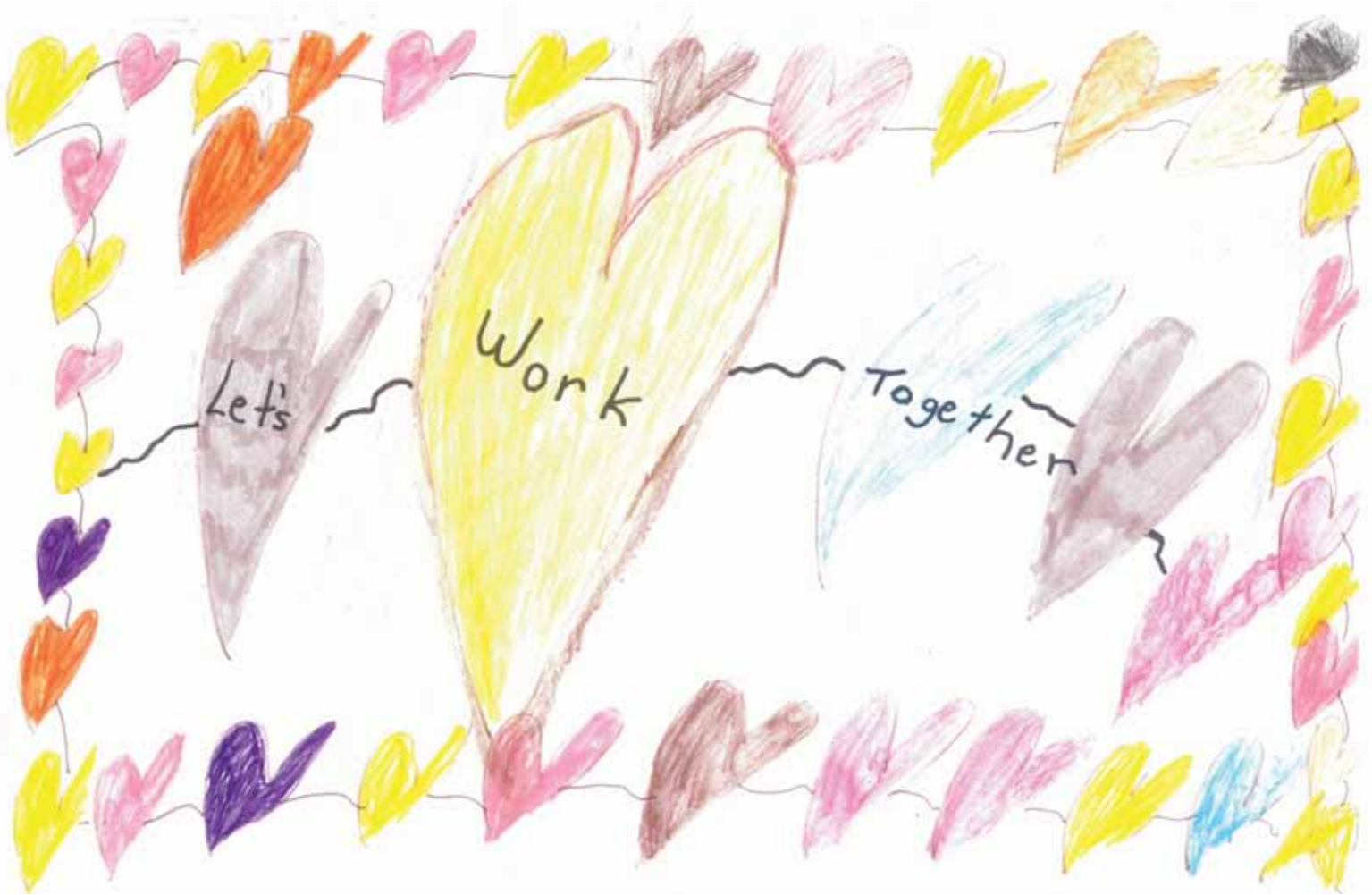




Commission to Promote
Sustainable Child Welfare

Commission de promotion de la viabilité
des services de bien-être de l'enfance

Towards Sustainable Child Welfare in Ontario



Early in its mandate, the Commission established “Project Artwork” inviting loans of poetry, children’s artwork, posters, professional artwork and other items that could be displayed in our offices to remind us of the central reason for our work: children, youth, and families. In the ensuing months, the Commission has received over sixty pieces of loaned artwork from CASSs, MCYS, and associations representing child welfare stakeholders. The cover artwork on this First Report was the result of an annual artwork contest organized by the Foster Parents’ Society of Ontario. This particular drawing was completed by a foster child in the Hamilton-Niagara region and has been reproduced with permission.

June 30, 2010



Commission to Promote
Sustainable Child Welfare

Commission de promotion de la viabilité
des services de bien-être de l'enfance

The Honourable Laurel Broten
Minister of Children & Youth Services
14th Floor, 86 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 2S3

Dear Minister Broten:

The Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare is pleased to submit its first report, Towards Sustainable Child Welfare in Ontario. This report reflects the first seven months of the Commission's work, describes a vision for a sustainable child welfare system and sets out the Commission's plan of action from now through to the conclusion of its mandate in September 2012.

We know from our discussions with you that you and the government are strongly committed to improving outcomes for Ontario's vulnerable children, youth, and families. The Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Early Learning Strategy and other government initiatives will contribute in important ways to improving responsiveness and accessibility to services. Our vision for Child Welfare is consistent with these initiatives. We envision a future in which a modernized child welfare system functions as one of many programs working together to provide integrated, child-focused services fully aligned within a broad network of children's services to improve outcomes for children and youth.

This report reflects much more than the ideas of three Commissioners. It represents the experience and expertise of more than two thousand individuals who have made time to meet with us and write to us over the past several months. Our confidence in the change that is possible in this sector stems from the service conviction and spirit of goodwill we have been met with as we have traveled the province.

Foster parents, community members, board members, CASs leaders, unions and front line staff, independent residential service providers, leaders of school boards, children's mental health organizations and other community partners, leaders within MCYS and government – again and again, the Commission has heard people pledging their commitment to working together to advance the interests of children. The voices of current and former youth-in-care were also very clear as they generously shared their stories and offered their perspectives on what would make the biggest difference to their lives.

We want to thank you for the privilege of serving the people of Ontario as members of this Commission. We look forward to continuing to work with you as we implement changes that will promote the sustainability of child welfare.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ene Underwood'.

Ene Underwood

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Lewis'.

Barry Lewis

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wendy Thomson'.

Wendy Thomson

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Executive Summary

Child welfare is one of several provincially funded programs designed to keep Ontario's children safe and healthy so that they will grow up to realize their full potential.

Today, child welfare in Ontario is delivered through 53 children's aid societies (CASs). Every year, staff in these agencies field more than 160,000 telephone calls for assistance. The phone rings at all hours of the day and night, seven days a week. Whoever calls, the CAS responds.

The job of the CAS is to ensure that children are safe and to help their parents keep them safe. If the children are not safe at home, then the CAS on behalf of all of Ontario's residents acts as their parents until they are able to return home or find a new home with another family.

AN INVESTMENT IN OUR FUTURE

The staff of the children's aid societies make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families every day. This work is an investment in the children's future and the future of communities in which they live in Ontario.

In the fiscal year 2010/2011, Ontario's children's aid societies will spend more than \$1.4 billion delivering this important service. This amount has increased substantially over the last decade – and at a much greater rate than spending on many other services for vulnerable children and youth. These dynamics together with the recent economic downturn have raised concerns about the costs of delivering the service and about the limited information that is available on outcomes that are being realized by children who receive services from CASs.

These concerns have prompted other questions. Is the province getting maximum value for the money it spends on child welfare? Is the present system of protecting vulnerable children, youth and families through 53 independent children aid societies the best way? Has the provincial government found the right balance in spending on child welfare through the children's aid societies and on other services for vulnerable children, youth and families?

SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

These are the types of questions that led the Ontario Government to establish a Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare in November 2009. The three-member Commission has a three-year mandate to develop and implement changes that will ensure a sustainable child welfare system for the province's vulnerable children, youth and families.

This is the Commission's first report. It examines Ontario's child welfare system as it stands today and how its policies, funding and service delivery have grown and changed in the past 10

years. The report then describes its vision of a sustainable and integrated system of children's services and sets out a strategic roadmap to follow from now to September 2012, when the Commission's mandate ends.

CHILD WELFARE IN ONTARIO TODAY

The financial trends show a sector that experienced a significant growth in its case load and spending in the early part of the last decade. This growth arose from multiple policy changes in the late 1990s to increase the focus on protecting vulnerable children. In the latter half of the current decade, there was a shift in emphasis towards supporting more vulnerable children at home with their families. This shift resulted in fewer children being taken into care and for shorter periods of time. Not surprisingly, the growth in spending decreased.

This change was a direct result of the Transformation Agenda launched by the government in 2006. The Transformation Agenda focused on a more balanced position between protecting the child and preserving the family. Further, the Transformation Agenda emphasized the importance of child welfare staff working collaboratively with community partners and in applying newly developed standards and tools.

The economic downturn over the last two years has brought new challenges to government spending. The child welfare sector in Ontario is now in its second year with no increases in funding and several CASs continue to face serious financial challenges. These dynamics have raised new questions about sustainability and about the best way to organize the sector to ensure that vulnerable children and youth will be supported regardless of the fiscal environment.

A VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

As a province, if we want to improve the outcomes for our most vulnerable children, we must make some policy choices. We need to move from the notion of "child welfare" to the "welfare of children". This is a responsibility we all share as members of a society; it is not the exclusive responsibility of the children's aid societies.

Further, the Commission believes that we need to see the welfare of children from the broader perspective of services for children, youth and their families. We need an integrated system across the province that is able to identify vulnerable children and families early, assess what services they need and ensure that they get them and in the form that will make a positive difference in their lives and for their futures.

"A future in which a modernized child welfare system functions as one of many programs working together to provide integrated child-focused services fully aligned to improve the outcomes for children and youth"

The Commission does not believe that children's aid societies should be the dominant provider, the sole point of access or the default organization for all services for vulnerable children and youth. What is needed is a new set of relationships in which other service providers and

children's aid societies operate as partners working together for the best possible outcome for children and their families.

