

Child Welfare Transformation 2005:

***A strategic plan for a flexible, sustainable and
outcome oriented service delivery model***

Ministry of Children and Youth Services

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Context

In October 2003, the Government of Ontario signaled its commitment to children and youth by creating the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the first new Ontario ministry in 20 years. Based on extensive research and consultation, the ministry has defined its vision as an Ontario where all children and youth have the best opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential. The ministry will mobilize to address key goals so that Ontario's children and youth are:

- Safe from harm
- Healthy and active
- Ready to learn at all ages
- Valued, involved and responsible
- Economically secure.

To achieve this vision and improve outcomes, the ministry will build a new system that fosters healthy development for children and youth in the context of their families and communities. At the core of Ontario's vision is the belief that early intervention will reduce the need for more intrusive and costly public services later and will lead to better outcomes for children and youth. While continuing to provide services that address the immediate and critical needs of children and youth today, the ministry will increasingly focus on prevention, early detection and intervention.

The ministry has identified three priority transformations to improve the lives of children and youth in Ontario:

- **Best Start:** A partnership with parents, Best Start is a broad ten to fifteen year strategy that supports healthy development on several fronts so that children will arrive at school ready to learn. The range of supports to parents and families will include: pre-natal and post-natal health strategies, parenting skills assistance, access to specialized help such as pre-school speech and language, and improved access to quality child care.

- **Specialized Supports System:** This transformation will improve access and coordination of services for children and youth who require specialized supports. These children and youth may have physical, emotional, psychiatric or developmental disabilities, be medically fragile and/or technologically dependent.
- **Children and Youth at Risk:** To shift the focus to prevention, early detection and intervention, this transformation will create a system where child welfare, youth justice and children and youth mental health services are better aligned to meet the multiple needs of children, youth and their families. This transformation includes: a review of residential services, development of a policy framework for children, and youth mental health and child welfare reform.

The following document focuses on child welfare reform.

Background

Protection and support services for children at risk of child abuse or neglect are delivered in Ontario through a unique model of not-for profit, community based children's aid societies regulated and funded by the province. This model supports one of the most innovative and dynamic child welfare systems in North America. With the increase in public and professional awareness of the problem of child abuse and neglect, this service delivery model has adjusted to an unprecedented expansion, both in the number and in the complexity of situations being referred to children's aid societies.

The provincial government has been working closely with children's aid societies to meet these needs. A first series of changes, including significant amendments to the legislation, were developed and implemented between 1998 and 2000. Building on these changes, the province has embarked on a transformation agenda which has included: moving child welfare services to the new Ministry of Children and Youth Services, completing a system-wide Child Welfare Program Evaluation, and establishing a Child Welfare Secretariat to address the findings and recommendations of the program evaluation.

The number of child abuse and neglect investigations conducted in Ontario has nearly tripled since 1993, expanding from an estimated 45,000 investigations in 1993 to close to 130,000 in 2003. The number of children in care has increased from 10,000 in the early 1990s to over 18,000. The province spends over \$1.1 billion dollars a year on direct child welfare services, more than twice as much as it spent in the late 1990s. While a number of factors may explain this expansion – including increased public awareness, expanded legislation, changes in investigation procedures and a more responsive funding framework – it ultimately represents a dramatic expansion of the types of situations in which child welfare services become

involved, in particular with respect to child neglect, emotional maltreatment and exposure to domestic violence. The profile of children and families served by the child welfare system has changed dramatically. While the typical child welfare case in the early 1990s involved acute problems such as sexual and severe physical abuse, child welfare service providers are increasingly addressing more chronic and multi-layered problems associated with neglect, exposure to domestic violence and socio-economic disadvantage.

Child Welfare Reform 1998-2000

The policy and service response to the expansion in child welfare services has been shaped by a number of events. In 1996, the Provincial Coroner's office launched a series of inquests into the deaths of children who had received child welfare services. These were followed in 1997 by a report of the provincial Child Mortality Task Force and in 1998 by the Minister's Panel of Experts report. Recommendations from these inquests and reviews touched on many aspects of child welfare service delivery, but most notably pointed to the need for an expansion of the legislation, especially with respect to neglect and emotional maltreatment, standardization of investigation procedures with an emphasis on child safety, and streamlining court procedures to ensure timely decisions.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services responded to these calls for change with a series of reforms, including legislative amendments, a new funding framework, the introduction of mandatory risk assessment tools, increased accountability measures, better information sharing through a province-wide FastTrack Information System, and a revitalization of the foster care system. Legislative changes which were proclaimed in March 2000 confirmed the primacy of the child's best interests, included neglect as a condition for which a child requires protection, established tighter child protection standards, and clarified reporting requirements for professionals. One of the most significant aspects of the reform package was the development of a structured and standardized approach to case decision-making through the introduction of the Ontario Risk Assessment Model.

