Durham CAS Executive Summary

of the

AOP DSI Organizational Needs Assessment

Background

Ontario's public sector is moving to engage "diversity" as a route to improving service delivery. In this shift there is an increased understanding that inclusive programming and policy can affect the bottom-line (e.g. customer service, quality hires, the retention and development of skilled and invested staff, management, etc).

Durham CAS is intent on engaging real anti-oppressive (AO) change that will address not only the more comfortable manifestations of social difference such as ethno-cultural difference, but the more complex and challenging issues of classism, ethnocentricism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and all of the '-isms', that are systemically (and often unintentionally, unknowingly) embedded in every aspect of the organization.

It is important to recognize that Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) has been embedded into Canadian schools of Social Work since 1999, and anti-oppressive practice is now almost indistinguishable from professional social work practice at large. Thus, in order to keep up with theory, research and up-to-date practice, and to ensure our Vision and Mission is fulfilled, Durham CAS must integrate anti-oppression to ensure service excellence for children, youth and families. Without an AO lens on service, children and youth can be placed at risk of harm. This can include incomplete and/or inaccurate assessments of families by CAS staff on which our intervention strategies are based. AO integration can only occur if there is an organizational shift starting from the top (board and leadership levels), all the way to front-line service, including changes in policies and practices.

Anti-oppression goes beyond concepts of 'diversity' and 'inclusion'. Many organizations have adopted the language of diversity and inclusion, but only at the surface level while power imbalances due to social location remain the same. A quick glance of who is at the top levels of organizations can serve as a sign that power imbalances have not

changed. In social service agencies, the impact to "who" is being served and how, has also not changed. Such initiatives have since been deemed as too narrow in scope, politically-motivated, disingenuous, lacking in high quality theoretical and well-researched backing, too dependent on who happens to be in-charge, and meaningless to the individuals and groups seeking true equity. Organizations that have failed in such efforts have lost the trust of communities, community partners, and well-respected advocacy bodies, and have faced various and often unrecoverable damages, both politically and financially. It is critical that any kind of change initiative of this nature be focused on sustainable systemic change, which ultimately means changes in outcomes and disproportional ratios of minoritized groups. Thus, anti-oppressive change is about change at the systemic and structural levels which then can create the pathways for change at service, practice and clinical levels. This means changing the very culture of how Durham CAS is experienced as a workplace and as a service provider.

There is no shortage of research that demonstrates how child welfare practices lead to oppressive outcomes, including families who have been in the system over generations, First Nations families and communities who are still healing from the trauma of the 60s Scoop, as well as overrepresentations of Indigenous, black, poor, and other racialized, minoritized and marginalized groups. The system has not only imposed dominant values, but has also acted to deepen and reinforce inequities directly faced by children, youth, families, and communities. In recognition of this, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), through the work of its Anti-Oppressive Roundtable (AOR), has adapted Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) and offers an AO Framework on how CAS's can engage in this change process. The AO Framework is clearly aimed at systemic and structural change, and has been embedded throughout this AOP Needs Assessment.

Durham CAS became aware of the need for change and embarked on this change journey change when Diversity Solutions Inc (DSI), a firm headed by Dr. Leeno Karumanchery, was hired on to train all staff, board and caregivers. DSI was also asked for a critical review of all of Durham CAS's existing structures, systems and practices. It is important to take a pause here to reflect on this pioneering step of making such an

'ask', as this itself took humility and courage by the leadership of the organization. To create this AOP Needs Assessment, Dr. Karumanchery engaged staff from across the organization in focus groups, as well as caregivers and service users. Equipped with this AOP needs assessment and with all board and staff trained in introductory AOP, the leadership's desire to change grew and an in-house subject-matter expert (Tahmena Bokhari, Anti-Oppressive Practice Integration Leader) was hired to ensure the sustainability and accountability of this change process. In doing so, Durham CAS became one of the very first Children's Aid Societies in Ontario to commit to anti-oppression and is well-positioned to become a leader in the sector.

