Making Anti-Oppressive Practice Visible in Child Welfare

Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton

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The Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council
Title: Making Anti-Oppressive Practice Visible in Child Welfare.

Background:

Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton (CCAS) has been providing child welfare services to the city of Hamilton since 1954. Guided by Catholic values and teachings, a fundamental belief in strengthening families and mandated by the laws of Ontario, the mission of the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton is to protect and advocate for the well-being of children, youth and families within the City of Hamilton.

As part of building an inclusive organization, a number of initiatives have occurred over a period of time. In July 2004, CCAS held a meeting with Hamilton’s African-Caribbean community. The purpose of this was to engage in a discussion regarding the following key areas: 1) children who were being removed from parents from diverse cultures and faiths; 2) parents wanting to know the work of CCAS of Hamilton; 3) issues of cultural knowledge and awareness; 4) need for foster parents from diverse racial and cultural groups.

In 2005 the CCAS engaged with the local Roma community. A report entitled *The Voices of Concern* was completed which provided some insight into the conditions and circumstances facing Roma people through their immigration to Canada. In 2005, a consultant, Susan Hall facilitated a workshop with almost 40 participants representing a number of agencies, community members including CCAS staff. The information from the workshop resulted in a report called “*Delivering Child Protection Services With An Organizational Culture That Is Anti-Oppressive*”. CCAS’ engagements with the
community were not only informative, but laid some of the background work which has resulted into some of the organizational changes in relation to diversity work.

In 2008, the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton (CCAS) partnered with the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC). The SPRC’s consultation incorporated some of the previous work of the CCAS with the Roma, African Caribbean and community partners regarding anti-racism and organizational. The SPRC consultation report identified that implementation of the recommendations would require extensive CCAS planning. The SPRC recommended that: 1). CCAS build collaborative relationships with community agencies serving diverse racial, cultural groups; 2). CCAS continue to provide anti-racist/anti-oppression education and training at all levels of the organization; 3). CCAS of Hamilton make efforts to increase the diversity of staff and volunteers across the agency; 4). CCAS develop systems and processes for monitoring progress and evaluating success of specific antiracist organizational change initiatives. These recommendations have acted as a guide and pillar for organizational change

**CCAS’ journey to create capacity to engage in anti-oppressive practice:**

As a way to move the anti-oppressive practice initiative forward, CCAS formed a working committee. The anti-oppressive practice committee is dedicated to effectively help the agency realize its goals of making its services accessible and equitable.

CCAS also created a job position of the anti-oppressive practice supervisor to help facilitate the organizational change initiative. The role of the anti-oppressive practice initiative supervisor includes: 1). building and strengthening community agency partnerships; 2). laising with various agency departments regarding anti-oppressive
work; 3). working with the anti-oppressive committee to help the agency achieve its goals as related to inclusive and equitable access of services. The creation of this position has enabled CCAS to have a staff member whose focus and responsibilities is to facilitate the ongoing work of building an inclusive child welfare agency.

As the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton continues its commitment to fair and equitable services to all our families and children, our desired outcomes entail the following:

1. to envision a Society that is welcoming, safe, accessible, compassionate and inclusive—one that fosters mutually respectful relationships both internally and with the communities that we are a part of.

2. to establish a safe and respectful environment to ensure healthy and positive discussions regarding anti oppressive practice

3. to build strong partnerships with Aboriginal people and services.

4. to work collaboratively with the diverse communities and agencies serving diverse communities.

5. to recognize that each family we serve is unique and parents play a vital role in raising their children. This recognition makes it imperative that parents and extended family are included in all aspects of service delivery unless there is significant evidence demonstrating a parent’s participation will be detrimental and/or harmful to the process.

6. to actively promote the best interest of children and youth, we need to ensure that their voice resonates in all our service delivery decisions.

7. to engage in child welfare work that is anti-oppressive and anti racist and demonstrate consistent adherence to strength based approaches in our day to day practice.

Challenges:
In pursuit of better outcomes for families, the Society also recognizes that a large number of families that are receiving its intervention are faced with day to day challenges of poverty. The lack of resources and basic necessities are real challenges for many of the families served by the Society. In 2006, Statistics Canada estimated that approximately 18% of Hamilton’s population lived below the low-income cut off or poverty line, compared to 14.7% of the provincial population overall. The groups with the highest rates of poverty in 2001 were: lone parent families at 56%, recent immigrants at 50%, Aboriginal persons at 37%, visible minority groups at 34%, people with disabilities at 29%, and children age 0 to 14 at 24%. Statistics Canada (2006) also reports that Hamilton has the fourth largest Aboriginal population in Ontario.

