcomes for this population. Recognizing that disparities are often shaped by intersecting identities, OVOV applies an intersectional lens across its work. This includes integrating SOGIE-affirming principles, acknowledging the intersecting realities of Black 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth, and supporting agencies to develop inclusive policies and practices that affirm identity and address the compounding impacts of racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

It is important to consider that even when a youth has identified as 2SLGBTQ+, there are other aspects to their identity that need to be met as well. Supporting 2SLGBTQ+ youth requires taking a holistic approach that acknowledges their SOGIE identities without overshadowing other aspects of the young person's life.

LIVED EXPERIENCE:

"Personally, I think affirming is not bringing it up, making me a centre of attention because of it, and just letting me be... I appreciated the way my worker went about it, asking because she cared and needed to include it on my file, but not making a big fuss over it."

– Anonymous youth

Respondents also identified gaps in access to culturally relevant and faith-responsive supports for 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families. They noted challenges for those in rural, northern or remote communities. These structural gaps call for tailored approaches that recognize the diversity of 2SLGBTQ+ experiences and avoid one-size-fits-all inclusion models. Embedding intersectionality into policy, training, and practice standards is essential to ensure affirming care is equitable, culturally responsive and grounded in the lived realities for Ontario children, youth and families. These findings reinforce that equity is not a parallel or supplementary consideration, but a core mechanism through which child welfare must be designed, delivered, and evaluated.

Thematic Analysis of the Findings: Progress and Gaps

The findings of this survey indicate that Ontario's child welfare sector has made tangible progress in advancing 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and affirming practice since the last organizational assessment. Compared to the earlier assessment with findings published in 2021, staff reported increased awareness of SOGIE identities alongside greater exposure to learning opportunities and training related to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion.

Analysing both the quantitative and qualitative findings, three themes emerged.

1. From Awareness to Practice: Progress without consistency

The 2025 findings show evidence that Ontario's child welfare sector has made sustained progress in building awareness and intent related to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion. Compared to earlier assessments, training participation has increased significantly, affirming language and symbols are visible within organizations and there is a broad recognition of the risks faced by 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth. These heightened risks are in relation to family rejection, placement instability and service access.

This progress reflects a sector that has largely moved beyond questioning the importance of 2SLGBTQ+



inclusion and SOGIE-affirming initiatives. Rather, the current challenge is one of integration and consistency. The goal for the sector will be to translate growing awareness and policy intent into reliable, consistent practice across roles, teams and service areas. As general awareness and a respect for SOGIE-affirming values are widely reported in the findings, confidence lowers when respondents are asked about concrete practices across the child welfare continuum throughout assessments, placement decisions, overall service planning and interactions with 2SLGBTQ+ families.

In short, the sector has set the groundwork in SOGIE-affirming child welfare, but the groundwork has not yet translated into a consistently shared practice standard across roles, teams and service areas.

2. Fragmented Knowledge and Limited Visibility

While awareness of 2SLGBTQ+ issues and affirming principles have increased across Ontario's child welfare sector, the findings reveal a persistent challenge related to fragmented knowledge and uneven visibility of SOGIE-affirming practices. Across areas related to SOGIE (leadership, legal services, placement, community partnerships, and funding), many respondents reported not knowing whether specific policies, processes, or supports were in place. This pattern does not necessarily indicate the absence of work; rather, it suggests that knowledge of this work is often concentrated within specific roles or departments and not consistently shared across organizations.

Differences in awareness by role were particularly pronounced. Executive leaders, equity leads and senior managers were more likely to report the existence of affirming policies, partners and practices while frontline staff and supervisors frequently reported uncertainty. This uneven distribution of information creates a risk that affirming practices may depend on individual subject-matter enthusiasm or knowledge held within siloed relationships rather than being embedded as shared organizational-wide standards. As a result, children, youth and families may experience inconsistency of support depending on where they enter the child welfare system or which staff person they encounter.

One youth participant shared how affirming it was to be part of a specialized 2SLGBTQ+ classroom in his community.

LIVED EXPERIENCE:

"This program definitely saved my life. It was the first time that I was able to experience where being queer wasn't 'weird.' Having a community of queer and accepting folk made me realize that I didn't need to fit into a box. I could be myself."

– Anonymous youth

Fragmented knowledge also has implications for accountability and sustainability. When organizations lack a shared understanding of their own practices, they are limited in their ability to measure impact, advocate for meaningful change and monitor outcomes. In this context, high levels of uncertainty are not neutral; they actively limit accountability and weaken system-wide learning. The findings point to the importance of intentional internal communication, clear documentation, and accountability measures to ensure that SOGIE-affirming practices are visible, understood and embedded across the organization.

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3. Commitment Without Infrastructure: The limits of individualized approaches

The third theme emerging from the findings highlights a structural tension between demonstrated commitment to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and the systems required to sustain that commitment over time. Throughout the survey, respondents described meaningful progress in training, awareness, visibility and stated values. However, the data also reveal that much of this progress remains reliant on individual effort, commitment without sustainable infrastructure, project or short-term initiatives, rather than being part of consistent organizational leadership.