Positioned to become a fully anti-oppressive workplace and service provider over the next decade, Durham CAS will need to: (a) proactively develop its organizational structure, (b) build anti-oppression into quality assurance measures, (c) integrate an anti-oppressive approach into all operational systems and policies, and (d) develop greater synergy within the management team to ensure support for the change process.

The AOP Needs Assessment itself can be challenging to read and 'digest' due to the language, content, subject-matter, length and how this information may get interpreted by various readers and their respective positionalities, social locations and individual perspectives, (e.g a racialized adoption worker may have a different reaction than a white manager in intake, as would a female team secretary who has not had any formal experience with AO practice in social work). This AOP Needs Assessment must be combined with best/promising AOP practices, current research, and a change process led by an experienced in-house subject-matter expert in order to truly ensure anti-oppression becomes 'living and breathing' within the organization as opposed to simply a well-intentioned philosophy. All of this will form the basis of the Durham CAS 5-10yr AOP Work Plan. It will take courage, humility, strong conviction, and strong leadership from the organization to move successfully forward in becoming a fully anti-oppressive organization. Dr. Karumanchery completed his work indicating that he feels confident that Durham CAS is fully capable of achieving this goal.

Summary of the DSI AOP Needs Assessment

The purpose of this AOP Needs Assessment was to draw a picture of the agency's state of preparedness to engage in ongoing, integrated anti-oppressive organizational change. DSI was able to explore both the existing "trouble spots" that frame more obvious areas in need of reform (e.g. recruitment, hiring, linguistic barriers, and the various –isms such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, religious oppression and so on), as well as those subtle tensions that will inevitably come to the fore as the agency becomes increasingly diverse and begins to explore how these '–isms' are entrenched in the very culture, structures, and services of this agency. Such tensions may include staff-management relations, tensions and lack of cohesion within leadership, transparency concerns, safety needs for employees at all levels to raise such critical issues, safety needs of minoritized staff, skill level of managers to address oppression related conflict, and leadership maintaining their AOP vision even during turbulent times (especially while structures are being created), and so on.

The recommendations generated in this AOP Needs Assessment will help Durham CAS to proactively address many of these challenges before they come to the fore; and if followed, will function as a roadmap to engage real meaningful and sustainable anti-oppressive reform.

There are seven key areas:

1) **Focus, Direction and Foundation**: While a clear anti-oppressive focus has been developing in the agency at the leadership levels, further work is required to transform this philosophy into all levels of the organizational, and into practice both as a workplace and a service provider. Addressing the foundational work necessary to support the initial implementation phases of this change process, the recommendations in this section highlight the need to (a) clearly establish the vision and direction for the agency, (b) adopt a clear anti-oppressive framework as the cultural and organizational model for the agency, and (c) develop the foundation upon which the change process will be built.

2) **Responsibility, Accountability and Transparency:** This section explores the supports necessary to ensure that the change process is not only manageable but sustainable as a long-term, ongoing process. The recommendations frame how Durham CAS might hold leadership and management accountable for maintaining the anti-oppression vision and supporting the change process.

3) **Human Resource Practices**: Here important questions are asked about 'who' is being hired relative to 'who' is being turned away, what criteria and approaches are being used to hire/promote, what deems certain candidates as the right fit and others as unsuccessful candidates, and what structures might be working against specific populations presently. With recommendations to address issues such as screening, recruitment, skill-specific hiring and interviewing, this section explores the need to revisit some of the agency's baseline HR methods. The recommendations in this section also frame important internal measures to ensure greater safety relative to oppressive conduct within the agency.

4) **Quality Assurance Measures:** Quality Assurance is about consistency, clear standards, and the unambiguous measurement of both success and failure. The organization will need to create measures and metrics specifically with respect to anti-oppression, again both as a workplace and a service provider. With an increase in quality assurance mechanisms, the agency will be able to better gain buy-in, address resistance and increase accountability. Also, a greater degree of quality assurance will shed light on a number of HR and supervision relevant issues, from hiring, retention, promotion and micromanagement.