Hamilton has proportionally more single-parent families than any other community in Ontario or Canada as a whole. Within the city of Hamilton, there are 25,085 lone-parent families (out of 140,805 census families or 17.8%), 20,795 of which are headed by women (82.3% of lone-parent families). These challenges can contribute to problems of child abuse and neglect, even when parents are doing their very best for their families. In response to child abuse and neglect, some of the Society interventions with families may require court involvement because the risks to the child are so high and opportunities for voluntary Society services have been explored and determined unavailable. Court involvement with the family may also be due to the need for permanency for a child where there has been lengthy Society intervention with no viable solution. Most times, the Society seeks cooperation and collaboration with the family, even in situations where court is involved to ensure the best plan of care for the children. There greater emphasis by the Society on consistent use of strength based
practices (signs of safety, family centered meeting, family group conferencing) to ensure collaboration with the families.

For children out of the family homes, greater efforts are being made to ensure that they are connected culturally to their community. The Society recognizes that raising children is a community effort and is proactively seeking service providers, leaders in the community and extended family members to help with resources. The resources can be, as in the example of extended family members or the community coming forward to provide a kinship service or kinship care home or even adoption of a child which means stability and permanence for the young person.

**Opportunities:**

Further, to achieve the desired outcomes of better and inclusive services for all families, one of the Society’s commitments has been to collaborate with its community partners to build stronger capacity to allow for the sharing of information and resources to enhance services for parents. Among the existing partnerships is the Family Health Teams where the Society and the CAS of Hamilton are working together with other professionals including doctors, nurses, mental health counselors, pharmacists and registered dieticians to reduce barriers and increase communication in an effort to support families in need of protection. The Society also has community based services, one involves the school based team where child protection workers are now directly placed with some Catholic elementary schools to support families and children as needed. The other community based services involve collaborative work with the Hamilton Women’s shelters to address issues of domestic violence within the home. The community partnership will enable the Society to reach out to the increasingly
diverse Hamilton community with an estimated immigrant population of 126,485 based on 2006 Statistics Canada census figures. One of the Society’s goals is to provide information sessions regarding its services which will include topics ranging from parenting to kinship services and kinship care to positive working relationships with child protection services. The Society anticipates that increased collaboration with other agencies and parents would provide greater opportunities for keeping children safer in their communities, family circles and extended family relationships.

Newly arrived immigrant parents will be provided access to information on the functions and role of the Society in the community. The Society anticipates that these strategies would assist parents, as they settle in their newly adopted country, while they continue to parent their children. For other parents, the Society’s information sessions would serve the purposes of increasing their levels of awareness in terms of ‘what to expect’ and ‘where to go for support,’ when receiving child welfare services. Information sessions also would allow the Society to understand and gain further knowledge regarding important and emerging social needs for the community, families and children. The increased level of community awareness can result in better communications during child welfare interventions with the families.

Following the SPRC assessment recommendations, a number of in-house/organizational changes have occurred, leading to the development of a service plan where CCAS has identified areas in each department to improve services to families and children. The service plan is part of an overall and ongoing organizational change that involves continued reviewing and transforming of our structures, systems, practices, programs and interactions with the families and children.
Staff training to increase diversity awareness has also been part of the in-house/organizational strategy and a response to the previous community discussions, as well as the recommendations by the SPRC. During 2008, CCAS staff participated in the agency required anti oppressive practice and antiracism training sessions provided by McMaster University Professor Gary Dumbrill. Currently, CCAS and the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton continue to provide ongoing diversity awareness training through the services of their own trainers. In addition, staff learning and training has been occurring in various forums including presentations by community guest speakers with a focus on issues and concerns encountered by different communities (victims of torture, Aboriginal ways of living). Foster parents are also receiving diversity awareness training, which is intended to provide them greater exposure to varying needs of children from various backgrounds.

Discussions also have began regarding CCAS’ plans to recruit and retain staff from various backgrounds to reflect the diverse community. The need to recruit and retain staff from diverse background is not unique to CCAS, but many organizations are experiencing this shift to a diverse workforce.

Our commitments to engage and collaborate with families have never been greater than today and especially with the current provincial Transformation Agenda which encourages Children’s Aid Societies to work with parents and other systems as partners. Summarily, it needs to be emphasized that CCAS is a community based agency. Over the years, CCAS has built partnerships with a number of other organizations including schools, shelters, agencies serving immigrants, Aboriginal and youths services. Through various community engagements and partnerships, CCAS
anticipates to build a more heterogeneous and inclusive agency, one that ensures that our services are equitable and accessible to families and children from all backgrounds.
Reference:

