

Developing a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre for Toronto

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Introduction:

Boost Child Abuse Prevention & Intervention is a community-based agency committed to eliminating abuse and violence in the lives of children, youth and their families. The centre is a registered charity and has provided programs and services to children, youth and their families, as well as professionals in the community for 30 years. Boost believes that all children and youth have a right to grow up in a safe, healthy and nurturing environment and is dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and violence through education and awareness, and through collaborating with our community partners to provide services.

Boost provides services to children and youth who have experienced abuse or violence or who are at risk of abuse or violence, and to their families. Programs and services are available to children, youth and adults of all races, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, language or physical ability. Programs are offered to children and youth between the ages of 3 to 17 years of age. Boost provides direct services to more than 800 children, youth and their families each year in the Assessment & Treatment, and Court Preparation programs. School-based prevention programs are delivered to more than 2,200 children annually through the I'm A Great Kid! and I'm A Great Little Kid! programs. In 2007, these school-based prevention programs were delivered comprehensively for the first time in other school boards in Ontario. Currently, training is provided through the Making A Difference program to approximately 3,000 adults each year throughout Ontario. Boost has a 15 member volunteer Board of Directors and approximately 150 volunteers. Boost also offers internship training opportunities and educational placements to high school co-op, undergraduate and post-graduate students.

For the past 30 years, Boost has worked effectively with child protection, police, education, child care, medicine, children's mental health, criminal justice, newcomer services and other community agencies to improve the response to children and youth who are at risk of, or who have been victimized by abuse and violence. Boost has a significant role in the development of a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre for Toronto, will provide a number of programs and services in the CYAC and is one of the leading project development partners.

Background:

Over the past 6 years stakeholder partners in the City of Toronto have been working collaboratively to establish a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre (CYAC) that will improve the quality of service and reduce revictimization of children and youth who have been abused.

The overall goal of the CYAC is to effectively coordinate the systems response so that children and youth who are victimized by abuse or violence can receive services in one location and not endure further trauma or revictimization. Approximately 1500 child abuse investigations occur in Toronto yearly.

The CYAC will provide a coordinated response to the investigation, referral, management and treatment of child abuse through:

- ✓ building on the experiences to date in other jurisdictions as well as in Toronto;
- ✓ specifically addressing the needs of children and youth and enhance the related services in Toronto;
- ✓ improving the quality of service and reducing the negative impact on children which can be caused by inappropriate responses;
- ✓ focusing on the investigation while meeting the requirement for a broader range of services to prevent revictimization and serve the needs of children and youth;
- ✓ respecting the mandates and contributions of all of the parties;
- ✓ involving community partners not only in delivery, but in ongoing planning and development of the CYAC and its services;
- ✓ providing for an effective accountability framework, both in terms of governance and the appropriate level of formalization of the relationships with community partners and other collaterals; and
- ✓ generating efficiencies that can be reapplied to further improve value-for-money or broaden the scope of the CYAC's clients or services.

The overall project is intended to address abuse and violence in the lives of children and youth and to improve the response to reports of abuse and violence by providing a coordinated, seamless approach that will reduce the likelihood of further trauma. Society's responsibility for serving children and youth, especially those whose caregivers

cannot do so on their own, is vested in a variety of organizations and institutions. When abuse is suspected, the investigation and coordination of services involves multiple organizations and professionals in the fields of child protection, law enforcement, medicine, mental health and victim witness support. Over the years, it has been recognized that coordinated, joint efforts by all systems can produce greater success in responding to the needs of children and youth and can reduce the unintended negative effects of their interventions on victims. Interagency and multidisciplinary models of service have been adopted (e.g., protocols and shared services) and “child-centred” principles have been embraced (e.g., legislative changes in Ontario and special courts for dealing with matters of abuse and assault against children). However, children, youth and their families are still required to navigate a fragmented and complicated system that unintentionally can and does create additional trauma. By providing all services out of one location, a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre, we can vastly improve the quality and consistency of service and minimize further trauma to the victim.

Child Advocacy Centres are well established in the U.S. however only a few exist in Canada and none in the City of Toronto or greater Toronto area. The model/approach is designed to reduce the stress and further trauma and to improve the effectiveness of the response for child and youth abuse victims and their families created by traditional child abuse investigation and prosecution procedures. A Child Advocacy Centre is a child-focused, community-oriented, multi-disciplinary facility where the professionals involved in the investigation, treatment and management of child abuse work together to ensure that a child’s safety and best interests are paramount. The initial forensic investigative interview by police and child protection is the first critical stage in the process, following which the services and supports needed by a child can be immediately mobilized by the Centre.

The National Children’s Alliance located in Washington, D.C. had 22 full membership CACs in 1992. By the end of 2006, with start-up funding from the federal government in the U.S. and a National mandate for the Alliance, the number of CACs had grown to 399 accredited members and 245 associate members, (including one in Canada, The Zebra Centre, in Edmonton). In addition to the CAC in Edmonton referenced above, there are now CACs that exist or are being developed in Montreal, Quebec; the Niagara Region of Ontario; Orillia, Ontario; Manitoba, and Vancouver, British Columbia.