A sustainable child welfare system should be dynamic and self-renewing. It should be child-centered, fully integrated and balanced between the protection of the child and the preservation of the family.

A sustainable child welfare system should be consistent for vulnerable children and families wherever they are in Ontario. This means equivalent access to services, equivalent performance and quality of services, and supported by processes and information flows that enable consistency and portability of services from one part of Ontario to another.

MAKING THE VISION A REALITY

The present child welfare system has many strengths and challenges.

The people who lead and deliver Ontario's child welfare services are both expert and passionate about their work. Further, the strong, community-based roots of the children's aid societies have resulted in large numbers of committed foster parents and loyal volunteers, a high rate of local engagement and generous public and private philanthropy. These assets are priceless and important. They must be preserved.

Nonetheless, Ontario's children's aid societies were not designed to perform as an integrated provincial system of child welfare services. This means there are a number of challenges that must be met to realize the Commission's vision for a sustainable child welfare system.

These challenges and concerns include the following:

- There are differences among the 53 agencies in the services they deliver, in their capacities to deliver services, in their models of service delivery and in their interpretation of their role and mandate.
- There is not enough collaboration amongst the 53 children's aid societies and there is significant variability in the kinds and availability of services across the province.
- There is a lack of clear and consistent accountability between the CAS and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. The system today centres on compliance-based mechanisms that focus on detailed audits of compliance against standards rather than on outcomes for children and performance of the agencies and system.
- The present funding formula does not allow the system to adapt to the present fiscally constrained environment. In some instances, the present financial system seems to discourage good performance and does not support the goals of the Transformation Agenda.

- The fragmentation of ministry functions across many branches results in a lack of clarity and focus. It's hard to see which branch does what. There are opportunities here to improve on how priorities are set, results are evaluated, communications are coordinated and policy directions are translated among other things.

OTHER CHALLENGES

The diversity of Ontario's geography and population present major challenges in ensuring equitable access and quality services across Ontario.

Aboriginal children and their families have different and complex needs. The legacy of residential schools and of the 1960s and 1970s when hundreds of children were removed through adoption have had a profound effect on the men and women involved and on their communities. There is an urgent need to work with Aboriginal communities to find and coordinate approaches that respond directly to the needs of their children and youth.

The Commission believes that although the strategy to advance child welfare is relevant to all of Ontario's residents, the special circumstances of Aboriginal children, youth and families must be viewed through an additional lens of the Aboriginal community.

A further challenge is meeting the needs of children and families whose first language is not English. It is critical that they receive services in the languages that they and their service providers understand.

Similarly, French-speaking residents not only deserve service in French, but it is the law. When warranted Franco-Ontarian children and families must have access to services in French anywhere in the province not only in the 22 communities designated under the French Language Act.

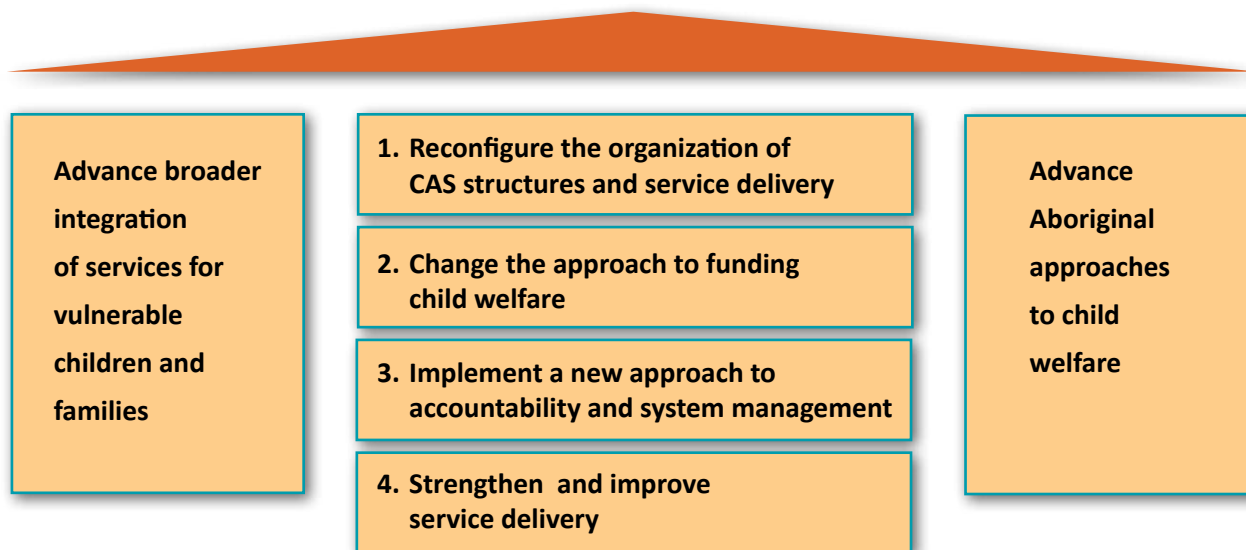
THE STRATEGY TO MOVE CHILD WELFARE FORWARD

The Commission has developed a four-tiered strategy to move toward its vision of a sustainable child welfare system. The strategy will evolve over the next two and a half years of the Commission's mandate.

The four tiers in the strategy build on each other. For example, the first tier is absolutely critical to the success of the second tier and so on through to the fourth tier.

A Four-Tiered Strategy for Sustainable Child Welfare

A modernized child welfare system providing integrated child-focussed services fully aligned with the broader network of children's services to improve outcomes for children and youth.



The **first tier**, reconfiguring the organization of CAS structures and service delivery forms the foundation on which funding, accountability and actual service delivery is based. Reconfiguration will lead to fewer CASs in Ontario and a higher level of shared services between CASs. In some communities, reconfiguration may well lead to a higher level of shared service and integration between CAS and other community services.

These changes are critical to ensure that all CASs have the scale to deliver consistent, high quality, and cost effective services and the capacity to adapt to the fast-paced changes facing children, families and communities.

In some communities, considerations of culture and remoteness must be balanced against these important scale factors. However, opportunities exist in several Ontario communities to leverage and integrate the strengths of current CASs to create even more effective, responsive and sustainable services for the future.

The **second tier** of the Commission's strategy will define the changes that are required in how the system is funded in order to achieve sustainability. The Commission is initiating a project with input from the ministry, CASs and others to develop alternate approaches to funding. Work on this tier will ramp up quickly over the summer and fall so that a phase-in of a new funding approach can begin by 2011/12.

In parallel with the new approach to funding CASs is the **third tier** of a new approach to accountability and overall system management. The importance of a model for accountability was highlighted in the Transformation Agenda and the Commission's strategy moving forward is to harness and build on this important work.

The **final tier** – strengthen and improve service delivery -- will examine the fundamental work of CASs. Efforts on this tier will focus on confirming and increasing clarity on the range of child welfare services; strengthening and improving direct services and streamlining administrative processes to maximize agency and worker capacity for providing services to children, youth and families

Changes realized through all four of the tiers will be of benefit to Aboriginal children and youth. However, because of the unique circumstances facing Aboriginal people additional consideration for advancing Aboriginal approaches to child welfare services for their communities is of prime importance. In parallel, ongoing attention will be given to strategies that will advance broader integration of all services for vulnerable children and families.

COMMISSION'S NEXT STEPS

With the release of this report, the Commission's work now shifts from examining what needs to change to working with the ministry and the child welfare sector to actively plan to realize these changes.

During these first seven months, the Commission has heard from foster parents, board members, CASs leaders, unions and front line staff, independent residential service providers, leaders of school boards, children's mental health organizations and other community partners, leaders within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and government. All have pledged their commitment to working together to realize the potential of this moment in time. And perhaps the clearest voices among them have been the voices of families and current and former youth-in-care offering their honest and personal perspectives on what would make the biggest difference to them in their lives.

This report represents our commitment to work over the remaining two and a half years of our mandate with this large and diverse team of partners to create a sustainable child welfare system for Ontario – and to make a lasting difference for vulnerable children and youth.

In November 2009, the Honourable Laurel Broten, Minister of Children and Youth Services, announced the formal launch of the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare. The three-member Commission has a three-year mandate to develop and implement solutions to promote the sustainability of child welfare in Ontario.

Reporting directly to the Minister, the Commission has the authority under the Child and Family Services Act to issue directives to children's aid societies (CASs) to take specific actions that will promote sustainable child welfare. In parallel, the Commission may make recommendations to the Minister and the Ministry on matters relating to how the government manages and sets policy for child welfare.

At the outset of their work, the commissioners established the following core principles:

- ***A focus on children, youth and families***
- ***Transparency***
- ***Objectivity based on evidence and the lived experience***
- ***Iterative, action-oriented process***
- ***Boldness***
- ***A spirit of partnership***
- ***Respect for diversity – including in particular, recognition of the unique considerations relating to Aboriginal child welfare***

In the seven months since the November 2009 launch, the Commission has proceeded with its work using these principles as a compass. Commissioners have engaged in extensive research from Ontario, Canada, and internationally. They have travelled the province meeting with foster parents, front-line child welfare staff, boards and management of CASs, ministry staff, independent residential service providers, leaders from child welfare partners in children's mental health, education, health, justice and the legal community, and a range of other community services. They have reflected and debated and have now developed a picture of where this work should lead and how they will get there.

This document shares the results of this initial work, the ground that the Commission has covered, the conclusions reached, and most importantly, the course that it is now following.

1. ONTARIO CHILD WELFARE IN BRIEF

Child welfare is one of several provincially funded programs intended to ensure that Ontario’s children are safe and healthy and grow up to realize their full potential as contributing members of our society. Child welfare is 100% government funded. Services are delivered through 53 independently governed agencies which are designated as CASs under the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA). Six of these agencies have been established with specific mandates to serve the needs of children in Aboriginal communities.

The CFSA sets out the following functions of a CAS:

- a) investigate allegations or evidence that children who are under the age of sixteen years or are in the society’s care or under its supervision may be in need of protection;
- b) protect, where necessary, children who are under the age of sixteen years or are in the society’s care or under its supervision;
- c) provide guidance, counselling and other services to families for protecting children or for the prevention of circumstances requiring the protection of children;
- d) provide care for children assigned or committed to its care;
- e) supervise children assigned to its supervision;
- f) place children for adoption; and
- g) perform any other duties given to it by CFSA or any other Act.