Training has been a critical driver of progress, and the increased update of SOGIE-related learning represents a significant achievement. Alongside this, the findings suggest that training alone is insufficient to ensure ongoing, affirming practice. The SOGIE Initiative offers clear guidance for affirming service practices and engaging with community partners. The new SOGIE Pathways Guide provides a structure for agencies to implement affirming service pathways across the child welfare continuum. Without accountability measures, dedicated roles and stable resources, training gains may fade or be unevenly applied.

Respondents repeatedly emphasized the strain created when 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion work is carried "off the side of the desk" by dedicated staff rather than being formally resourced or integrated into core organizational functions. Reliance on individual commitment creates vulnerability: changes in staff, funding or competing priorities can stall or undo affirming practices. The findings call for durable, agency-wide structures that embed SOGIE-affirming work into how child welfare organizations operate and measure success.

While staff report a growing commitment to inclusion, lived experience narratives from youth highlight the high cost of "commitment without accountability."

LIVED EXPERIENCE:

"I tried accessing [a specialist] and I didn't even get access until 14, almost 15... Every single time I went, the staff members or worker present would keep giving very contradictory input. They didn't want me to transition. Some straight up said they didn't believe in it, or it went against their religion."

– Anonymous youth

This example of lived experience illustrates that gender-affirming care is often treated as an option rather than a fundamental child right. Despite the fact that this youth was vocal and knowledgeable about her needs from the age of 11, the existing system lacks a consistent, affirming pathway, which allowed for the biases of a direct service worker to impede her medical and social transition for years.

Further conversation about this youth's lived experience also highlighted the trauma related to "placement bouncing" based on gender presentation. She recounts her experience of moving between a boys' group home to girls' group home, due to systemic transphobia and lack of support, she felt forced to de-transition in her journey. The cycle of moving between group homes amplified her lack of permanency, which severely impacted her mental health.

Priority Directions Moving Forward

Overall, the findings and themes outlined above indicate that Ontario's child welfare system has reached an important inflection point in its approach to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion. While the sector has established a strong foundation of awareness, intent and commitment to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, the next phase of work must focus on consistency, accountability and sustainability. The central challenge is not whether 2SLGBTQ+ affirming practice matters, but whether the system is structured to deliver it consistently, equitably and sustainably. Building on the findings and thematic analysis presented in this summary report, the following priority directions and recommendations are drawn directly from the full **2025 2SLGBTQ+ Organizational Self-Assessment Report**.



Service Delivery & Practice

1. Strengthen Consistency and Depth of Mandatory Training
2. Increase Awareness and Communication of Available Supports
3. Embed 2SLGBTQ+ Affirmation into Child Protection Service Areas
4. Expand and Stabilize 2SLGBTQ+ Specific Services

Data, Governance, and Accountability

5. Advance Data Practices
6. Increase Board-Level Engagement and Accountability

Resource, Placement, and Legal Services

7. Enhance 2SLGBTQ+ Affirming Practice for Resource Areas
8. Improve Integration of 2SLGBTQ+ Affirming Practices within Legal Services

Agency Culture and Organizational Infrastructure

9. Move Beyond Visibility Toward Meaningful Cultural Integration
10. Strengthen Internal Communication and Knowledge Mobilization
11. Formalize and Enforce Gender-Affirming Language Practices
12. Improve Access to Inclusive Physical Spaces for Both Service Recipients and Staff
13. Deepen Community Partnerships
14. Increase Transparency of Resource Allocation and Address Financial Constraints on Affirming Care

System Sustainability

15. Reduce Reliance on Individual Champions Through System-Level Infrastructure and Accountability

Governance, Policies, and Human Resources

16. Fully Embed SOGIE Considerations in Policies, Forms, and Documentation
17. Align Human Resources with 2SLGBTQ+ Inclusion Goals
18. Foster Safe Workplace Culture for 2SLGBTQ+ Staff
19. Advance Data Practices
20. Increase Board Level Engagement and Accountability

Conclusion

The findings from the 2025 2SLGBTQ+ Organizational Self-Assessment Survey highlight both meaningful progress and important opportunities for growth across Ontario's child welfare sector. Over the past several years, agencies have deepened their awareness, expanded training opportunities, and increased the visibility of affirming language and practices. These efforts reflect a sector that increasingly values the importance of creating environments where 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, families and staff can feel safe, supported and included.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that awareness alone is not enough to ensure consistent, affirming experiences across the child welfare system. Variability in knowledge, uneven implementation of policies and reliance on individual champions continue to shape how affirming practices are for 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families. The results of this survey demonstrate that the quality of support available to 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families may still depend on where they enter the system, the resources available in their community, or the specific staff member they encounter.

The youth perspectives included throughout the summary reinforce the importance of moving beyond intention toward consistent, affirming practice. These young people described both the powerful impact of affirming relationships and the significant barriers that arise when systems lack clear pathways, resources or shared knowledge.

The child welfare sector is well positioned to build on the progress identified in this organizational assessment. By strengthening governance and accountability structures, improving service coordination and deepening partnerships with 2SLGBTQ+ communities and organizations, agencies can move from instances of strong practice toward an affirming, consistent system of support.

