



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETIES

2025 *Pre-Budget Submission*

JANUARY 24, 2025

Priority Areas for Action

- **Strengthen social infrastructure in communities across the province** so community-based organizations and service providers have capacity to meet the needs of children, youth, and families and effectively work in partnership to deliver integrated, wraparound supports, services, and treatment.
- **Ensure children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health and addictions, etc.) have access to highly specialized, intensive services, supports, and treatment and/or out-of-home care and live-in treatment** tailored to their unique needs.
- **Bring greater financial stability and sustainability to the Ontario child welfare sector by modernizing the funding formula** so that it aligns with service principles and best practices (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to kin, culture, and community) integral to delivering improved, equitable outcomes and responds to regional realities.
- **Prioritize family- and community-based placements** by ensuring kin and alternate caregivers receive adequate financial assistance, have timely access to local supports, services, and treatment, and receive care in a way that is culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming.
- **Support youth receiving supports and services from a child welfare agency as they transition to independence** by continuing to fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* and improving access to integrated youth services in communities across the province.



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 and training opportunities, as well as communication and advocacy supports to help bring positive change to the Ontario child welfare system and deliver improved, equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Introduction

The OACAS 2025 Pre-Budget Submission is informed by feedback from our members and youth with lived experience in the Ontario child welfare system. 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 do not just provide protection services; they also work closely with organizations and service providers in their communities, as well as kin and alternate caregivers, to facilitate crisis intervention, early intervention, prevention-focused, and out-of-home care.

The work of child welfare agencies requires communities with robust resources and integrated systems of care that are ready to wrap around children, youth, and families so they have access to the right care, at the right time, close to home. Unfortunately, timely and equitable access to community-based care is lacking in communities across the province.

Gaps and barriers to culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming supports and services at the community level are acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families, including those presenting with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health and addictions, etc.) and living in poverty. There are also regional barriers to care; children, youth, and families living in Northern, rural, and remote parts of Ontario face unique challenges in accessing services, supports, and treatment close to home.

Child welfare agencies are deeply concerned by the inadequate access to community-based care in Ontario given the scope of their work. They are seeing the impact on the children, youth, and families they support; challenges are deepening, and more and more families are escalating to the point of crisis. Further, they are facing significant economic hardships and human resource challenges as they strive to fill systemic gaps and remove barriers to care in the broader social services sector.

OACAS and our members remain committed to working in partnership with the Ontario government to promote the health, well-being, and safety of children, youth, and families across the province and bring positive change to systems serving children, youth, and families, including child welfare. Together, we can work towards actionable solutions so that children, youth, and families receive the right care, at the right time, close to home.

Priority Areas for Action & Recommendations

Strengthen social infrastructure in communities across the province so community-based organizations and service providers have capacity to meet the needs of children, youth, and families and effectively work in partnership to deliver integrated, wraparound supports, services, and treatment.

Children, youth, and families across Ontario are facing significant challenges amidst a period of heightened economic vulnerability. High inflation rates over the past few years have increased the cost of basic needs, such as housing, food, and healthcare. Though the inflation rate has come down, the cost of living has not, and families are having a tough time making ends meet.

Community-based organizations and service providers play a vital role in supporting children, youth, and families facing challenges. They make up the backbone of social infrastructure in Ontario by delivering programs focused on health and well-being and addressing poverty and its interconnected challenges like food insecurity, affordable housing, employment, education, and so on.

Sadly, community-based organizations and service providers are struggling to keep up with the increased demand for support. Up against worsening economic hardships linked to outdated approaches to funding and a shortage of human

resources, they are cutting back programs and services to cope; waitlists for existing programs are growing and the number of closures is climbing.¹

Child welfare agencies are deeply concerned by the increasingly frail state of social infrastructure in Ontario given the scope of their work. Most families receiving services from their local child welfare agency are not cases of extreme abuse or neglect. They are families facing challenges like poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, and intimate partner and gender-based violence or systemic racism.

Agencies work tirelessly to ensure children, youth, and families remain connected while providing them with short- or long-term support. In 97% of investigations, children and youth remain at home with their families while receiving services.² Agencies achieve this by working in close partnership with local partners and service providers, as well as kin and alternate caregivers, to facilitate crisis intervention and ongoing early intervention and prevention-focused care. The capacity of agencies to ensure children, youth, and families thrive and stay together is directly impacted by the availability of resources in their communities.

Unfortunately, for many agencies, they face a scant, siloed, and splintered landscape of supports and services in their communities. For some agencies, the services, supports, and/or treatment they need are simply not available. For others, there are lengthy waitlists, insufficient resources (i.e., funding, staff), or exclusionary eligibility criteria that frustrate access to the right care, at the right time, close to home.

Inadequate access to care has a profound impact on the children, youth, and families that agencies support. When families do not have timely access to supports, services, and treatment needs deepen and demands on community-based organizations, including child welfare agencies, intensify as they strive to keep up with families facing increasingly complicated challenges.

Gaps and barriers to culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming supports, services, and treatment at the community level are acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families, including those presenting

¹ Ontario Nonprofit Network. *2024 State of the Sector Survey Report*. 2024. <https://theonnc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024-ONN-Survey-Policy-Report-1.pdf>.

² 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.

with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health and addictions, etc.) and living in poverty.

There are also regional barriers to care for children, youth, and families living in Northern, rural, and remote parts of the province due to longstanding disparities in social infrastructure. Many families must travel long distances to receive care exclusively offered in other parts of the province; this comes with unique economic hardships and challenges. For example, loss of income due to absences from work so they can travel and transportation costs.

Inadequate access to inclusive community-based supports, services, and treatment exacerbates existing inequities and disparities in outcomes linked to systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming approaches to service delivery are central to health and overall well-being; such approaches to service delivery ensure children, youth, and families feel truly supported as they navigate challenges.

The Ontario government can help by strengthening social infrastructure through the 2025 Budget. We recommend that the province:

- **Work across ministries to make targeted investments in community-based organizations and service providers across the province in the social services sector to build their capacity to meet the needs of children, youth, and families and effectively work in partnership to deliver integrated, wraparound supports, services, and treatment.**

We urge Ontario to make targeted investments in community-based organizations and service providers delivering early intervention and prevention-focused programs related to health and well-being, mental health and addictions, child and family services, child development and rehabilitation, food insecurity, affordable housing, employment, poverty reduction, crisis intervention and intimate partner and gender-based violence.

A portion of targeted investments should be earmarked for organizations and service providers delivering supports, services, and treatment tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families.



- **Work across ministries to develop a strategy to modernize and maintain social infrastructure in Northern, rural, and remote parts of the province so children, youth, and families have access to the right services, at the right time, close to home.**

The strategy should include strategic investments to address disparities in resources and barriers to care. A portion of investments should be earmarked to ensure Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLTBQ+ children, youth, and families living in Northern, rural and remote parts of the province have timely access to culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming supports, services, and treatment

Ensure children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health and addictions, etc.) have access to highly specialized, intensive services, supports, and treatment and/or out-of-home care and live-in treatment tailored to their unique needs.

Over the past ten years, the number of protection cases, investigations transferred to ongoing service, and children in care has decreased. These broad trends reflect the successful efforts of agencies to prioritize early intervention and prevention-focused care outlined in the previous section. Though service volumes are declining as more and more children remain at home with their families while receiving services, workloads have not decreased, nor have they become easier to manage as agencies contend with increasingly complicated cases.

Child welfare agencies are supporting more and more families with children presenting with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health and addictions, etc.) and filling systemic gaps. Most often, they are working with families who have reached a breaking point and feel they have nowhere else to turn after being unable to access highly specialized, intensive supports, services, and treatment or out-of-home care or live-in treatment in their community. For other families, they have reached an acute point of crisis where there is not a protection concern, but a safety concern and their child can no longer remain at home.

Access to highly, specialized, intensive supports, services, treatment and out-of-home care and live-in treatment comes with its own unique challenges for Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families, as well as



those living in poverty due to systems of power, privilege, and oppression. There are limited options for culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming care. Regional disparities in resources also frustrate timely access to care for children, youth, and families living in Northern, rural, and remote parts of the province.