Child Welfare Program Evaluation 2002-2003

Following this first set of reforms, a comprehensive evaluation of the child welfare program was initiated in 2002 resulting in a series of recommendations in the areas of child and system outcomes, integration, accountability, efficiency and sustainability. Noting that many advances were made through the 1998-2000 reforms, the evaluation focused on a number of areas that could be addressed and drew attention to some of the unintended consequences of the earlier reforms. The evaluation concluded that Ontario's child welfare system was not sustainable without modifications to the funding framework, to government policy, and to the children's aid societies' approaches to service delivery.

The program evaluation also highlighted the need for a stronger emphasis on outcomes, an investment in research, and the development of a common information system. It encouraged implementation of Looking After Children, a clearer and stronger connection between children's mental health and the child welfare sectors, and a differential approach for responding to lower risk cases. It highlighted the need for more attention to shared services and infrastructure, suggested less reliance on court ordered interventions, and a broad rethinking of the current funding approach within child welfare. It strongly recommended a multi-year approach to planning and budgeting as well as the introduction of measures, incentives and targets within an accountability framework focused on outcomes.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services released an Interjurisdictional Review in May 2003 which provided the field with a description of best practices and innovative approaches in the areas of differential response, permanency planning, performance based funding and mediation. The program evaluation report was released in February 2004, and shortly thereafter the ministry received approval in principle to move ahead with the spirit of the recommendations.

Child Welfare Secretariat 2004-2005

In April 2004, the new ministry created the Child Welfare Secretariat - charged with the responsibility of addressing key aspects of the Child Welfare Program Evaluation. A policy and implementation planning team was seconded from children's aid societies, the University of Toronto and the ministry (see Appendix A).

The secretariat's work is supported by a provincial advisory committee including representatives from the ministry, a number of child welfare agencies across the province, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and the Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario. (See Appendix B).

Legal Aid Ontario, the Office of the Children's Lawyer, the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy, the Coroner's Office, the Adoption Council of Ontario, Ontario Works, the Ontario Disability Support Program, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Attorney General have been consulted on key issues. Content for the child welfare funding model was developed with the input of the secretariat team, ministry focus groups and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies Funding Framework Advisory Group.

In addition, the views of representative youth and parent groups were sought with regard to their service experience as well as suggested changes from a policy perspective.

Child Welfare Transformation Agenda

The transformation agenda is organized around seven key priorities that emerged from the Child Welfare Program Evaluation.

Building on the reform policies that helped to refocus child welfare services, this transformation focuses on an expanded array of intervention options that will better meet the increasingly complex needs of children and families being referred to child welfare agencies across the province. The expanded intervention options relate to three key stages in the service delivery system:

- (1) A more flexible intake and assessment model
- (2) A court processes strategy to reduce delays and encourage alternatives to court
- (3) A broader range of placement options to support more effective permanency planning.

In addition, this transformation focuses on developing modified, or in some instances new, service and policy planning mechanisms in four areas:

- (4) A rationalized and streamlined accountability framework
- (5) A sustainable and strategic funding model
- (6) A single information system
- (7) A provincial child welfare research capacity.

Child Welfare Transformation Guiding Principles

The following principles have been identified in consultation with key stakeholders to guide policy development and implementation planning for this child welfare transformation:

- **Outcome Focused:** Program, policy, funding and legislative directions will achieve better child welfare outcomes in the areas of child safety, permanency and child well-being.
- **Balanced Service Approach:** Change to policy and practice will maintain a strong emphasis on child safety, build on family and community strengths, encourage prevention and early intervention and achieve continuity of care and relationships for children and youth.

- **Research Based:** Best practice and research will help guide Ontario's child welfare transformation. A research and evaluation agenda will track key policies implemented by the ministry.
- **Sustainable and Flexible:** Policy, practice and funding solutions will acknowledge Ontario's diversity, the fact that one size will not fit all, and that solutions must be sustainable, flexible and equitable. Planning must be multi-year focused.
- **Accountable and Integrated:** Government and governance structures and process will focus on ends, not means. Better child welfare outcomes will be encouraged through integrated efforts within and between sectors.

