



Funding cuts take heavy toll at children's aid

by David Fleischer

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The loss of 18 workers, including frontline supervisors, means York Region's Children's Aid Society has no more fat to trim without affecting services for children and families, executive director Patrick Lake said.

But experts suggest that it's presumptuous to assume funding cuts won't impact the level of service children in need will receive.

The society was forced to make the cuts to administrative and supervisory staff this week in the face of a 12.7 per cent budget cut mandated by the province.

"We're going to have to scramble a lot more to make sure we're providing adequate supervision," Mr. Lake said.

"The board reached the conclusion they didn't have a choice."

The society trimmed \$1 million from its budget before submitting it to the province and has now trimmed another \$1 million, Mr. Lake said.

Without new funding, the agency could run out of cash early next year.

The problem is related to the fiscal crisis said Ernie Lightman, a professor with the University of Toronto's Faculty of Social Work.

"We pay a long-term price for (funding cuts)," he said.

Budget cuts mean Children's Aid workers don't have the resources to help families in crisis the way they used to and if we miss the opportunity now we will see the impacts downstream on police, corrections, health care and other areas, Mr. Lightman said.

"When money is tight ... the best investment you can make is in children. You can get a return over that child's life," Mr. Lightman said.

The province has increased funding in recent years, Mr. Lake said, but it has also increased regulations and standards.

The agency serves 1,200 families and 2,400 children residing in their own homes and nearly 500 children are in their care each year.

Funding is based on three-year-old numbers, very much to the detriment of high-growth areas such as York Region.

The agency is expected to deal with ongoing issues in the face of a fast-growing population and a budget that is now below 2007 levels, Mr. Lake said.

"It's based on York Region 100,000 people ago."

The result is that the society receives 25 per cent less per case than its peers in Toronto, but is expected to provide the same services to clients, Mr. Lake said.

The society found out about the cuts in June and was among 36 agencies across the province who appealed to the province, so far to no avail.

"We were hit the hardest of any children's aid in Ontario," Mr. Lake said, adding this is the fourth time in 20 years the agency has faced a financial crisis.

The legal review process is expected to take until December or January.

The board has told the province they will make no more cuts unless told what services to eliminate or what regulatory corners to cut by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Mr. Lake said.

Unlike other provinces, Children's Aid is kept at arm's length in Ontario, meaning the society, not the minister, gets blamed when case loads grow and children fall through the cracks.

"Children's Aid is an agency that's really caught in the middle," Mr. Lightman said.

If there is a light at the end of the tunnel it is that such political games are not uncommon and the province may yet swoop in with last-minute funds, having demonstrated they will look everywhere before making cuts, he added.

Of course, the society is just one of the many underfunded services agencies in York Region and as vocal as local politicians have been, they need to continue to press York's case, Mr. Lake said.

York Regional council has supported the society's request for more funds, with Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti comparing the cutback to those seen in the 1990s.

It was particularly tough to take in the face of explosive growth, he said.

"It is challenging at the utmost for them to even work with what they have and meet ever increasing needs of children at risk and in need of protection," health commissioner Joann Simmons said.

"To have this kind of cutback is devastating."