Access to Highly Specialized, Intensive Supports, Services, and Treatment focused on Early Intervention and Prevention

Families seeking support from their local child welfare agency hope that the agency will not have to confront the same barriers to highly specialized, intensive supports, services, and treatment focused on early intervention and prevention. However, child welfare agencies encounter the very same challenges that families do. Agencies also face long waitlists, inadequate resources (i.e., funding, staff without adequate education/training), exclusionary eligibility criteria, and regional disparities in resources.

In 2023, the Ontario government invested \$97 million over three years to support the Extensive Needs Service pilot program (ENS program) at three major hospitals in Toronto, Hamilton, and Oshawa to help improve access to highly specialized, intensive care early on. This type of programming goes a long way to ensure children, youth, and families receive the right care, at the right time, close to home. Ultimately, such programming helps families from reaching a breaking point or acute point of crisis by ensuring challenges do not deepen and intensify. Early intervention and prevention-focused care can be truly transformative for a young person with complex needs and change their path, as well as their caregivers.'

We commend the Ontario government for making this initial investment in 2023 and recently supporting the expansion of the ENS program in the Durham Region. We encourage the province to continue to build on these efforts to improve access to highly specialized, intensive supports and services early on at the community level through the 2025 Budget.

Access to Highly Specialized, Intensive Out-of-Home Care & Live-in Treatment

OACAS and our members also recommend that the government take steps to improve access to care and treatment outside of the home. There is a critical role for the province to play in improving access to non-profit out-of-home care and live-in treatment. There are simply not enough providers and, when there is capacity, organizations often deny referrals and/or placement requests from

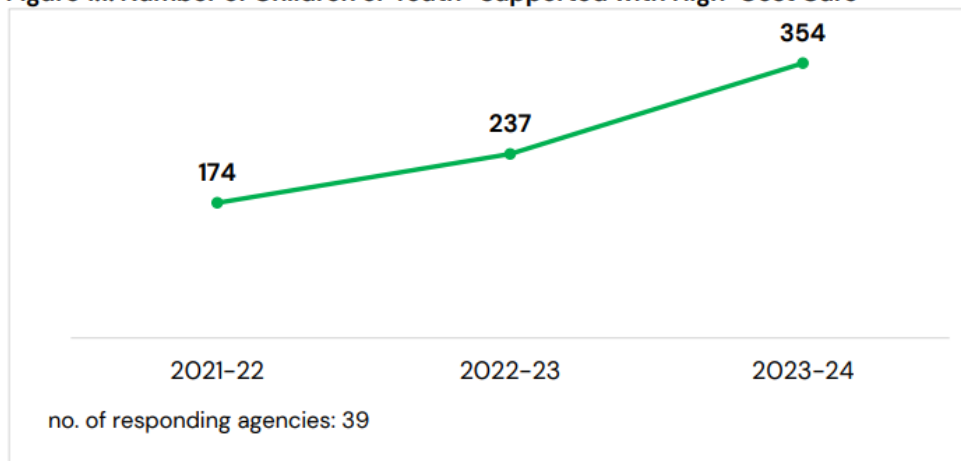


agencies. They often cite exclusionary admission criteria (i.e., high risk behavior, recent self-harm, substance use, severe/complex personality disorder, etc.) or inadequate resources (i.e., funding, staff without adequate education/training).

When child welfare agencies can secure an out-of-home placement or access to a live-in treatment program, they are often high-cost due to expensive per diems and special rate agreements. Preliminary data from 39 of 47 designated member agencies has revealed the number of children and youth requiring high-cost care in out-of-home settings has doubled, increasing from 174 in 2021-22 to 354 in 2023-24. Boarding costs have risen accordingly, up from \$48.3 million in 2021-22 to \$107.4 million in 2023-24. Many children requiring high-cost care present with complex needs.

The Landscape of High-Cost Care

Figure 1.1: Number of Children or Youth* Supported with High-Cost Care



*Refers to the number of **unique** children/youth supported with per diem and/or SRA costs (i.e., a child or youth supported with both per diem and SRA costs is counted as one)

Organizations and service providers delivering for-profit out-of-home care and live-in treatment seem to be aware of the limited options agencies face. This reality is leveraged against agencies, and it appears to be common practice among for-profit organizations and service providers to only accept referrals from agencies willing to pay the highest price.

In dire circumstances where agencies are not able to secure appropriate out-of-home care or live-in treatment, they are forced to explore alternative settings like hotels, motels, offices, and trailers. These are temporary housing options of last resort that quickly become expensive. When a child welfare agency is forced to use these settings, they put in place a harm reduction approach to promote the health

and safety of the young person; this includes the highest level of supervision and support possible. Agencies sometimes hire third party vendors and/or reallocate their own staff to provide round-the-clock care, which comes with significant expenditures.

These temporary housing options have a profound impact on children, youth, and families. Though they receive the highest level of supervision and support, they are not receiving supports, services, and treatment that will truly meet their needs. Hotels, motels, offices, and trailers are not designed to function as care settings and direct service staff are not always able to provide highly specialized, intensive care. More and more direct service staff are leaving the workforce or taking sick leave, citing physical and psychological safety risks.

The capacity of child welfare agencies to access highly specialized, intensive supports, services, and treatment, as well as out-of-home care and live-in treatment close to home, is directly tied to the options available to them. Agencies are committed to ensuring young people receive care that centres their safety, health, and well-being. Many agencies are filling systemic gaps and removing barriers to care and, in the process, facing significant economic hardships and human resource challenges that threaten their financial stability and sustainability.

Through the Ontario 2025 Budget, we recommend that the province:

- **Continue to invest in non-profit community-based organizations and service providers delivering highly specialized, intensive supports, services, and treatment so children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs have access to care tailored to their unique needs, early on and closer to home.**

When investing in non-profit community-based organizations and service providers, we encourage the Ontario government to remain mindful of the distinct needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs. It is essential to support predictable, sustainable programming that is culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming.

- **Examine and respond to administrative barriers that frustrate access to Complex Special Needs (CSN) funding.**

Accessing CSN funding is challenging and cumbersome for families with complex needs; administrative barriers can delay access to critical financial assistance and, in turn, highly specialized, intensive supports, services, and treatment. Agencies encounter the same challenges when attempting to access CSN funding; in dire circumstances, placements are lost due to administrative delays.

- **Invest in non-profit community-based organizations and service providers delivering out-of-home care and live-in treatment so that they have adequate resources (i.e., funding, staff with adequate education/training) to support children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs, closer to home.**

Ontario must ensure they invest in non-profit community-based organizations and service providers delivering care that is inclusive. Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families require access to care that is culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming.

- **Continue to support child welfare agencies in managing economic hardships linked to high-cost out-of-home care and live-in treatment, including care for children and youth presenting with complex needs.**

Bring greater financial stability and sustainability to the Ontario child welfare sector by modernizing the funding formula so that it aligns with service principles and best practices (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to kin, culture, and community) integral to delivering improved equitable outcomes and responds to regional realities.

Though strengthening social infrastructure and addressing systemic gaps and barriers to care in the broader social services sector would relieve financial pressures, there are additional steps the Ontario government can take to address the economic hardships many agencies are facing. To start, we recommend that the Ontario government develop a modern child welfare funding formula.

The current child welfare funding formula does not align with service principles and best practices, like intervening early and focusing on prevention or promoting

improved, equitable outcomes through continued connections to kin, culture, and community through family- and community-based placements (i.e., kin service, kin care, customary care, family-based foster care).

For example, the current funding formula allocates more funding if an agency has more children or youth in care. Though the funding formula *should* account for the number of children and youth in care, it must also factor in costs associated with early intervention and prevention-focused care. This work is labour intensive and time consuming. It involves working closely with families to identify kin and alternate caregivers and working in partnership with kin and alternate caregivers to ensure they are adequately supported (i.e., coordinating financial assistance, facilitating access to local supports, services, and treatment).

Kin and alternate caregivers play a vital role in supporting children, youth, and families and ensuring improved, equitable outcomes. Broad kin networks are directly linked to better outcomes and positively contribute to the well-being of children, youth, and families interacting with the Ontario child welfare system.

Additionally, the current child welfare funding formula is not responsive to different regional realities and distributes funding inequitably. Agencies in Northern, rural, and remote parts of the province, many of whom are Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies, have different core operating costs given the typically larger geographic areas they serve. These child welfare agencies are also less likely to have access to robust social infrastructure; meaning they face increased demand for their supports and services and must stretch their resources even further to fill systemic gaps driven by significant regional disparities in resources.