Like police services, children’s aid societies are relatively unique among publicly funded services in that they have a legislative authority and obligation to provide these services. Under the CFSA, CASs must respond to all eligible requests for services within specified time parameters. Waiting lists are not an option for managing demand within fixed resources.

While most people are aware that the work of CASs involves protecting children by removing them from their homes and caring for them in foster care or group homes, in fact, this represents only a small part of their work. Although these “in care” services represent a large part of child welfare

CHILD WELFARE AT A GLANCE

- 53 CASs serving approximately 120,000 families and over 310,000 children each year
- Close to 6.4 million days in substitute care
- Over 18,000 children in care (foster homes, group homes, residential treatment facilities)
- About 90% of children served by CASs are at home with their families
- Close to 1,000 adoptions through CASs annually
- Approximately 8,000 foster families in the province
- Approximately 8,800 CAS staff
- Hundreds of volunteer drivers, tutors, special friends, and other roles
- Over 800 volunteer board members of CASs and their CAS foundations

costs, they account for only a small proportion of children and youth served by CASs. For every child “in care” in Ontario’s CASs, it is estimated that another nine children are served by CASs at home with their families.

2. THE POLICY CONTEXT FOR CHILD WELFARE

Child welfare policy in any jurisdiction reflects a number of societal choices.¹ Prominent among these choices is balancing the dual mandate of protecting children on one hand, while supporting the family-child bond, on the other. Policy in Canada, the United States, and England, has tended to place more emphasis on child protection. Sweden and some other European countries, tend to place more emphasis on providing supports to families. In Aboriginal communities throughout the world, emphasis is placed on community preservation as integral to healthy individual identities and a strong value is placed upon keeping children within their families and their communities.

A related choice – regardless of whether the emphasis is on child protection or family preservation – is the degree to which the state intrudes into the lives of children. Child welfare policy in some jurisdictions reflects a “least intrusive” approach with the state intervening only when absolutely unavoidable. Policy in other jurisdictions takes a more communal approach viewing the health of parent-child relationships as a shared societal responsibility. This orientation results in a more proactive approach to providing support to families where children are considered to be at risk.

Another significant dimension of child welfare policy relates to whether child protection functions as a stand-alone service – or whether it is integrated as one element of a range of comprehensive children’s services.

A final significant child welfare policy choice relates to how service decisions are made. On one end of the continuum is emphasis on the training and judgement of child welfare professionals, leaving individual case decisions up to the discretion of the child welfare worker. On the other end of the continuum is a reliance on rules determined by guidelines, standards and regulations to be applied consistently to all cases.

Child welfare policy in Ontario over the last decade reflects a number of shifting choices relating to these various dimensions. Up until the late 1990s, Ontario child welfare policy reflected a “least intrusive” bias. Child welfare functioned fairly independently of other social services and intervention decisions relied largely on the discretion of individual child protection workers and their supervisors.

¹The commentary in this section borrows significantly from the discussion of child welfare policy in the book, Freymond, N. and Cameron, G. (Eds.) (2006), *Towards positive systems of child and family welfare; international comparisons of child protection, family service, and community caring systems*, University of Toronto Press.

By the late 1990s, a series of high profile child deaths at the hands of their parents caused a dramatic policy shift towards a more intrusive and proactive approach. In parallel, the emphasis shifted in favour of child protection as enshrined in the CFSA with the language, “the paramount purpose of this Act is to promote the best interest, protection, and well being of children”. In addition, increased attention was placed on standard approaches to risk assessment, shifting away from the discretion of individual workers. Finally, in several communities the government encouraged service agencies to move towards integrated models for providing related services such as child welfare, youth justice, children’s mental health, etc. This resulted in the formation of several amalgamated agencies which exist today.

In 2006, following two years of collaborative work between the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) and CASs, the Ontario Government launched the Transformation Agenda. This multi-dimensional agenda shifted the policy focus towards a more balanced position between “child protection” and “family preservation”. Policy emphasis was also placed on child welfare collaborating more fully with other community partners. Transformation also recognized the merits of a different, more community-based response to Aboriginal child welfare (such as “customary care”). The emphasis on consistent application of universal standards continued and various new standards and tools were introduced.

3. TRENDS IN SERVICE VOLUMES AND FUNDING (TO 2008/09)

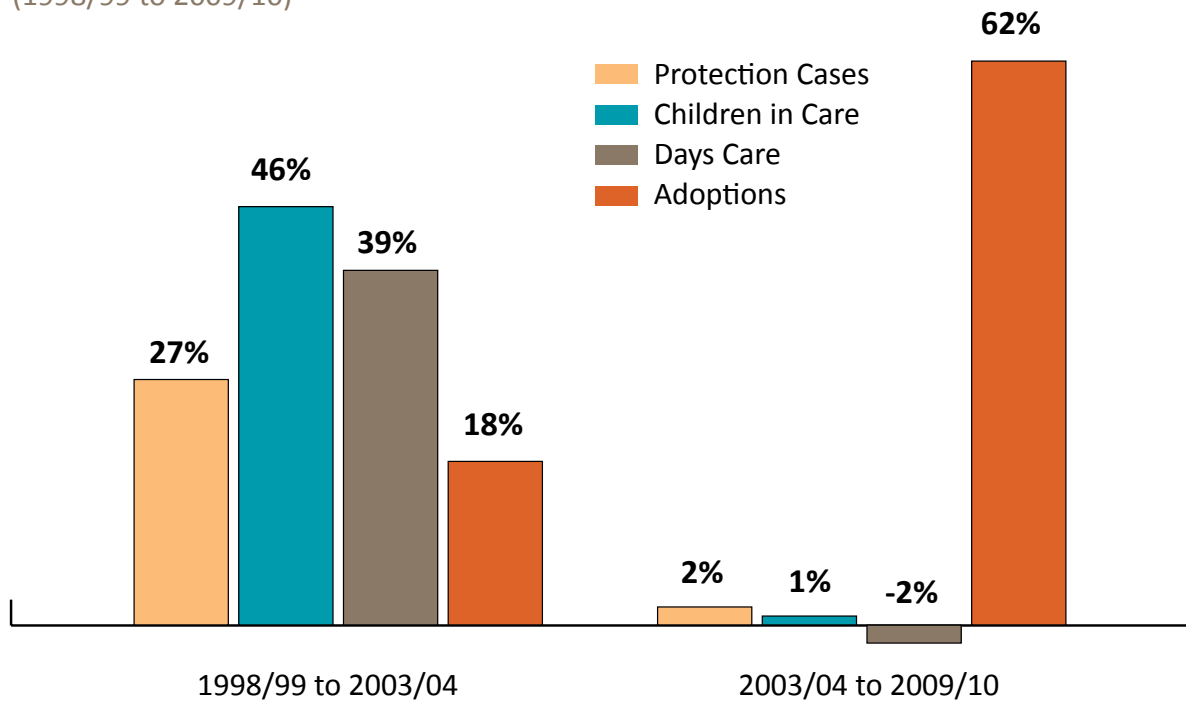
An examination of service levels and of child welfare funding since the late 1990s tells the story of the impact of various policy shifts over the last decade. As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, in the five years prior to the start of work on the Transformation Agenda (1998/99 to 2003/04):

- The number of children coming into care (i.e. foster care, group care) increased rapidly in response to the stronger policy emphasis on protection and risk.
- This increase in children in care together with increased workloads associated with administrative and regulatory demands resulted in a rapid escalation of costs. Child welfare spending grew at three times the rate of all other Ontario government program spending.

In the five years following work on the Transformation Agenda (2003/04 to 2008/09):

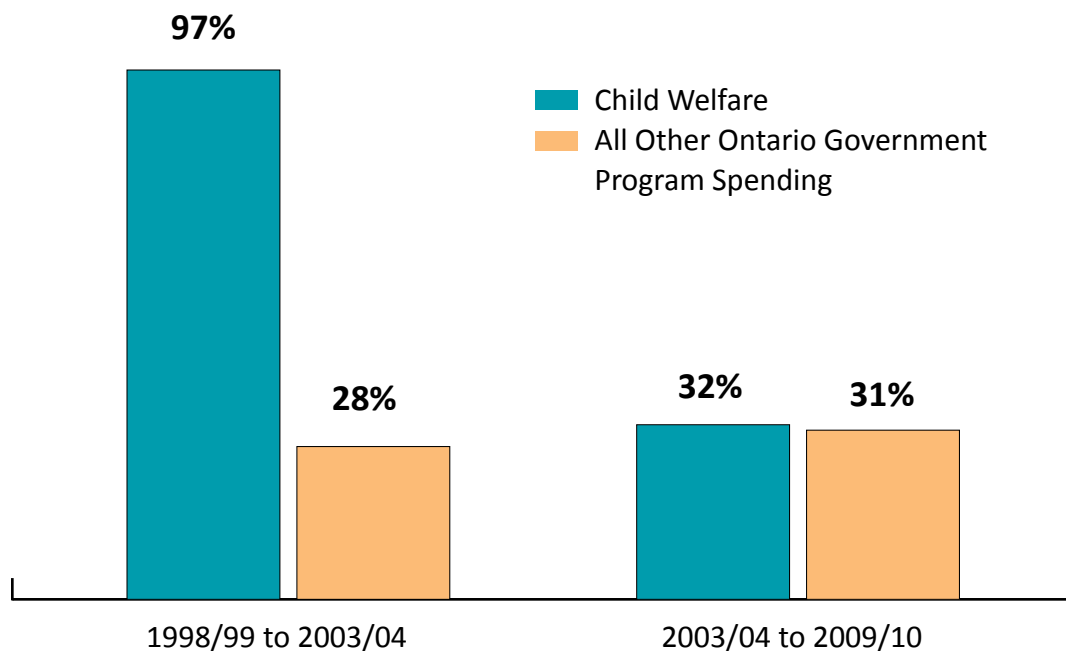
- New policy directions including “differential response”, increased emphasis on kinship, more focus on permanency, and other new approaches introduced through Transformation arrested further growth of the number of children in care as an increased proportion of children and youth were supported without extensive time “in care”.
- In parallel, spending growth returned to levels consistent with the rate of spending growth for all other Ontario government funded programs.