CACs may differ from one another in relation to the clients they serve, the range of services they offer, their staffing and governance arrangements, accommodations, sources and levels of funding and other factors. However, what CACs *all* have in common is their philosophical (child-centred) foundation as reflected in the following key features:

- a child-friendly facility that is comfortable for children and is both psychologically and physically safe;
- a multidisciplinary team approach in which the CAC works with police, child protection professionals, physical and mental health professionals, prosecutors and victim advocates;

- specially trained forensic interviewers who gather investigative information thereby avoiding repeat, sequential interviews of the child;
- medical evaluation either at the CAC or through collaboration with specialized medical service providers;
- specialized mental health services provided either at the CAC or in co-operation with collateral providers;
- victim support/advocacy available either at the CAC or through collaboration with other providers;
- case reviews with the Team conducted on a routine basis to share information, plan and co-ordinate investigation and other services; and,
- case tracking provided in a systematic way to monitor case progress, service outcomes and the efficacy of the program.

Developing a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre for Toronto

An Investigative Partnerships Committee (IPC) was established in Toronto in March, 2005 following a presentation by the Toronto Police Service (TPS) on a new vision of the relationship between the TPS and child protection agencies in Toronto. The Committee's mandate was "to explore partnerships between the TPS and the Children's Aid Societies, identify common issues and problems and provide solutions to identified problems". Its members included:

Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CCAST)
 Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST)
 Jewish Family and Child Service (JFCS)
 Native Child and Family Services (NCFS)
 Toronto Police Service (TPS).

During its first 10 months of work, the IPC identified key issues, gathered research, conducted surveys of investigative staff, and analyzed the results of these efforts. It also took into account various prior activities and reports, including a feasibility study conducted in 1994, which recommended the establishment of a Child Advocacy Centre (CAC) in Toronto, and reviewed the steps taken by various organizations in the community to create programs that reflect the fundamentals of a CAC.

By November, 2005, the IPC had proposed specific actions for each of these challenges, along with one overall recommendation: the establishment of a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre for the City of Toronto.

Since that time, the IPC has continued to meet as a group and has coordinated its efforts with several of its community partners through a group known as the Child & Youth Advocacy Committee (CYAC Committee). The CYAC members include the IPC members, as well as The Gatehouse, Safe-T Program of the Thistletown Regional Treatment Centre, SCAN Program at the Hospital for Sick Children and Boost Child Abuse Prevention & Intervention. The Crown Attorney's Office is also represented.

The Child & Youth Advocacy Committee is actively working to establish a centre in Toronto that will achieve the goals of a CYAC. A model of service has been developed that includes a new program that will meet the needs of families by providing an Advocate that will guide the child/youth and family through the system from the initial report to disposition. The Advocate will work as a member of the multidisciplinary team to coordinate services for the child/youth and family.

The Advocacy Program at the CYAC is an innovative new program that will fill a significant gap in the continuum of service to children/youth and their families in Toronto. The project partners all work in organizations that will provide services in the CYAC. Police, child welfare workers, medical practitioners, trauma counsellors and court support workers will be co-located at the CYAC to provide a coordinated response beginning with the investigation and throughout the criminal justice process. However, there is still a significant need to offer a service that will provide continuity throughout the process, serve as a guide and liaison for the family to the system and provide support throughout the entire process. Additionally, many caregivers have identified an urgent need for crisis support immediately following the investigation and this support is often unavailable or difficult to access in the current service system. The Advocacy Program will fill this gap and will ensure that the child, youth and their family receive the immediate and ongoing support that is needed to cope with the trauma of abuse, as well as the aftermath of disclosure and their involvement within the system.

In 2010, the City of Toronto proposed a possible location for the CYAC. The municipal government planned to purchase a former high school in northeast Scarborough and to make it available to community organizations, including the CYAC for below market rent. However, for a number of reasons, this facility did not meet the needs of the CYAC and the committee is still seeking an appropriate location.

In the meantime, much work has gone into developing the model, as well as designing a research and evaluation plan for the CYAC and the committee wanted to maintain the momentum that had been established. A plan is now in place to pilot the CYAC model and evaluation for a one year period beginning April 1st, 2011. A pilot CYAC multidisciplinary team that includes 6 detectives from 2 police divisions, identified child protection workers, an Advocate, medical and mental health representatives and Child Victim Witness advocates will work together to provide coordinated services out of The Gatehouse, a child-friendly interview site in south Etobicoke. A pilot project coordinator from Boost will oversee the pilot and work with the research team to ensure that data is collected that will allow for an evaluation of the project. Two additional police divisions will serve as the control group. The pilot project will provide an opportunity for the team to implement a coordinated model in preparation for the establishment of a permanent Child & Youth Advocacy Centre in Toronto. In the meantime, the CYAC committee is continuing to work together to develop a governance model, and will work with a Project Manager to identify a location and complete the necessary steps to establish the first comprehensive Child & Youth Advocacy Centre in the City of Toronto.