Developing a modern funding formula that aligns with service principles and best practices (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to kin, culture, and community) and factors in regional realities would promote greater stability and sustainability across agencies, as well as drive improved, equitable outcomes. However, it is also essential to ensure that an updated funding formula is flexible enough to keep up with legislative and regulatory changes and inflationary pressures.

The current child welfare funding formula is not responsive to the changing care landscape in Ontario. It has not kept pace with legislative and regulatory amendments and how they have significantly impacted service delivery, expenditures, and operational costs. For example, in 2018, Ontario increased the age

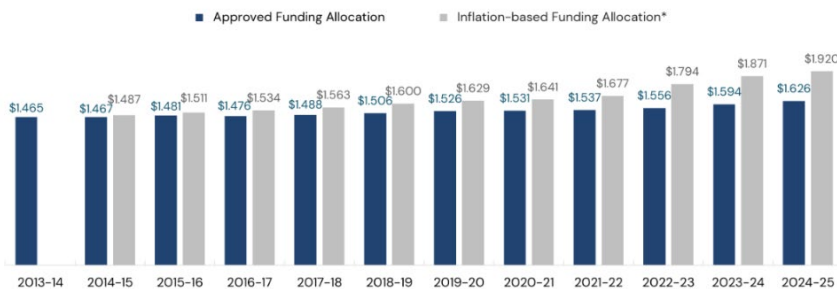
of protection to include all children under the age of 18 years and introduced Voluntary Youth Services Agreements (VYSAs). Child welfare agencies are required to provide the full range of services to 16- and 17-year-olds that are available to younger children, including coordinating alternative living arrangements for those who are unable to remain at home. Supporting more young people, and for longer, has come with costs.

It is important to keep in mind that some legislative and regulatory amendments have also come with human resource costs. For example, as part of their efforts to implement the Ontario Child Welfare Redesign Strategy, the Ontario government introduced the *Quality Standards Framework*. The legislative and regulatory changes have transformed day-to-day service delivery by introducing more administrative tasks and responsibilities. More direct service staff are needed to lead implementation and ensure workloads remain manageable so direct service staff can form meaningful, impactful relationships with children, youth, and families.


OACAS and our members support the Ontario government’s efforts to improve the lived experiences of children, youth, and families interacting with the Ontario child welfare system through legislative and regulatory reform. However, it is essential to ensure that the approach to funding aligns with these efforts and responds to their impact on service delivery.

Funding Allocation: All Child Welfare Agencies

Funding Allocation for ALL Ontario Child Welfare Agencies (\$ Billion):
MCCSS-approved vs. Inflation-based



*Using FY 2013-14 as the base year (when the new funding model was introduced), funding allocation for the next FY 2014-15 was calculated by multiplying the approved funding allocation in FY 2013-14 with Ontario's inflation rate at the end of March 2014. For the succeeding FYs, the increase in inflation-based funding allocation was calculated using the previous FY's inflation-based funding allocation multiplied by the inflation rate at the end of March of the previous FY.