The course charted for this transformation has been informed by a review of the most current and innovative practices across North America, the United Kingdom and Australia. Child welfare practice continuously evolves and is shaped by child, family and community needs, evolving parenting practices and societal expectations. The ability to easily access information about emerging child welfare practices, programs and service delivery methods in other parts of the world means the child welfare community is able to share knowledge about practices that achieve positive outcomes for children. In addition, the academic community has increasingly turned its attention to the child welfare sector. A growing body of research is helping to move towards evidence-based practices with demonstrated effectiveness in achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

This transformation builds on the momentum and innovative practices within our province as well as effective practices from other jurisdictions to pave the way towards better outcomes for children and families served by Ontario's child welfare system.

1) Intake and Assessment: Differential Response

Currently, all families who are referred to a children's aid society and are eligible for child welfare service receive a standardized intake investigation as prescribed by the Ontario Risk Assessment Model (ORAM). This model was developed in response to concerns about inconsistent investigation practices that were not sufficiently focused on risk and safety. Since the implementation of ORAM the number of families referred to the child welfare system has nearly doubled and the types of cases being referred have changed dramatically.

A number of differential response models have been developed across North America and elsewhere in response to a growing concern that intense protection investigations that focused on gathering evidence were not appropriate for all cases. Typically these models provide a greater range of intake response options ranging from full child protection investigations, to strength based family assessments, to referrals to community service providers. Early evaluations from these programs have produced encouraging results. Missouri, for example, implemented a vigorous model with over two thirds of cases being diverted to an assessment stream. Results show slight decreases in the rate of recurrence of abuse and in the length of time children were spending in temporary out-of-home care. Preliminary results in Alberta are equally encouraging.

Some caution, however, should be taken. In some jurisdictions, limited resources have been provided for service to clients with a low risk of future abuse or neglect. As with any such reform, adequate resources are required to fully support the model. The ministry recognizes the importance of supporting community service providers' capacity to meet the needs of children and families involved with the child welfare system, within the resources that are available.

The ministry is developing a differential response model that will continue to utilize the existing eligibility tool. Once eligibility is determined, children at high risk of maltreatment will continue to receive a full protection investigation and risk assessment. Lower risk situations will receive a modified response which will focus less on evidence gathering and more on engaging families during the investigation. The emerging model emphasizes: assessing current strengths and deficits, identifying community resources, and engaging families, where possible, on a voluntary basis. The lower risk cases, however, would not be seen as necessarily requiring less service. While these may not be cases where there are immediate safety concerns, the long-term effects of chronic maltreatment can be more severe than in more acute cases that may have received a full protection investigation.

While child welfare agencies in most other jurisdictions place families in service "streams" based on information received from referring persons, Ontario will maintain

its strong focus on child safety. All clients eligible for children's aid society service will continue to receive face-to-face contact and the standard safety assessment. A decision about the type of service that will best meet a child and family's needs will follow this initial contact. The model will require some adjustments and revisions to the standards and regulations governing ORAM to allow for differential treatment of lower risk cases, as well as to expand the array of available assessment tools beyond risk assessment. A standardized strength based child and family assessment as well as optional specialized assessment tools (e.g. mental health inventory; substance abuse checklist) will be considered as supports to this undertaking.

In phasing Ontario's approach to differential response, consideration will be given to those areas of service activity and growth (e.g. domestic violence referrals) that might lend themselves most readily to a more customized service response.

To further Ontario's differential response model, a number of alternatives for involving families as partners in case planning and decision making, including family conferencing, wraparound, concurrent planning and mediation could be considered at any stage of the case planning or intervention process. A number of Aboriginal culture based practices such as "talking circles" are being explored and implemented in Aboriginal communities. With a view to engaging families and their natural support systems more effectively, children's aid societies will be encouraged to expand partnerships with other community resources and service providers.

2) Court Processes and Alternatives to Court

Clinical research indicates that in many cases the longer a child waits for resolution of their permanency plan, the more difficult it becomes to achieve that plan and better outcomes for the child. The judiciary, private bar and children's aid societies have raised concerns regarding delays in child welfare proceedings. Statistics from the Ministry of the Attorney General indicate that over the past five years approximately 24 – 28 per cent of the Child and Family Services Act applications in the Ontario Court of Justice and approximately 38 – 41 per cent in the Family Court of the Superior Court of Justice have taken more than 120 days to reach disposition. To address the concerns regarding delays, the ministry is moving forward with recommendations to promote timely resolution of child welfare matters.