Figure 1
Child Welfare Activity Levels
 (1998/99 to 2009/10)



Source: MCYS Quarterly Reports, 1998/99 Q4-2009/10 Q3

Figure 2
Change in Child Welfare Spending vs All Other Ontario Government Spending
 (1998/99 to 2009/10)
 % nominal dollars (not inflation adjusted)



Source: Ontario Public Accounts documents, 1998-2009

These figures show the financial impact on CASs of policy directions taken in the last ten years, but do not tell us about the consequences of such growth for other related children's services. Ten year trends are difficult to assess across these children's programs accurately, because of departmental and program changes that have been made provincially during this period. Nevertheless, the Commission has heard from many sources that other services, such as children's mental health services and services for children and young adults with developmental disabilities, received very limited funding increases during this period, and in some years no increase at all. The unintended impact is that in many local communities, the very supportive and preventative services that could prevent children requiring protection may often be unavailable.

4. THE CURRENT FUNDING CLIMATE

In response to the global economic crisis, Ontario government funding to all sectors has been significantly constrained in 2009/10 and again in 2010/11. The allocation for child welfare for these two years has been roughly equivalent to funding made available to CASs in 2008/09. Given their legal duties, and the relatively fixed nature of "in care" and staffing costs, CASs have struggled to balance budgets in the face of this significant financial constraint.

In Ontario child welfare, a funding formula – introduced as part of Transformation and rolled out in 2005/2006 – is used to determine what proportion of the total budget for the sector will be allocated to each agency. The formula, however, was designed to support implementation of the Transformation Agenda and did not contemplate accommodating periods of fiscal constraint in the sector. In the 2009/10 budget, application of this funding formula resulted in significant variation in the impact on each CAS. Some CASs received funding increases of as much as 4.5%. Some received allocations unchanged from 2008/09. Some had decreases in excess of 10%.



Some modifications to the formula were made for 2010/11; however, significant variations exist again in a similar order of magnitude as experienced in 2009/10. This differential impact of the two years of funding constraint has increased the intensity of the financial stress on several CASs.

A future in which a modernized child welfare system functions as one of many programs working together to provide integrated, child-focused services fully aligned to improve outcomes for children and youth.

1. THE BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

Child welfare's unique and immediate focus lies in protecting vulnerable children each and every day and enabling kids to be kids. Protecting children from neglect and abuse, however, has very significant long-term social value. Children who suffer abuse and neglect are more likely to grow up having mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, risky sexual behaviour, obesity, and criminal behaviour, which persist into adulthood.² Evidence also shows links between childhood maltreatment and a range of chronic and debilitating illnesses in adulthood.³ Investing in quality services for children and their families will benefit Ontario communities and taxpayers, now and in the long term.

So, with the stakes so high, what are the underlying causes of child abuse and neglect and how do we address them?

Poverty has been shown to have a particularly strong correlation in cases of neglect.^{4,5} The 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect found that neglect was the primary category of maltreatment in nearly one third of all substantiated maltreatment investigations.⁶ It also found that families in substantiated neglect cases were least likely to have full-time employment and most likely to be receiving some form of social assistance. In Aboriginal communities where socio-economic conditions are even more challenging, neglect was found to be the primary category for over half of all substantiated investigations.

The challenge of preventing the near- and long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect extends well beyond the scope of services CASs are mandated and funded to provide. The recent economic downturn provides a case in point, to which many CASs attribute increasing calls

² Gilbert, R. (2009), *Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high income countries*, The Lancet, Volume 373, Issue 9657, 3 January 2009, Pages 68 - 81.

³ Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B., and Lozano, R. (2002). *World report on violence and health*. (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization).

⁴ Leschied, A.W., Chiodo, M.A., Whitehead, P.C., & Hurley, D. (2003)., *The Association of Poverty with Child Welfare Service and Child and Family Clinical Outcomes*. Community, Work & Family, Volume 9, Issue 1 February 2006, pages 29 – 46.

⁵ Leschied, A.W., Whitehead, P.C., Hurley, D., & Chiodo, M.A. (2003). *Protecting Children is Everybody's Business: Investigating the Increasing Demand for Service at the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex*. United Way of London and Middlesex and the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex.

⁶ Trocme, N., Fallon, B. et al (2003), *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect*, CECW.

for their services from families affected by job loss and anxiety. The reality is that vulnerable children live in vulnerable families. Without more equal opportunities, and in the absence of more positive interventions and service availability for vulnerable families and children, demands on the child welfare system increase – bringing corresponding questions regarding its long-term sustainability and cost to society.

2. ENVISIONING A SYSTEM RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The scope of the Commission’s work is child welfare. Yet, because of the impact of social and economic factors on children and families, it is important to place child welfare in a broader vision for children’s services; a vision where services are designed and integrated around the needs of the vulnerable children and families.

Today’s reality is that vulnerable families often find themselves attempting to access services organised in separately delivered programs, each with their own mandates, access criteria, and institutional obstacles. Moreover, the universal services that are in place to meet the needs of all Ontarians – education, healthcare, and others – often fall short of meeting the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. And when they fall short, it is the children who suffer the most. Children without a family doctor, left out of school or without mental health treatment too often drift towards chronic unemployment, homelessness, the criminal justice system, and at worst, suicide and premature death.

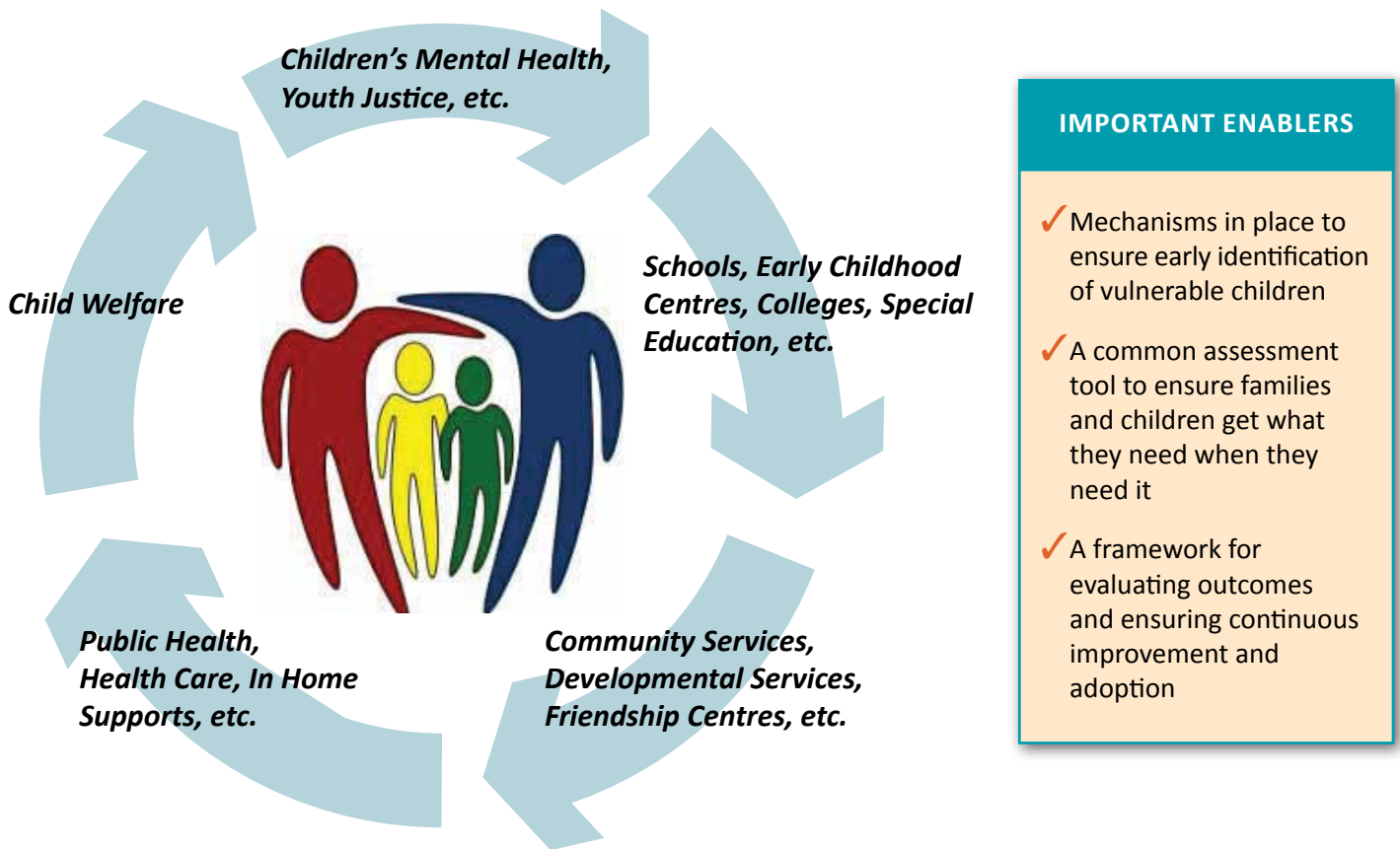
As a province, if we want to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children, we must make some important policy choices. We must commit to maintaining the balance between child protection and family preservation that was inherent in the 2006 Transformation Agenda. We must also choose to reframe “child welfare” as “the welfare of children”, which is a shared societal responsibility – not the exclusive purview of CASs.

In making these choices, we need to deliver services for vulnerable children and their families in a very different way than we do today. We need to move past a reality where families are too often left to navigate alone and figure out how to make the “system” work for them. We need to move beyond a reality where CASs default into the role of advocates or gatekeepers facilitating access to services that are intended to be universal. We need to see a new set of relationships in which other service providers see CASs not as the dominant player, but as a partner in an environment where multiple providers work together to ensure the best outcomes for vulnerable children and youth.

Rather, as illustrated in Figure 4, we need to create an integrated system of services that has the capacity to identify vulnerable children and families early, assess what services they need most, and ensure that they get the services they need, when they need them and in the form that will make the biggest difference. No more. No less. No falling through the cracks. No passing the buck.

Figure 3

An Integrated System for Ontario’s Vulnerable Children and Families



The vision depicted may appear to be simple common sense. It is much more difficult to deliver – every time, to every vulnerable family and child in Ontario.

In some parts of Ontario, vulnerable children and families are being identified early and are experiencing a higher degree of coordination of services. This is the number of Ontario communities in which multiple agencies and programs have been consolidated under one roof. It exists in some communities that have put in place active children’s planning councils that are innovating in new ways to identify and respond to the needs of their most vulnerable families. It exists in some communities where multiple agencies have developed working arrangements that

achieve greater integration and seamlessness and tailoring of services to meet unique family circumstances. It needs to exist everywhere and it needs to be durable. It therefore needs to be officially sanctioned in some way and not dependent on personal relationships alone or on ad hoc arrangements.

Ontario has begun to make changes and commitments that move the entire province closer to realizing this vision. The Poverty Reduction strategy. The Early Learning strategy. These and other initiatives are promising steps towards realizing a more integrated system responsive to the needs of vulnerable children – and in the process, an environment in which sustainable child welfare can be realized.

3. VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

Against the backdrop of this imperative to move towards a more child-focused system of child and family services, we return to the Commission's vision for sustainable child welfare.

A future in which a modernized child welfare system functions as one of many programs working together to provide integrated, child-focused services fully aligned to improve outcomes for children and youth.

Within this broad system of services, child welfare will serve neither as the gatekeeper nor as the nucleus. It will be a self-renewing dynamic child welfare system that is fully integrated and balanced within a child-focused system that provides a full continuum of services to children, youth and families.

In this future:

- **Children, youth and families will be served equitably across Ontario.** All clients will have access to comparable levels of expertise and professionalism. Moving from one part of Ontario will not mean losing access to supports that were available in another part of Ontario. Similarly, in this future, foster and adoptive parents and kin families will experience comparable access and supports regardless of where they live in Ontario.
- **Vulnerable and at risk children will be identified and supported early.** Consistent with the spirit of the Transformation Agenda, the need for child protection services and admissions to CAS care, will continue to decline as a result of more proactive and early interventions for vulnerable children and families. Children's service providers, including CASs will work together to garner the services needed to avoid deterioration in children's and families' circumstances.

- **Youth will enter adulthood with lifelong connections.** Youth will no longer fear “aging out” of care. They will enter adulthood with the connections, skills and confidence that they will need to reach their full potential.
- **There will be clear evidence of, and constant improvement in, the outcomes that the system is producing.** Government, CAS boards, staff, and the public will be able to easily access information and see evidence that the outcomes for vulnerable children and youth are improving and that the cycle of neglect and poverty is not being repeated from one generation to the next.
- **Time supporting direct service to children, youth, and families will be maximized.** Social workers, children and youth workers, and other professionals will be spending most of their time in direct service to children, youth and families – not in the office filling in forms and checking off boxes.
- **There will be fewer CASs and all CASs will be financially stable.** The scale of each organization will permit high levels and expertise in service delivery, management, quality, legal, and other services. In this future, one or two children with very complex needs will not be the difference between a CAS being able to meet or not meet its budget.
- **There will be variations in the model and in the role that CASs play across the province,** but the outcomes for children will be the same and the differences will be justifiable, based on community, clients and capabilities
- **Aboriginal children, whether on-reserve or off-reserve,** will have access to services that reflect their needs and are delivered in ways that respect their culture, heritage and traditions.



1. TODAY'S STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Children's aid societies grew out of strong religious and charitable beginnings and were organized around city and county boundaries. These strong, community-based roots represent a source of considerable strength. Today's CASs benefit from high levels of volunteerism, community engagement, and private and public philanthropy. Their strong community-orientation has also resulted in significant customization of services to respond to local community needs and cultures.

Throughout its initial work, the Commission has been impressed by the level of commitment, passion, and innovation evident in the staff, volunteers, and partners working in CASs. The many individual stories from youth-in-care and kin families and biological parents of how CASs have made a difference in their lives are tremendously inspiring. Similarly, much inspiration can be drawn from hearing the remarkable stories of commitment and self-sacrifice that characterizes so many foster families, CAS staff and volunteers.

Notwithstanding these many strengths, Ontario's CASs were not designed to perform as an integrated, seamless provincial system of child welfare services. There needs to be more portability, interoperability and equity of services from one CAS to another. For CASs to become a sustainable system capable of realizing the vision we described, some significant changes are needed.

Variable capacity among CASs

The largest CAS in the province has over 800 staff and a budget of close to \$160 million. The smallest has about 30 staff and a budget of less than \$4 million. Some regions of Ontario are served by very large CASs; other regions are served by very small CASs. These size differences give rise to uneven levels of specialization, expertise, and management capacity. They also have very different capacity to cope with rapid socio-economic changes in their communities, the year on year variations in budget allocations and the unpredictable variations in the costs associated with caring for individual children's complex needs.

Variable CAS service models / cultures

No two CASs are alike. This is not entirely surprising as no two Ontario communities are alike. However, it isn't evident that all the different service approaches and cultures operating in different CASs are due to communities' different needs and circumstances.

As examples, the capacity for and emphasis on adoption, kinship care, supports for youth transitioning to adulthood, supports to foster families, and views on group care for children and youth, vary markedly from one agency to another.

Variability in legal processes and delays

The Commission has observed considerable variability in the organization of legal services in CASs and in the way legal matters are handled. There is also considerable variability by the Bench and by the local Bar. Examples of variability include; the use of Access Orders where children are Crown Wards and might be otherwise free for adoption; the frequency with which CASs must secure psychological assessments and drug testing of parents; and decisions relating to the amount of supervised access. Access to courts, especially in the North and in smaller rural communities, is a significant concern. The Commission has heard many examples of prolonged delays before a matter can be heard beyond an adjournment at the first appearance. The human and financial costs of these issues can be enormous.

Insufficient inter-CAS collaboration and sector-wide focus by CASs

There are many examples of collaboration between CASs on both local and provincial levels. However, this collaboration is largely ad hoc. CASs collectively do not behave as a coordinated system and tend to look to the government to initiate and provide direction on system-wide priorities. To become a self-sustaining, adaptive system, CASs will need to develop a shared responsibility for serving all of Ontario's children, providing services as part of a province-wide system of appropriate services.

Compliance focus above a performance and outcomes focus

Today's accountability framework largely revolves around a multitude of compliance-based mechanisms that focus on detailed audits of compliance against standards. Limited information is available on the performance of individual CASs or on the overall performance of the sector. CAS boards do not have clear and consistent accountabilities to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services based on performance standards and outcomes targets.

Too much expected of a funding formula

Several dimensions of intended system performance were incorporated in the funding formula introduced as part of the 2006 Transformation. Further modifications were added in recent years. The formula has not enabled the system to adapt to the current realities of a fiscally constrained environment. It is characterized as creating "perverse incentives", and appears, in some instances, to discourage good performance. Nor does the current funding formula adequately support the goals of the Transformation Agenda.

Fragmentation and suboptimal coordination of MCYS functions

Responsibility for child welfare functions is distributed across multiple divisions within MCYS which sometimes creates lack of clarity on who is doing what as well as challenges in

communications. The role and authority of regional offices relative to corporate functions is sometimes unclear. There are opportunities to better set priorities, evaluate results, coordinate communications, request information and translate policy directions into operational requirements.

Two additional dynamics transcend child welfare but are absolutely essential to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and youth served by CASs:

Mainstream services not sufficiently responsive to the needs of “CAS kids”

CASs invest considerable resources in advocating for access to services for the children and youth in their care. The Commission has heard many examples of children in care missing weeks of school while the CAS negotiates for their admission with a local school board and/or for appropriate supports for their special needs. An equal number of examples exist related to access to children’s mental health services – a program that has received limited funding increases for over a decade. Many children simply go without the services that CAS and foster parents feel that they need. The situation has become so acute in some areas that CASs have either negotiated arrangements to pay children’s mental health providers for services or have created in-house services in order to respond to needs. We must move from this reality of having to negotiate for access to services to a system in which resources are balanced and coordinated and able to be responsive to the needs of these vulnerable children and youth.

Lack of a robust connection between needs, system priorities, and system capacity

While extensive research and analysis capacity exist within MCYS functions, it is unclear where responsibility lies for assessing the overall needs of Ontario’s children, disseminating this information to CASs and other providers, and ensuring that services are available to meet these needs. Significant variability in the availability of supports like children’s mental health services, independent group and foster home care, etc. is evidence of the lack of overall system discipline that is required to ensure local resources match local needs.



A GLIMPSE INTO VARIABILITY AMONG TODAY'S CASs

All of Ontario's 53 CASs are subject to the same legislation and policy requirements. And all of them provide mandated child protection and adoption services. They all receive calls from the community and investigate those calls. They provide services to children and to their families and if necessary, remove children from their family in order to care for them safely in the home of a neighbour or a relative, or in a foster home or a group home until they can be returned to their own home or placed for adoption.

And yet, the way that children and families experience child welfare services across Ontario varies so much that it is difficult to claim that the 53 CASs provide the same services under the same mandate. Consider a call made to a CAS by a relative concerned about the care of an eight year old girl who is apparently often left alone overnight by her mother (a young single parent) and is frequently absent from school. The same information received by three CASs may result in very different responses:

- After the initial investigation, the worker from one CAS identified a neighbour who could help out from time to time, arranged addiction counselling and a parenting education and support program for the mother (located at the school), and made other referrals to get needed help for the family.
- At a second agency which provides a variety of programs under one roof including mental health services, parent support programs and child welfare, a family support worker and a mental health worker were assigned right away and the child welfare worker was satisfied that the risk to the child was reduced to the point that child protection services were not required.
- In another community there were no available services for the mother in the community and the agency did not have the resources itself to deal with the mother's needs. Nor could they locate a capable neighbour or relative willing to support the mother. The little girl was brought into care, court proceedings followed, and mother did not receive the supports and treatment that would help her to prepare for her daughter's return home.

In each of these scenarios, the CAS workers involved did what they could within the policy and legislative framework. In each case they sought alternatives to creating an ongoing child protection case and to removing the child from her home. And in each case, the model of service, the resources available in the community and the capabilities of the CAS itself, were all significant factors in the way that the child and mother were served.

The question that arises from these scenarios is, in light of differences in the clients served, the characteristics of various communities and the availability of other services, what is the justifiable degree of variability in the scope, organization and delivery practices in child welfare services across Ontario? And the same question arises in relation to other aspects of child welfare services as well. Some child welfare agencies have high numbers of children in group homes outside their own community and others have very few. Some complete relatively high numbers of adoptions each year while others complete very few. Some have very high numbers of children in their care relative to the child population in their area while others remove very few children from their homes. From the child's point of view, this is not fair.

2. UNIQUE POPULATION CHALLENGES

The diversity of Ontario’s population and of its geography presents major challenges in ensuring equitable access and quality of services for children and youth across the province.

Aboriginal Children and Families

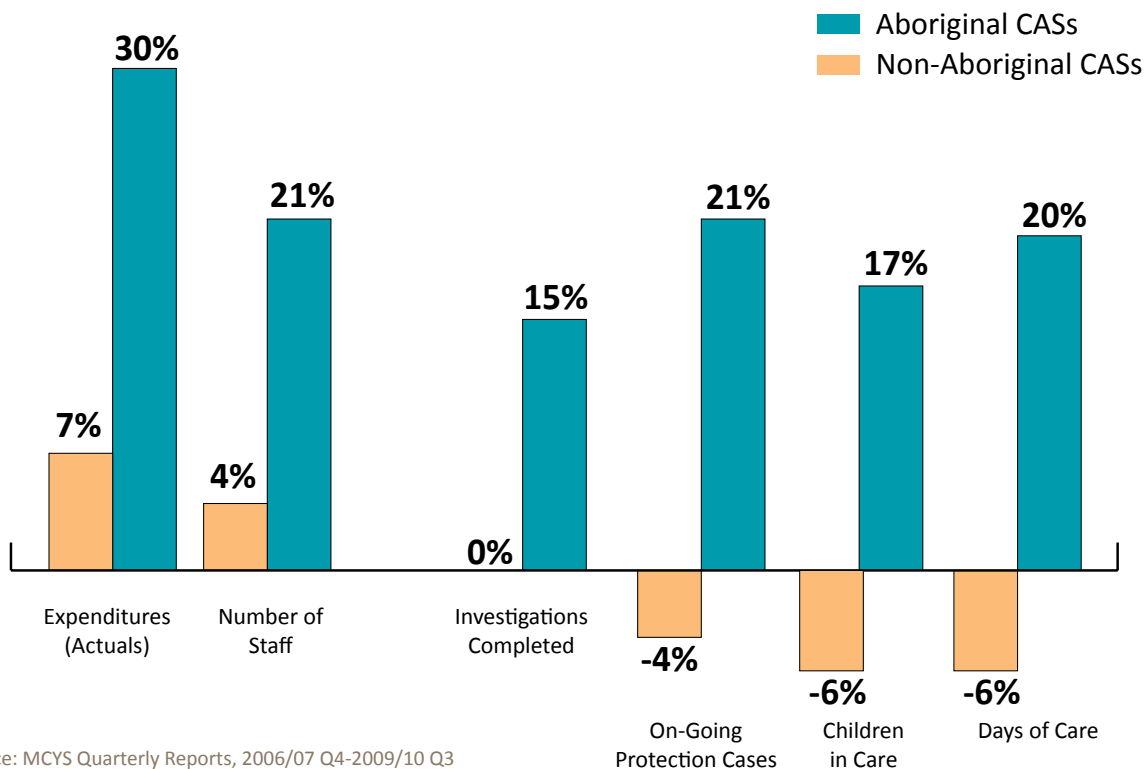
An imperative in Ontario child welfare is responding to the *unique and complex needs of Aboriginal children and families*. The legacy of residential schools and the hundreds of children removed from Aboriginal communities through adoption during the 1960s and 1970s have had a profound impact on Aboriginal communities. As Aboriginal people throughout the province strive to move beyond this history and rebuild their communities and cultures, they struggle with many political and socio-economic challenges. Some face additional complexities associated with remoteness. Several communities are reeling from escalating rates of youth suicides. Meanwhile, all Aboriginal communities – urban, northern, and southern – are experiencing rapid growth in their children’s population.

As illustrated in Figure 3, these dynamics translate into very different service trends for Aboriginal child welfare compared to child welfare for the province’s other children. Solutions for sustainable child welfare in Ontario must take into account these very different dynamics facing Aboriginal communities and their children.

Figure 4

Trends in Aboriginal CASs vs Non-Aboriginal CASs

(2006/07 to 2009/10)



Source: MCYS Quarterly Reports, 2006/07 Q4-2009/10 Q3

Many Aboriginal communities have advocated strongly for designation of their own agencies as child welfare agencies. Six Aboriginal agencies are currently designated under the CFSA as CASs. Another seven Aboriginal agencies have been actively working towards designation.

CFSA includes a number of provisions for how all CASs should work with Aboriginal communities to support Aboriginal children but practices vary between CASs. There is an urgent need to work with Aboriginal communities to solidify approaches that respond to the unique needs of their children and youth.⁷

Children and Families Whose First Language Is Not English

For children and families whose first language is not English, it is critical when they receive child welfare services, that they and their service providers understand each other's language, including the subtleties of words. They are dealing with the most critical and personal matters of their lives.

This is true for all clients –but for French-speaking Ontarians, the right to services in French is imbedded in law.

CASs designated to provide French language services fully embrace the practice and the obligation. At the same time, however, this obligation places many additional demands on these agencies: translation of all public materials; recruitment and retention of bilingual and French-speaking staff, board members, volunteers, and foster families; and identifying and working with other service providers who have French-language capabilities. Notwithstanding the costs associated with French language services, the sector as a whole needs to be able to offer child welfare services anywhere in the province where requested by clients – not only in the 22 communities that are designated under the French Language Services Act. To contain costs and take advantage of the special language capabilities in some CASs they could access each other's French language skills, use a networking approach of some sort, or take other measures. In any event, emphasis should be given to the service needs of clients not only the narrow legal requirements.

3. A SUMMARY OF SYSTEM DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

During its first phase of work, the Commission identified five dimensions of system design. These five features provide a lens through which to examine the current system and compare it against systems in other jurisdictions. The five features also provide a mechanism for identifying what should be retained and what should change in order to realize sustainable child welfare in Ontario. The results of this work are detailed in the Commission's working paper, *Jurisdictional*

⁷ For further commentary and analysis of unique considerations relating to child welfare for Aboriginal children and youth, please refer to *Aboriginal Child Welfare across Canadian Jurisdictions* in section two of the Commission's Working Paper No 2, *Jurisdictional Comparisons of Child Welfare System Design*.

Comparisons of Child Welfare System Design,⁸ and are summarized in Figure 5.

As noted in the table, a “child-focused culture” is an over-arching feature that informs and is informed by all five of the system design features.

It should be noted that the unique considerations of Aboriginal communities warrant an examination of these design features through a separate lens. Potential modifications to system design resulting from this kind of examination have not been captured on the chart that follows.

Figure 5
Summary of Current System Design

Child-focused culture		
All organizations, staff, and boards demonstrate significant intent to be child-focused but individual organizations and sectors function too much as silos. Children and families do not experience an integrated array of services responsive to their needs.		
Feature	Status	Comments
1. Governance model	Retain	Ontario’s independent governance model differs from most of Canada. However, its roots in the community are a great social asset and should be retained. Better province-wide system design and effective accountability relationships will ensure more consistent services and outcomes.
2. Policy character	Retain	The balance established by the Transformation Agenda between child protection and family preservation is appropriate. However, the policy directions from Transformation have not been fully or consistently realized across the province – which is essential for sustainable child welfare.
3. Service configuration	Change	Opportunities exist to enhance consistency and quality of services through service reconfiguration including: shared services at the regional and provincial levels; agency amalgamation; and in some circumstances, amalgamation with other agencies serving children and families. Moreover, greater integration of services within and beyond the child welfare sector is required.
4. Funding approach	Change	New approach to funding is required that is more fully aligned with current system goals and accountabilities, more reflective of local community needs, and more adaptive to changing fiscal realities.
5. System of accountability	Change	Shift is required from current compliance focus to more outcomes and performance focus. Enhanced and transparent system-wide performance and outcomes information required at agency and system level.

⁸ Available on the Commission’s website

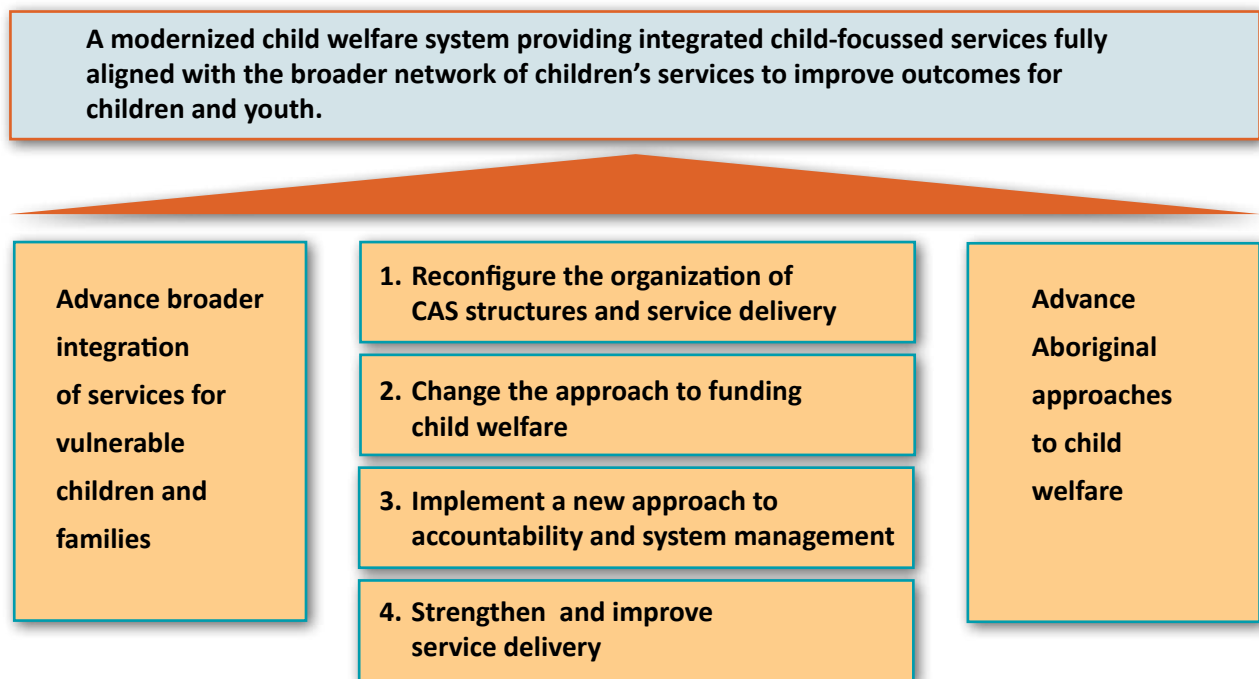
THE STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILD WELFARE

The Commission’s vision for child welfare in Ontario represents a future that will look very different than the status quo. It will demand changes for every CAS, at every level of MCYS, among child welfare’s many partners – foster parents, independent service providers, children’s mental health, education, community agencies, and others. The overriding principle in this change process must be to look beyond today’s systems, processes, and organizational and sector identities to the question of: how can we improve outcomes for vulnerable children and youth across Ontario?

In its initial months, the Commission has been encouraged and inspired not just by the commitment of all child welfare providers and partners to the importance of this change agenda – but also by the many instances in which they are actively moving forward with change.

The Commission has developed a four-tiered strategy through which to accelerate action towards the sustainable child welfare vision during the remaining two and a half years of its mandate. These four tiers are illustrated in Figure 6. While efforts will occur on each tier in parallel, the tiers themselves build on each other with the first tier being absolutely critical to fully realizing the second and the so on. As illustrated, the four tiers are flanked by two overarching strategies relating to Aboriginal child welfare and broader system integration.

Figure 6
A Four-Tiered Strategy for Sustainable Child Welfare



1. RECONFIGURE THE ORGANIZATION OF CAS STRUCTURES AND SERVICE DELIVERY

The configuration and organization of CAS services forms the foundation on which funding, accountability, and actual delivery of services is based. Hence, reconfiguration of CAS services is necessarily positioned as the first tier in the Commission's strategy. Following the adage "form follows function", configuration decisions must stem directly from changes that will more fully position the system to deliver on the characteristics described in the vision in Chapter Three.

The Commission's belief in the need for some degree of system reconfiguration stems from three conclusions. First, all child welfare organizations should have the scale required to ensure economy, quality and consistency. Second, in some cases, economies of scale can create efficiencies which in turn free up valuable resources for services to children and families. Finally, ensuring comparable access and quality of services across the province will require some degree of system reconfiguration.

The Commission will be undertaking further work during the summer to set priorities and develop tools and frameworks to support identification and implementation of reconfiguration options. This work will be informed by the following conclusions that have arisen from the Commission's early work:

Regarding the Role of CASs ...

- CASs should be leaders in the delivery of: protection investigations and assessments (based on a differential response approach); ongoing protection services with families; in-care services; and adoption placements and supports.
- CASs should collaborate – and where appropriate, directly provide – early intervention, admission prevention, and family preservation services in the exercise of their primary child protection function.
- CASs should support youth in developing lifelong connections and the skills and knowledge they will need to reach their full potential in their transition to adulthood.

Regarding Economies of Scale ...

- There are a number of smaller CASs that should move towards amalgamation with a neighbouring CAS in order to realize economies of scale and to enhance quality, service expertise and managerial capacity. This will result in fewer CASs in Ontario.
- Issues of remoteness and culture may outweigh economy of scale considerations in some communities.
- Not every CAS should be designated to provide all functions set out in the legislation. There are opportunities for some of the larger CASs (including larger Aboriginal CASs) to provide specialized services and expertise to other CASs – in much the same way as occurs in healthcare with the role of teaching hospitals.

- The delivery of some services on a regional or provincial basis may be beneficial for some direct services and some administrative functions.

Regarding Broader Service Design...

- The integrated service models in place in several Ontario communities (notably north-eastern Ontario) create a case to carefully examine the benefits that could be realized through extending this kind of a model in other rural and rural-urban mixed communities.
- All child welfare service configuration changes should take place in the context of broader efforts to move towards a more fully integrated and balanced system of children's services.

Reconfiguration by its very nature can be disruptive in the short term. It can have very direct and personal impacts on individuals at every level of CASs – boards, management, staff, foster parents, volunteers. It can also have an impact on children and families. Some reconfiguration is, however, essential in moving Ontario towards a child-focused sustainable child welfare system. Reconfiguration will require a close examination of options and important choices regarding which option will deliver the most value to children and have the most impact on improving outcomes. The Commission has defined an initial set of core principles which must guide decisions around reconfiguration:

- The protection and well-being of children will be enhanced through reconfiguration.
- Reconfiguration will contain, reduce, and avoid costs and will increase value for money
- Administrative burden will be reduced and there will be greater capacity for direct services to children and families.
- Local community assets, including volunteers and relationships will be valued and leveraged.
- Voluntary participation by CASs is preferred to the extent possible.
- Reconfiguration will enhance economies of scale to ensure agency capacity, capability and financial viability.
- Reconfigurations can be initiated or accelerated by taking advantage of decisions or changes that are made for other reasons (e.g. retirements, new accommodations acquired, etc.)
- While the focus of reconfiguration will be primarily on child welfare, in line with the Commission's mandate, broader integration of children's services will be encouraged where warranted by community circumstances.
- Time is of the essence. However, changes will be made on a step-by-step basis.

2. CHANGE THE APPROACH TO FUNDING CHILD WELFARE

In June 2010, the Commission is formally beginning work to develop recommendations for a new approach to funding child welfare. A fundamental premise of this work is the conclusion that there is a need to change the basis on which child welfare funds are allocated. The basis of funding should migrate away from the current approach, which is significantly influenced by historical agency-by-agency costs and recent service volumes. While these factors remain relevant, population size, socio-economic factors, and relative capacity of other community resources should be incorporated as determinants of how provincial child welfare funds are allocated across Ontario. Other observations from the Commission's early work that will guide the development of recommendations for the future include:

Caution on complex funding formulas and use of funding incentives

- A funding approach augmented by clear performance accountabilities and outcomes measures will be much more effective than a complex funding formula embedded with multiple incentives.
- Setting limits on proportionate costs of infrastructure should be avoided as such targets limit management flexibility to enable front line staff to become more productive.

Provision for the unexpected / mitigation funding

- The historical pattern of year-end mitigation funding is unhealthy and unproductive.
- Changes in economies of scale of organizations will offset some of the vulnerability of smaller organizations and reduce the need for mitigation funding from the province.

Predictability and alignment in the annual planning and budgeting cycle

- Province-wide priority setting, annual budget allocations, and agency budget and accountability processes need to be more fully aligned.
- Processes must be put in place to inject more predictability and an earlier start to the annual planning and budgeting cycle.

Parallel adjustments in funding in other sectors

- Parallel attention is required to appropriate funding of children's mental health, developmental services for young adults, and other inter-related services needed for CAS children. This is essential to avoid CASs facing the choice of leaving families without services or directly providing them out of child welfare funding.
- Consideration should be given to channelling funds through a "commissioning" body which would be responsible for assessing local needs and securing the right services to meet them. This may achieve a better balance of funding and services with respect to needs across the children's and family services spectrum.⁹

⁹See the Commission's working paper, *Jurisdictional Comparisons of Child Welfare Design*, for how this model has been applied in the UK and in parts of the United States.

3. IMPLEMENT A NEW APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABILITY AND SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

In parallel with a new approach to funding CASs, a new approach to holding CASs accountable and overall system management is essential. The importance of a model for accountability was highlighted by both the 2003 Child Welfare Evaluation and the 2006 Transformation Agenda. Over the one to two years, considerable work has been undertaken by MCYS and CASs to begin to address many of these features. The Commission's strategy moving forward must harness and build on this important work.

This strategy will also leverage parallel thinking that is now underway in health care in examining how the focus on performance, quality, and outcomes can be strengthened from the Ministry to the hospital board all the way down to the front-line service provider. As in healthcare, accountability in child welfare must be grounded in a solid focus on who the system is for – in this case, vulnerable children and youth – and the desired outcomes for this population. Notable features of the Commission's strategy are:

Outcomes and performance-based accountability

- A need to shift away from a focus on compliance against standards to a focus on outcomes for children and agency and system performance.
- CAS Boards of Directors to have clear outcomes and performance accountabilities to MCYS against established targets.
- Outcomes and performance reporting to be complemented by "capacity assessments" to evaluate agency competence and capacity on multiple dimensions (eg. governance and leadership; strategy, planning and monitoring; stewardship of resources and value for money; program and service management; community partnerships; client perceptions; etc.).
- Introduce rewards and closer monitoring for lower performing agencies; more flexibility for higher performing agencies.
- Accelerated implementation of a province-wide information system will be an important enabler of these shifts – but is not required to begin the necessary changes.

Re-aligning roles and accountabilities

- Shift MCYS to system design, policy direction, funding, and evaluation from the current focus on case-based reviews.
- Clarify the role of regional offices and "head office" with respect to CASs.
- Boards to focus on agency strategy, plans, outcomes and performance
- Management to focus on day-to-day management with accountability to boards for overall outcomes and performance.

Create public transparency

- Move towards public reporting of outcomes on a provincial, regional, and agency basis.

4. STRENGTHEN AND IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

How agencies are structured, distributed across the province, funded, and held to account for results shapes the CAS's day-to-day work of making a difference for vulnerable children, youth, and families. A culture focused on improving service delivery for children and families is essential to maximizing the value and impact of this day-to-day work. During its remaining two and a half years, the Commission will place emphasis on three dimensions of improving service delivery:

- Confirming and increasing clarity on the range of child welfare services.
- Strengthening and improving direct services to children, youth and families.
- Streamlining administrative processes to maximize agency and worker capacity for direct services to children, youth and families.

Confirming and increasing clarity on the scope of child welfare services

As changes in the first three tiers take shape, the Commission will work with MCYS and the sector to define the range of services and delivery models provided through child welfare. This will include exploring what changes are necessary for services to be made more accessible to children wherever they live, whatever their ethno-cultural background. This examination will look at ways to ensure accessibility does not change when a child moves from one part of Ontario to another. This will be an iterative process and will be informed by policy decisions in the broader continuum of children's and family services.

Strengthening and improving direct services

The Commission has identified three direct service areas for focused attention during its mandate. This list may expand over time. The three areas are:

- *In-Care Services:* Representing 40% of total CAS costs, in-care services (foster and group care) for children and youth are broadly recognized as an important area for improvement. Phase 1 of this work began in April 2010 and will result in a short-list of priority action areas by the end of July 2010.
- *Permanency:* Accelerating movement to permanency for children and youth – through family preservation, kinship, adoption, guardianship, and other avenues – is vital to improving children's outcomes and ensuring the financial sustainability of the system. This work will build on the policy directions from the Transformation Agenda and from the August 2009 report of the Adoption and Infertility Working Group.
- *Youth Transitions to Adulthood:* Permanency and increased emphasis on supporting children in their own homes has been driving a gradual reduction in the number of children in care. This in turn, however, has resulted in an increasing proportion of the "in care" population being older youth – a trend that will continue in the coming years. The transition to adulthood is a critical period for these youth and a key factor in whether they realize their full potential as adults and whether they become "second generation"

CAS clients. The Commission will work closely with MCYS, CASs and community partners to identify and strengthen strategies for supporting these vital transitions for youth.

A final overarching area which requires focused attention relates to delays and variability in *Legal Services and Court Processes*. The Commission will work with CASs, the Bench, and the Bar to understand the issues and recommend steps, within its scope, to address them.

Streamlining administrative processes

This latter dimension – streamlining administrative processes – is the focus of a working paper (*Reducing Administrative Burden in Child Welfare*) and accompanying recommendations that the Commission tabled with the Minister of Children and Youth Services on May 31, 2010.¹⁰ This working paper draws on evidence from other parts of Canada and Europe to recommend actions that MCYS and CASs should take to reduce time lost in unnecessary administrative requirements. The Commission recognizes that changes must strike the right balance between safety and risk, central control, and local accountability. How do we achieve this objective more effectively with less process overhead than we have today? It is all about freeing up the time of front line staff to provide direct services to children.

The Commission’s recommendations for action in this area are detailed in the Working Paper and include: establishing within MCYS a “Gateway” mechanism to streamline and reduce administrative requests; adopting a cost model to measure and manage the problem; and developing a network of CASs to make sure that changes make an impact “on the ground”. The Commission has recommended immediate action to reduce administrative burdens associated with the “Tracking of High Risk Protection Cases” and “Simplifying Serious Occurrence Reporting.”¹¹

5. ADVANCE ABORIGINAL APPROACHES FOR CHILD WELFARE

Changes realized through all four of these tiers of the sustainable child welfare strategy will be of benefit to Aboriginal children and youth. However, as noted earlier, unique dynamics and circumstances facing Ontario’s Aboriginal people require additional consideration with respect to the shape of child welfare services for Ontario’s Aboriginal communities.

In April 2009, Minister Laurel Broten announced the appointment of an Aboriginal Advisor to provide advice relating to Aboriginal child welfare issues and Aboriginal child welfare policy. In the coming months the Commission will work with the Aboriginal Advisor and Aboriginal communities to identify culturally specific solutions to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth. These solutions must ensure that Ontario’s Aboriginal children benefit

¹⁰ See *Reducing Administrative Burden in Child Welfare*, Working Paper #1, May 31, 2010.

¹¹ See associated recommendations to the Minister posted on the Commission’s website at www.sustainingchildwelfare.com

from services and protections that should be available to all children. At the same time, services must reflect the unique considerations relating to Aboriginal history, jurisdiction, culture, and community healing as well as the socio-economic challenges facing many Aboriginal communities.

Solutions must take into consideration:

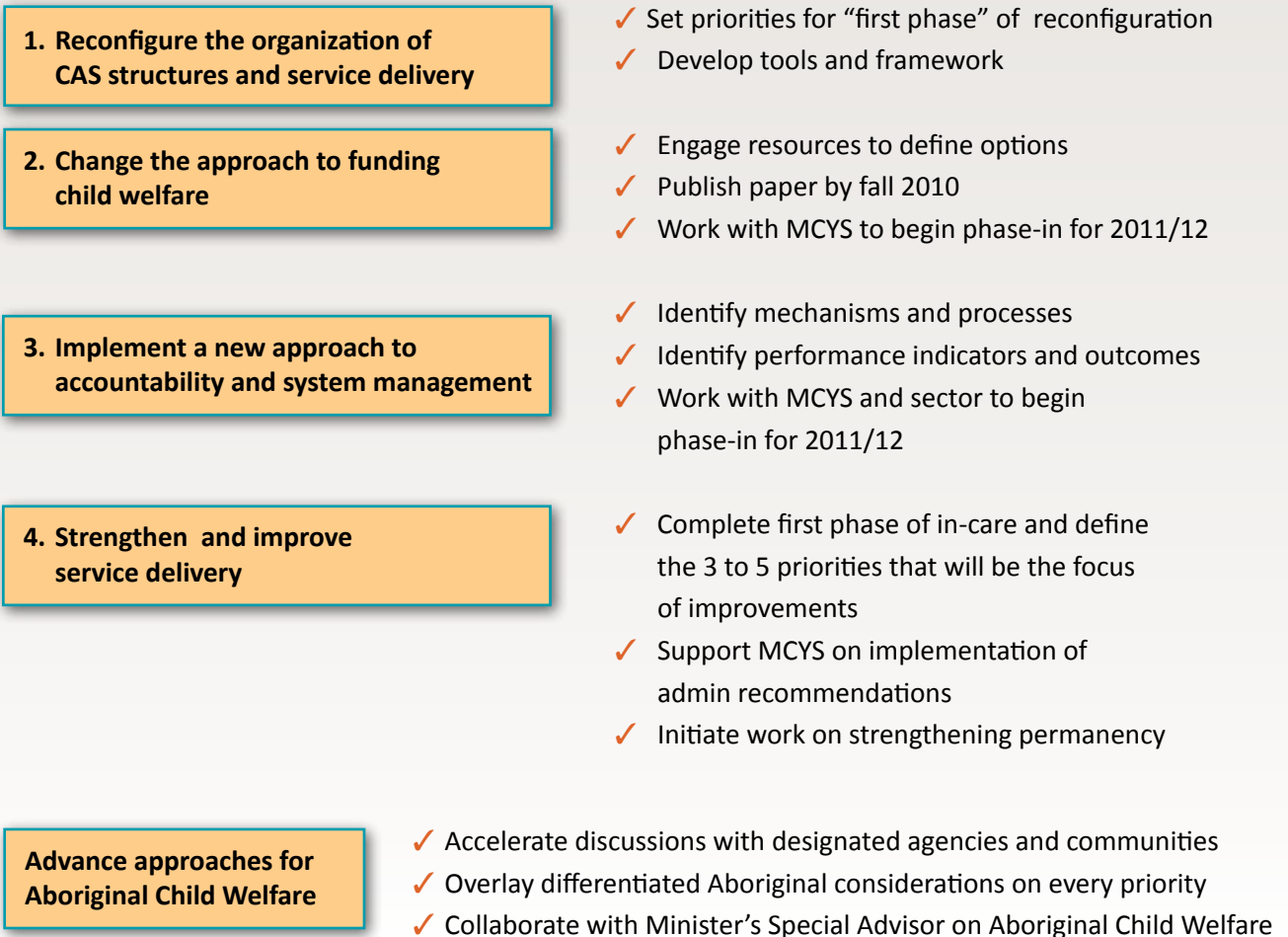
- Standards of care that are reflective of Aboriginal culture and communities.
- Outstanding questions regarding the future role of pre-mandated Aboriginal agencies
- Relationships and protocols through which mainstream CASs serving Aboriginal children should interact with Aboriginal communities.
- Inter-relationships to broader socio-economic community needs beyond child welfare.



The intention of this *First Report of the Commission* is to reflect on the work of the Commission’s first seven months, describe a vision for what a sustainable child welfare system will look like, and set out a strategic roadmap for actions from now through to the end-date for the Commission’s mandate in September 2012.

With the release of this report, the Commission’s work now shifts from examining what needs to change to realise its vision for a child-focused service, to working with MCYS and the sector to actively plan to realize these important changes. Figure 7 summarizes some of the immediate action priorities that the Commission will be pursuing over the summer and fall.

Figure 7
Immediate Action Priorities



The Commission's work has benefited greatly from extensive and candid dialogue with hundreds of individuals throughout and outside of the child welfare sector. This Report provides a springboard for further dialogue. Over the summer, the Commission's continued travel to various CASs and communities across the province will be an opportunity for further personal feedback on this Report.

More formal feedback and dialogue is invited through the Commission's website.

There, visitors will find:

- A printable summary of this Report to support local discussion of the Commission's Vision and strategy
- Instructions for submitting written comments to the Commission

www.sustainingchildwelfare.ca

The Commission has heard on many occasions that this is a moment in time when there can be lasting changes in the shape of child welfare in Ontario – thereby, improving outcomes for vulnerable children and youth. The courage and spirit of goodwill that the Commission has observed in stakeholders throughout child welfare during this first seven months bodes well for what we, together, can achieve for Ontario's vulnerable children and youth.

From foster parents, board members, CASs leaders, unions and front line staff, providers of independent residential services, leaders of school boards, children's mental health organizations and other community partners, leaders within MCYS and government – again and again, the Commission has heard people pledging their commitment to working together to realize the potential of this moment in time. And perhaps the clearest voices among them have been the voices of families and current and former youth-in-care offering their honest and personal perspectives on what would make the biggest difference to them in their lives.

The Commission has heard these voices. This Report reaffirms our commitment to work in partnership with everyone who is interested in participating, to create a sustainable child welfare system for Ontario – and to make a lasting difference for vulnerable children and youth.

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Commission to Promote
Sustainable Child Welfare

Commission de promotion de la viabilité
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