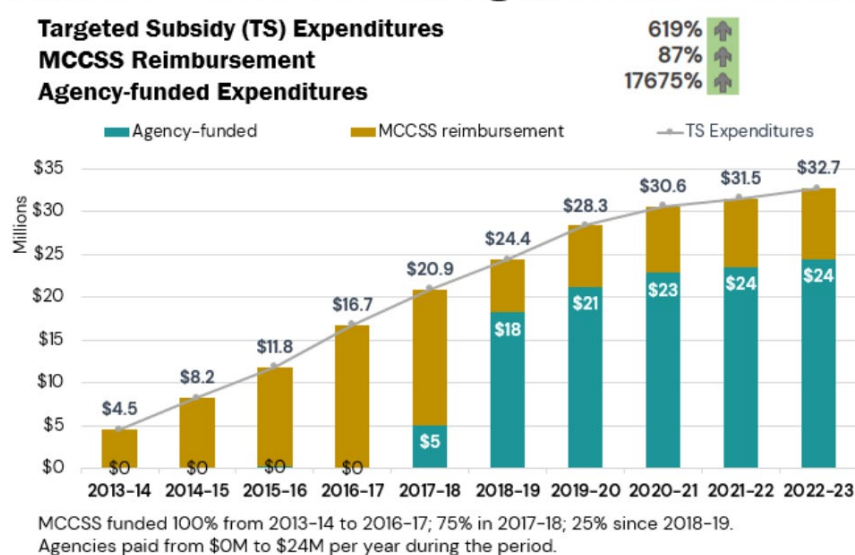

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 Approved funding allocations are referenced from Ministry Quarterly Reports/Child Welfare Transfer Payment Supplementary (TPON) Reports; inflation rates are referenced from Statistics Canada's Consumer Price Index by geography, all-items, monthly percentage change, not seasonally adjusted, Canada, provinces, Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Inuit.

Finally, the current funding formula has not kept pace with inflationary pressures. Inflation may have come down, but prices have not; agencies are grappling with

increased operational costs and economic pressures that undermine their financial stability and sustainability.

The Ontario government can also help promote financial stability by ensuring child welfare agencies receive predictable, sustainable funding. It is difficult for child welfare agencies to successfully engage in long-term fiscal planning when funding is unpredictable or changes without sufficient notice; for example, the province has decreased its share of funding for targeted subsidies. Ten years ago, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (the Ministry or MCCSS) funded 100% of targeted subsidies; agencies now cover 75%. To successfully manage their budgets and plan, predictability is essential.

TARGETED SUBSIDIES: Funding and Reimbursements



To bring greater financial stability and sustainability to child welfare agencies, we recommend that the Ontario government:

- Develop a modern child welfare funding formula that aligns with service principles and best practices (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to kin, culture, and community) integral to improved, equitable outcomes and responds to regional realities.
- Ensure child welfare agencies have access to predictable, sustainable funding so they can successfully engage in long-term fiscal planning.

Prioritize family- and community-based placements by ensuring kin and alternate caregivers receive adequate financial assistance, have timely access to local supports, services, and treatment, and receive services in a way that is culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming.

Kin are individuals who have a relationship with a young person or family. This may include biologically related kin, members of cultural communities, or individuals with other social, emotional, or community connections, such as teachers, coaches, or neighbors.

Alternate caregivers are relatives or community members who provide living arrangements for children and youth when necessary. It is an umbrella term used by many child welfare agencies to describe the broad spectrum of individuals who sometimes partner with child welfare agencies to provide family- and community-based placement options, such as kin service, kin care, customary care, and family-based foster care.

Kin and alternate caregivers ensure children receive care that is culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming. They promote a strong sense of self and belonging by supporting a child or young person in maintaining connections to broader kin and community networks, as well as their culture. Culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming care is central to delivering improved, equitable outcomes for children and youth, particularly for Indigenous and Black children and youth who have been and continue to be overrepresented in Ontario's child welfare system.

A young person is typically placed with a kin or alternate caregiver on an urgent basis; meaning, kin and alternate caregivers suddenly find themselves in a new role they did not plan or prepare for. Kin and alternate caregivers account for 45% of family- and community-based out-of-home care placements. As they welcome a child into their home, kin and alternate caregivers require timely access to community-based supports and services to meet the young person's unique needs.

Amidst the persisting housing and cost-of-living crisis in Ontario, it is more important than ever to ensure kin and alternate caregivers have access to adequate resources related to health, mental health and addictions, housing, childcare and early childhood education, and so on. Child welfare agencies across the province are

facing a shrinking pool of kin and alternate caregivers. Many caregivers do not have the financial flexibility or physical space to welcome a young person into their home. For example, available family-based foster homes affiliated with child welfare agencies in Ontario have dropped by over 35% since 2020.

We urge the province to ensure kin and alternate caregivers have access to adequate resources so they can readily and sustainably support a child or young person.

Through the Ontario 2025 Budget, we recommend that the Ontario government:

- **Increase the Ontario Works Temporary Care Assistance and Ontario Child Benefit to align with the current cost-of-living and inflationary pressures.**
- **Modernize financial assistance available to kin and alternate caregivers (i.e., kin service, kin care, customary care, family-based foster caregivers) to ensure all caregivers have access to equitable, sustainable funding that aligns with the current cost-of-living and inflationary pressures.**
- **Make targeted investments to improve access to community-based supports, services, and treatment so that children and youth, as well as the kin and alternate caregivers who support them, receive the right care, at the right time, close to home.**

Priority areas of investment include health and well-being, mental health and addictions, child and family services, childcare and early child education, child development and rehabilitation, food insecurity, affordable housing, employment, poverty reduction, crisis intervention and intimate partner and gender-based violence.

A portion of targeted investments should be earmarked for organizations and service providers delivering supports and services tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families.

There are additional steps the Ontario government can take to prioritize family- and community-based placements. This includes continuing to support initiatives focused on building capacity in the child welfare sector to deliver supports and services in a way that is culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming.

OACAS commends the province for their continued support of the One Vision One Voice (OVOV) program. OVOV is central to addressing anti-Black racism and supporting improved, equitable outcomes for Black children, youth, and families interacting with Ontario's child welfare system. OVOV provides tools and resources, as well as training, collaboration, and education opportunities, for child welfare agencies that help agencies build on promising practices and deliver services in a way that is holistic and centers identity.

Black children, youth, families, kin, and alternate caregivers have shared they experience disparities when interacting with the Ontario child welfare system. This includes being treated differently than their white counterparts, poorer outcomes, and not receiving services in a way that is inclusive or affirming. Further, Black families have shared they are dehumanized, judged, and punished, especially when experiencing vulnerability. Addressing these disparities is vital to ensuring kin and alternate caregivers feel truly supported when working with child welfare agencies to provide kin service, kin care, or family-based foster care.

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 2025. 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 in their home and communities. It is vital children and youth receive services in a way that is inclusive and affirming, including those in family- and community-based placements.

In the Ontario 2025 Budget, we recommend that the province:

- **Provide ongoing funding for OVOV so they can continue to develop and promote tools and resources, as well as training and education opportunities, designed to advance promising practices and policies in the child welfare sector as it relates to culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming care.**
- **Provide ongoing funding for the 2SLGBTQ+ Initiative so they can continue to develop and promote tools and resources designed to improve**



outcomes for 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families interacting with the Ontario child welfare system.

Adequately support youth receiving supports and services from a child welfare agency as they transition to independence by continuing to fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* and improving access to integrated youth services in communities across the province.

OACAS is grateful for the province's efforts to help youth better prepare for and transition to independence through the *Ready, Set, Go* program (RSG or the program) launched in 2023. The decision to expand the scope of eligibility for the program (i.e., from 21 to 23 years old) and the investment of \$170 million over three years to support its implementation are commendable. RSG will help young people build on their unique strengths and skills and address disparities in outcomes.

Disparities in outcomes for children and youth receiving services from a child welfare agency compared to their peers are 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. Though OACAS and our members trust RSG will have a positive impact, we remind the province that this program alone cannot guarantee improved, equitable outcomes. There is more work ahead.

Through engagement sessions with young people with lived experience, 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 each young person has access to housing and employment, as well as culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming community-based supports, services, and treatment related to health, mental health, education, and so on, including those living in Northern, rural, and remote parts of the province. Youth signaled that supports and services must be flexible and low barrier.

Young people with lived experience emphasized that systems of care must be well integrated so the transition to independence is not as stressful or overwhelming. Youth pointed out that wraparound supports and services require organizations in the child and youth services sector to be well resourced (i.e., funded, staffed) so young people can form stable, meaningful relationships with direct service staff who will help them navigate this critical period of transition.

To ensure young people successfully navigate the transition to independence, OACAS recommends that the Ontario government make key investments through Budget 2025. We suggest that the province:

- **Fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* beyond three years and make investments that will increase the number of Youth in Transition Workers and Education Liaisons so young people have timely access to integrated, wraparound supports and services.**

Increasing the number of Youth-in-Transition Workers and Education Liaisons is essential to promoting improved, equitable outcomes. Under *Ready, Set, Go*, agencies are connecting with young people earlier to help them plan and prepare for their transition to independence; as a result, they require partners at the community level ready to come to the table and help ensure young people receive connected, consistent care as they plan for their future.