Alternatives to Court

Once the decision is made to provide ongoing child welfare services, the response option, in cases where families refuse or do not support services is largely limited to initiating court proceedings that may be more adversarial and formal than necessary. A number of provinces and states offer a range of alternative dispute resolution

options (ADR) that include: mediation, family conferencing, mediation circles and settlement conferences. Evaluation of these options have consistently produced positive results including: more timely resolution, higher settlement rates, higher satisfaction rates, better communication, more effective client engagement and lower costs.

Proposed amendments to the Child and Family Services Act, if passed, would require a children's aid society to consider alternative dispute resolution where there is a dispute related to a child or a child's plan of care, and to permit the Office of the Children's Lawyer to represent a child where alternative dispute resolution is proposed.

Although not appropriate in some child protection cases, mediation is regarded as one of a number of ADR options that may be effective in resolving disputes and reducing the volume of cases that go to trial. Mediation can be an effective alternative in appropriate cases because: it allows a parent to tell their story to an impartial third party who won't judge them; it can lead to a better understanding of a case by both the children's aid society worker and the parents; it can lead to a better understanding of the role of the children's aid society and a better working relationship between the family and the children's aid society workers; and it allows for parental involvement in making decisions.

A provincial mediation strategy is being considered that would provide for child protection mediation before a court application is initiated or at any point in a court case. Child protection mediators would be neutral and be required to meet specific qualifications and standards of service.

The provincial strategy would need to take into consideration the special needs and circumstances of many remote First Nation communities and be flexible enough to accommodate traditional practices. Many jurisdictions are supporting efforts of First Nation communities to care for children at risk and to implement Aboriginal culture based programs to deal with child protection issues. Several jurisdictions are co-funding Aboriginal mediation programs under a cost-sharing arrangement with the federal government Aboriginal Justice Strategy. In Ontario, a First Nations child protection mediation program has been operating on a pilot basis in a number of Nishnawbe-Aski Nation communities since May 2002. The project is managed by Nishnawbe-Aski Nation Legal Services in Thunder Bay. Called the Talking Together Project, it uses a community-based traditional circle approach to help ensure the best interests of children and the strengthening of the family unit, while functioning parallel to the mainstream court process.

Family conferencing is increasingly popular as an ADR option. With this approach, intervention plans are developed through a case conferencing process that brings together extended family and other potential community supports. Evaluations consistently report high rates of satisfaction from participants and increased involvement from extended family and community supports. While the use of family

conferencing does not necessarily require changes in legislation or regulations, lack of flexibility in the current funding model may be an obstacle to implementation. Consideration is being given to providing children's aid societies with the funding flexibility needed to establish partnerships with community service providers who can offer family conferencing, where appropriate.

Legal Service Delivery within a Children's Aid Society

The ministry will work with children's aid societies through their membership organizations, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies in Ontario, to develop and disseminate "best practices" information related to strategic case planning, with a view to identifying and using alternatives to court where appropriate. The ministry will also encourage further development and exchange of best practice that will lead to more effective use of legal advice and management of the legal process within children's aid societies.

Collaboration with Justice Sector Partners

The ministry will move forward with a number of recommendations that have been made for collaboration with the Ministry of the Attorney General, Legal Aid Ontario, the Office of the Children's Lawyer, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies in Ontario, the judiciary and other justice sector partners to promote effective and efficient resolution of child welfare matters before the court. These include recommendations to: address concerns related to the use of assessments, encourage the development of effective family court committees in every child protection court, explore ways to support effective judicial case management, and address concerns related to trial scheduling. Those jurisdictions with established mechanisms to bring the bench, bar, children's aid societies and other key stakeholders together on a regular basis for problem solving and relationship building are much more likely to expedite legal matters affecting children and contain costs.

3) Expanded Permanency Planning Options

Effective and permanent plans for the care of a child or youth provide both psychological and legal certainty. Knowing and having faith in the predictability of their caregiver allows children and youth the emotional connection necessary for them to feel accepted and loved. Legal certainty means they know that their new family has a secure and enduring foundation. With the dramatic increase in admissions to out-of-home care, it has been increasingly difficult to provide stable and permanent placements for children and youth in a timely manner. Placement instability and multiple moves often impact the emotional well-being of children and youth and other child welfare outcomes and may contribute to requiring more expensive specialized placements. An expanded continuum of family-based permanency options would help children's aid societies to determine individual plans that are best suited for each child. The proposed continuum, referred to as *Pillars of Permanence*, includes: admission prevention, kinship care, customary care, legal custody, family foster care, adoption and youth leaving care.

Admission Prevention

A number of family support services have shown to be effective in preventing admission to care and in helping to support children who return home. While placement prevention should never compromise the safety of children, appropriate use of family support services has consistently produced positive results. To enhance the supports available to children and families, the ministry is considering a number of options including: additional supports to families where such assistance would enable children to remain in, or return to, the care of the birth family; more effective engagement of families through the differential response intake and assessment option; and greater involvement of extended families and community supports through enhanced case planning mechanisms.

Kinship Care

Kinship care refers to the full-time care and nurturing of a child or youth by a relative, community member, or other adult with whom there is a relationship significant to the child or youth. In these cases a formal admission to care may be prevented through the use of kin as a temporary care provider. Kinship care is the fastest growing placement option in North America, yet an under-utilized option in Ontario. Follow-up research generally finds that if adequately resourced, these placements are more stable and children feel a stronger sense of belonging. These children are less likely to be re-admitted to care once they return home. Some studies, however, have raised concerns about inadequate supports provided to kinship placements. The ministry will support the expanded use of kinship care by providing funding flexibility

for children's aid society staff to provide additional supports in situations where kin are caring for a child who has not been formally admitted to children's aid society care. Kin who are caring for a child who has been admitted to children's aid society care could be eligible for similar support and compensation available to all approved foster parents.

Customary Care

Aboriginal children are vastly over-represented in the care of children's aid societies in Ontario. Although some improvements have been made, most are not placed in Aboriginal families and many are removed from their home communities. This severs not only ties to family, but the cultural practices and identity necessary for these children to grow confidently as Aboriginal community members. Customary care refers to the traditional practice of child rearing and care within which all members of the family, extended family, relatives, and community are involved. Customary care practices are influenced and determined by the culture of the parents and community in which the child is raised. The ministry supports children's aid societies' efforts to develop customary care practices in collaboration with local First Nations. Drawing on the experience of several Aboriginal children's aid societies, the ministry will co-ordinate the development of a set of customary care best practice guidelines in partnership with representatives of Ontario First Nations leadership, the Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. The guidelines are intended to support the expanded use of customary care practices by providing more clarity on issues related to legal status, residential standards and subsidies.

Legal Custody

When it is necessary to develop a permanent plan for the care of a child or youth and adoption is not considered appropriate for cultural, familial or other reasons, another legal option is required. Proposed amendments to the Child and Family Services Act would, if passed, include a legal custody option where a child or youth would be cared for by a relative or someone else close to them while maintaining their name, contact with family and rights of inheritance. For example, for children who are Crown wards and have been living continuously with a foster parent for a significant period of time, it would be possible for custody of the child to be transferred to a foster parent under a legal custody order. In appropriate cases, where a person, including a foster parent, is granted a legal custody order, additional supports could be provided by a children's aid society to complement the care of the child or youth on a long-term basis. In such cases, the child or youth would be discharged from care and experience less stigma which is sometimes associated with being 'in care'.

Family Foster Care

Wherever possible, children requiring out-of-home-care should be placed in family-based settings. The ministry acknowledges the rich tradition of family-based foster care across Ontario and will continue to support this critical service.

The ministry is considering the implementation of Looking After Children (LAC) on a provincial basis. LAC is a strengths-based practice model that monitors and supports the development and well-being of children and youth in care, with the goal of securing positive outcomes that are similar to those of children and youth in the general population. Its focus is on resiliency, defined as positive adaptation in the face of adversity, and on supporting a child's progress within seven key dimensions: health, education, family and social relationships, social identity, emotional and behavioural development and self-care skills.

In addition, the ministry is considering the implementation of PRIDE (Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education) on a provincial basis. PRIDE establishes a standardized approach to supporting and training foster families to meet the increasingly complex needs of the children they serve.

Revised standards and regulations are also under consideration to afford more flexibility for children's aid societies. Without compromising safety, this would allow children to be placed with kin in situations where existing rules prevent children's aid societies from doing so. Through improved training, more support and greater flexibility, foster parents could be in a stronger position to meet the increasingly diverse needs of foster children.

Adoption

Adoption is a desired plan with positive outcomes for many children, yet is an option that is being used in a minority of cases. To support expanded use of adoption the ministry is considering a number of strategies. A key legal barrier to adoption is the high percentage of children with court-ordered access to birth parents. In many of these cases access is a good thing and communication or contact is important to the healthy development of a child. Proposed amendments to the Child and Family Services Act would, if passed, allow communication after an adoption through openness agreements or orders. Openness could allow for a continuum of contact ranging from the sharing of birth family information to personal visits. The degree of openness would be based on the child's best interests. This would promote more adoptions and also allow for the preservation of important connections to family history, relationships and culture. Where necessary, mediation could be available to assist children's aid societies, adoptive families and birth families in the development of openness arrangements. Further support could be provided by increasing post-placement services, in particular, parent education and other forms of assistance. Connecting children with prospective adoptive families would also require further

investment in tools, training and increased cooperation among children's aid societies and between children's aid societies and the private adoption sector. The development of a common home study assessment format, the sharing of information, an electronic database to assist matching potential adoptive families with waiting children, and public promotion of adoption would provide the resources to help find and secure loving families for children.