- **Continue to invest in and support community-based organizations and service providers delivering integrated youth services related to health, mental health, education, employment, housing, and recreation.**

There is a need for programs specifically designed to support young people transitioning to independence. For instance, service models that offer a holistic range of wraparound supports and services focused on health, mental health, education, employment, housing, recreation, and continued life-skills development.

Conclusion

Child welfare agencies are integral members 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. They work closely with local organizations and service providers, as well as kin and alternate caregivers, to support families facing challenges.

The work of child welfare agencies requires well-resourced communities with integrated systems of care ready to truly meet the needs of children, youth, and families, regardless of where they live or how complex their needs may be.

Unfortunately, persisting systemic gaps and barriers to care frustrate timely, equitable access to community-based care across the province.

Gaps and barriers to care are acutely felt by Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families, including those presenting with complex needs (i.e., social, emotional, developmental, mental health and addictions, etc.) and living in poverty. There are also regional barriers to care; children, youth, and families living in Northern, rural, and remote parts of Ontario face unique challenges in accessing services, supports, and treatment in their communities.

Child welfare agencies are deeply concerned about the inadequate access to community-based care. The challenges children, youth, and families are facing are deepening and cases are growing more and more complicated. Further, they are facing significant economic hardships and human resource challenges as they strive to tackle systemic gaps and barriers to care.

OACAS and our members remain committed to working in partnership with the Ontario government alongside provincial partners, community-based organizations, and service providers to bring positive change to systems of care supporting children, youth, and families. Together, we can identify actionable solutions to ensure children, youth, and families have access to the right care, at the right time, close to home.

Recommendations

- Work across ministries to make targeted investments in community-based organizations and service providers across the province in the social services sector to build their capacity to meet the needs of children, youth, and families and effectively work in partnership to deliver integrated, wraparound supports, services, and treatment.
- Work across ministries to develop a strategy to modernize and maintain social infrastructure in Northern, rural, and remote parts of the province so children, youth, and families have access to the right services, at the right time, close to home.
- Continue to invest in non-profit community-based organizations and service providers delivering highly specialized, intensive supports, services, and treatment so children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs have access to care tailored to their unique needs, early on and closer to home.
- Examine and respond to administrative barriers that frustrate access to Complex Special Needs (CSN) funding.
- Invest in non-profit community-based organizations and service providers delivering out-of-home care and live-in treatment so that they have adequate resources (i.e., funding, staff with adequate education/training) to support children, youth, and families presenting with complex needs, closer to home.
- Continue to support child welfare agencies in managing economic hardships associated with high-cost out-of-home care and live-in treatment, including care for children and youth presenting with complex needs.
- Develop a modern child welfare funding formula that aligns with service principles and best practices (i.e., early intervention, prevention, continued connections to kin, culture, and community) integral to improved, equitable outcomes and responds to regional realities.
- Ensure child welfare agencies have access to predictable, sustainable funding so they can successfully engage in long-term fiscal planning.



- Increase the Ontario Works Temporary Care Assistance and Ontario Child Benefit to align with the current cost-of-living and inflationary pressures.
- Modernize financial assistance available to kin and alternate caregivers (i.e., kin service, kin care, customary care, family-based foster caregivers) to ensure all caregivers have access to equitable, sustainable funding that aligns with the current cost-of-living and inflationary pressures.
- Make targeted investments to improve access to community-based supports, services, and treatment so that children and youth, as well as the kin and alternate caregivers who support them, receive the right care, at the right time, close to home.
- Provide ongoing funding for OVOV so they can continue to develop and promote tools and resources, as well as training and education opportunities, designed to advance promising practices and policies in the child welfare sector as it relates to culturally relevant, responsive, and identity-affirming care.
- Provide ongoing funding for the 2SLGBTQ+ Initiative so they can continue to develop and promote tools and resources designed to improve outcomes for 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth, and families interacting with the Ontario child welfare system.
- Fully fund *Ready, Set, Go* beyond three years and make investments that will increase the number of Youth in Transition Workers and Education Liaisons so young people have timely access to integrated, wraparound supports and services.
- Continue to invest in and support community-based organizations and service providers delivering integrated youth services related to health, mental health, education, employment, housing, and recreation.