Youth Leaving Care

The transition from being in care to living independently can be difficult for youth leaving care and requires support and planning. In addition to the current extended care and maintenance financial support that is available for youth in school until age 21, the ministry supports the development of social and life skill programs that will help prepare youth for living on their own. Specifically, the ministry supports the development of a guide to best practices for the preparation of youth for independence and will explore further opportunities for financial assistance for post-secondary education.

4) A Rationalized Accountability Framework

Accountability for results is an important feature of this child welfare transformation. The goal is to achieve a more streamlined and rationalized accountability relationship with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services that builds on the strength and diversity of Ontario's community-based children's aid societies while maintaining province-wide standards.

Over the last decade, the number of accountability and review mechanisms for child welfare increased as a result of previous child welfare reform, inquests, in-year pressures and recommendations from the provincial auditor. Yet the ability to document the effectiveness of child welfare services across Ontario remains limited.

One assumption is that the service standards that are monitored will reflect better outcomes. A high standards compliance rate however, does not necessarily mean that children are better protected or that their well-being has measurably improved. In the absence of a stronger focus on client and system outcomes, more monitoring of standards would not necessarily provide detailed information to continue to build effectively on Ontario's community-based service delivery model.

The new accountability framework will require a shift of focus from process monitoring to outcomes, in general, and specifically as they relate to child outcomes contained in the National Outcomes Matrix (NOM). The NOM was adopted by the ministry and is being used to collect outcome data in a number of other provinces.

The first component of the new accountability framework to be implemented is a multi-year results based plan which will replace the annual agency service management plan. Once fully implemented, this multi-year results based plan will become the key operational planning document that identifies an agency's service delivery model and how agency resources are used to support that model over a three year period. It will link closely to agency strategic plans and provide information about the agency, the client population served by the agency and the local service delivery context, as well as the agency's relationship with local service partners. Data and information will be collected regarding agency goals and objectives, client and system outcomes, the agency's quality assurance activities and the results of those activities.

Next steps in creating a new accountability framework will include streamlining existing review and monitoring mechanisms such as crown ward reviews, services and financial data reviews and child death reviews. The ministry will also strengthen its role as service system manager to facilitate a greater integration of, and access to, community services required to support children and families who have come to the attention of children's aid societies. On a longer term basis, accreditation will be explored as a promising future direction for child welfare in Ontario.

5) A Sustainable Child Welfare Funding Model

Funding mechanisms play an increasingly central role in shaping the types of services provided by children's aid societies. The ministry is developing a new child welfare funding model designed to replace the current funding framework with a more sustainable mechanism to allocate transfer payments to children's aid societies. The funding model is designed to support the proposed policy and service reforms.

The new funding model is comprised of four integrated but unique "funding blocks" through which funding will be allocated to children's aid societies:

1. **Agency core funding** (Block 1) through which approximately 90 per cent of a children's aid society's expenditures will be funded, subject to ministry financial planning approval. This includes expenditures for service delivery to clients and the required operational infrastructure and supports.
2. **Change management investment funding** (Block 2) through which funding will be allocated and can only be used for the achievement of transformation policy, service priorities and related objectives determined by the ministry.
3. **Select service volume growth change funding** (Block 3) will provide funding for eligible service volume growth.

4. **Ministry managed child welfare funds** (Block 4) will contain individual funds that can be used only for specific purposes (e.g. capital acquisitions, technology) as determined by the ministry.

Similar to the previous funding framework benchmarks, each funding block is comprised of a series of funding factors and related calculations. The funding factors have been determined by analysis of a base line year of actual service volume and financial results for each children's aid society. The funding factors are more global in nature than were the detailed original funding framework benchmarks and significantly fewer in number (fewer than half of the original 56 benchmarks).

The funding model baseline year is being updated to 2003 / 2004 agency specific actuals. Such funding reflects the unique characteristics and service models of each children's aid society that existed in 2003/ 2004. This, for example, includes travel costs for children's aid societies serving large geographic areas. Block 4 will allow for the future development of a northern remoteness factor and/or French language service factor that could capture related costs not contained in core funding. Future policy work is required regarding the need for such funding and to identify what it would contain.

The new funding model will be supported by the new multi-year results based planning process which is designed to assist in adjusting funding to reflect significant changes in service volume as well as track the extent to which children's aid societies are meeting targets they have set for themselves, and targets set by the ministry.

6) Single Information System

The Child Mortality Task Force and the coroner's inquests of the late 1990s strongly recommended the implementation of a comprehensive single information system. The Ministry of Community and Social Services along with children's aid societies attempted on two previous occasions to develop one such system. More recently, the Child Welfare Program Evaluation recommended a single information system to support implementation of many of the report's recommended reforms and outlined the advantages of one system over the current multiple systems.

In 2000, a province-wide FastTrack system was established to allow all children's aid societies to determine if referred children and families had been previously reported to another children's aid society. In addition, individual children's aid societies have taken a number of initiatives in setting up coordinated data user groups. Despite these efforts at increased coordination across user groups, limitations of the current agency-based systems hinder the sector's capacity to track and report much of the information needed to assist province-wide service planning and policy development.

The current collection of information systems does not provide provincial information about some of the most basic characteristics of children receiving child welfare services. There is no central capacity to report province wide on: the types of reported and investigated maltreatment, the age and sex of children receiving services, the proportion of children receiving services who are taken into care, the number of placement changes, or the proportion of children who received services and are re-victimized.

An agreement has been negotiated between the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies to fund the design and development of a new web-based child welfare information system to be piloted in a minimum of two agencies.

The system will be designed to: meet the core information requirements of all children's aid societies and the ministry; link to common financial, human resource and document management systems, and be capable of expansion and adaptation to meet the information technology requirements of other ministry funded children's services.

The system will support: increased direct worker contact with clients through streamlined data entry processes; more effective case and workload management; National Outcomes Matrix data collection; shared service approaches; greater transparency and accountability; improved research capacity; access to information, performance, trends and comparisons; and improved financial management and reporting.

7) Provincial Research Agenda

The 1998-2000 child welfare reforms have not been systematically evaluated. As recommended by the program evaluation that followed the reforms, a provincially funded and coordinated research agenda is critical to ensuring that the impact of new policies and practices are adequately evaluated and support evidence based planning, policy development and decision-making.

Research is playing a central role in the current planning for child welfare transformation. The three core service initiatives in the areas of differential response, alternative dispute resolution and expanded permanency planning are all based on reviews of the best available research evidence.

The ministry is considering mechanisms that could support a provincial child welfare research agenda that would focus on creating the capacity to collect and analyze outcome and service data, forecast new and emerging trends, support the multi year results based plans and produce public annual reports.

It will be critical to understand the impact of transformation initiatives on Aboriginal communities and other special populations in Ontario. To this end, the research agenda will promote collaborative culturally appropriate research approaches as well as data analysis and interpretation methods.

It will also require coordination of research in key areas such as risk assessment, domestic violence and/or foster care and support in the dissemination of findings from relevant research. These activities will assist in future policy development and continuous improvements in child welfare, and move the field towards evidence-based practice.

The research agenda will be supported by a provincial fund managed by the Research and Outcome Measurement Branch (ROMB) with advice from a provincial child welfare research fund advisory committee to: help set priorities for allocating research funds, track and coordinate child welfare research activities, develop ethical review standards, support capacity development, support research dissemination, and provide input into content of a child welfare annual report.

The advisory committee will be co-chaired by the Child Welfare Secretariat and ROMB, with representation from service providers, the Office of Child and Family Services Advocacy and a multi-disciplinary group of academic researchers.

The research agenda for 2005 will include collecting baseline outcome data for four of 10 indicators contained in the National Outcomes Matrix, and beginning baseline evaluation of the new child welfare initiatives (differential response, permanency options and alternative dispute resolution).

Next Steps

The strategic plan outlined in this document sets out a series of measures to support the transformation of Ontario's child welfare system through a more flexible, sustainable and outcome oriented service delivery model. Building on the reforms initiated in 1998, this plan, developed in consultation with key stakeholders, emerges out of the Child Welfare Program Evaluation. The plan incorporates the best available evidence on effective child welfare services and reflects many of the innovative programs that are emerging across the province, the country and internationally.

A 12 month, three stage strategy is planned for further program design and implementation planning:

1. In the first stage (Spring 2005), the focus will be on potential legislative amendments and introduction of the key funding, planning and evaluation mechanisms: multi-year results based planning, the funding model and the child welfare research fund advisory committee.

2. In the second stage (Summer – Fall 2005), the focus will be on further development of the accountability framework, funding model and multi-year results based planning approach to support the child welfare transformation agenda.
3. In the third stage, (Winter – Spring 2006) differential response, alternative dispute resolution and enhanced permanency planning options will be introduced on a graduated basis. Timing will depend on the passing of proposed amendments to the Child and Family Services Act.

Unlike the first wave of reforms between 1998 and 2000 that required highly standardized province wide implementation, most of the changes currently proposed involve adding new service options and increasing program flexibility in order to allow children's aid societies to tailor their services more effectively to their diverse client populations. Implementation, therefore, hinges on the extent to which children's aid societies are ready to make use of this broader array of service options.

The new service planning, funding and accountability mechanisms that are being proposed are designed to support a flexible and sustainable implementation process that can be adjusted to meet local realities. By tracking outcomes through a more effective information system and monitoring the effectiveness of new initiatives through a provincial research agenda, the ministry would also be in a better position to make further adjustments to determine that the proposed changes are yielding the intended outcomes.

Our experience with previous child welfare transformation in Ontario as well as evidence from other jurisdictions speaks clearly to the need for a policy and implementation focus that is sustained over time. A strong emphasis on training and capacity building, both within the ministry as well as the field, are both critical ingredients to achieving better child welfare outcomes and sustainability in the future.

This journey, which also represents a significant shift in culture, is continuous by its very nature. Through phased implementation, clear and measurable evidence of improvement is anticipated by the end of fiscal year 2007-2008.

Appendix A: Child Welfare Secretariat

Sponsoring Assistant Deputy Minister

Trinela Cane, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy Development and Program Design Division

Child Welfare Secretariat Team Members

Shelley Acheson, Senior Policy Analyst, Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Jennifer Gallagher, Counsel, Ministry of Community and Social Services and Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Elaine Kennedy, Administrative Assistant, Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Anna Mazurkiewicz, Service Director, Peel Children's Aid Society

Sally McGowan, Program Supervisor, Ministry of Community and Social Services

Kevin Morris, Senior Policy Analyst, Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Jim Phillips, Director of Finance, Waterloo Family and Children's Services

Bruce Rivers, Executive Director, Toronto Children's Aid Society

Susan Rudnick, Senior Policy Analyst, Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Chris Steven, Director, Residential Resources, London and Middlesex Children's Aid Society

Nico Trocmé, Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto; Director, Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare

The Child Welfare Secretariat would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of our colleagues in the Program Management Division, including Regional Offices and in the Children and Youth at Risk Branch, Policy Development and Program Design Division, as well as those individuals who have recently joined the Secretariat team.

Appendix B: Child Welfare Secretariat Advisory Group

Marcel Donio, Executive Director, Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario

Greg Dulmage, Executive Director, Northumberland Children's Aid Society

Mac Hiltz, Executive Director, Services Familiaux Jeanne Sauvé Family Services

Mark Kartusch, Director of Services - Hastings Children's Aid Society

Jeanette Lewis, Executive Director, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

Nancy Liston, Director, Performance Management Branch, Ministry of Community and Social Services

Mary McConville, Executive Director, Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto

Kenn Richard, Executive Director, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto

Bruce Rivers, Executive Director, Children's Aid Society of Toronto (Chair)

Peter Steckenreiter, Regional Director, South-West Region, Ministry of Community and Social Services

Members of the Child Welfare Secretariat as listed in Appendix A

Appendix C: Overview of Child Welfare Transformation Agenda

GOAL: AN EFFECTIVE, SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM THAT PROTECTS CHILDREN AT RISK OF MALTREATMENT AND IMPROVES THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE

Differential Response

Alternate responses at the front end of the child welfare system. Less adversarial, more customized response(s) to lower-risk situations. Responses will employ strength-based assessments.

Permanency Planning

Earlier achievement of permanency for children, via a continuum of alternatives such as kinship care, customary care, private custody arrangements and enhanced adoption options.

Alternatives to Court

Availability of mediation services will achieve more timely resolution of issues for children. Improved and more efficient agency and system legal processes will reduce court delays.

SUPPORTED BY:

Research/Evaluation Framework

Supports achievement of positive client outcomes through evidence-based practice.

Single Child Welfare Information System

Provides enhanced capacity to track and report specific child and family profiles and outcomes data.

Outcomes Focused Approach to Accountability

More effective, appropriate and rational accountability relationship between ministry and children's aid societies.

ENABLED BY:

A sustainable, simplified and flexible multi-year funding model that facilitates efficient and strategic use of resource to achieve desired client outcomes.