5) **Supervision and Management:** When it comes to the challenges of developing the capacity of employees, especially the staff delivering services, the agency needs to address not only those most obvious issues in need of attention, but also the more deeply ingrained features of every day work life that may go unquestioned. The analysis in this section focuses on issues of power in management-staff relations as well as an analysis of (a) management consistency, (b) the development of collaborative staff-supervisory protocols, (c)

reporting structure, and (d) oppressive conduct and practices, again ones that are often well-hidden and well-embedded.

6) **Communications**: Because the successful implementation of any large-scale change process requires a sound and pragmatic planful approach to shifting the organizational culture, there is considerable importance placed by DSI on the development of an effective communications plan and roll-out strategy. DSI recommends that AO is clearly branded in the agency as a fundamental pillar on which all programs, policies and practices stand, and a clear communications strategy will be a key lynchpin in achieving this end.

7) **Oppressive Paradigms in Child Welfare:** Stress is a major issue of concern for both agency personnel and service users alike. Because the ramifications for both service users (e.g. depression, non-compliance, family stress, fear, etc.), and agency personnel (e.g. impacts to one's health and mental health, sick leaves, low morale, absenteeism, low productivity, turnover, loss of high performing staff) can be severe, the need to reform child welfare service delivery models has been taken very seriously in this AOP Needs Assessment. The recommendations made in this section focus on how Durham CAS might better ensure the healthiest and safest, both broadly defined, and most conductive working environment for staff and best service delivery possible for children, youth and families in Durham region.

The DSI Equity Pyramid

Using DSI's Equity Pyramid as a model for understanding the nature of anti-oppressive organizational change, Durham CAS's preparedness to engage this change process exists on a spectrum of sorts. The agency, at a systemic level can be viewed as beginning Stage 3, which is when the anti-oppressive shift is beginning and systems are being developed. Any cultural change initiative must take into account buy-in at the individual level, meaning do people personally believe in the need for this change? At the level of individual within the agency, Durham CAS is at Stage 2 of the DSI Equity

Pyramid. This is wherein "diversity" is perceived by many agency personnel (both staff and management) as a compliance-driven, image-specific project, supported only through time-limited funding. In looking at the culture of the organization itself, the agency can be understood to be at Stage 2, in which there is awareness for the need for change, but there is a lack of a clear road map or structures to create the change. This leaves considerable room for denial, recidivism and resistance to take hold. There must be a clear commitment to AO and a willingness to deconstruct and rebuild systems/structures to allow for real AO change to occur. At the systemic level the organization is at Stage 3, wherein AO has been adopted in theory, but the structures and practices are slow to evolve. With Durham CAS hiring an in-house subject-matter expert to lead this process, the organization is better situated to move AO from a well-intentioned philosophy into actual structures that provide a platform for existing systems to be challenged, shifts in workplace culture, policies, accountability measures, quality assurance, human resources and ultimately in changes in practice and service delivery.

The DSI Equity Pyramid ©
A Model for Understanding Anti-Oppressive Organizational Change

STAGE 5 – Proactive Anti-Oppression and the Maintenance of Inclusivity
- Anti-Oppression is foundational, fully embedded into the organization's vision, values and day-to-day operations
- While AO is an established program with a clearly defined lead, the responsibility to sustain AOP falls to all organizational personnel and stakeholders
- Financial resources for AO and INCLUSION are embedded and supported just as all other vital programs
- HR and QA work hand in hand to ensure that policies and practices reflect an understanding of social power dynamics and oppression
- Organizational Structure, Environment and Culture are safe, productive and equitable; thereby allowing diverse bodies, approaches, abilities and beliefs to thrive

STAGE 4 – Active Anti-Oppression
- The relationship between Inequity and power are clearly understood and so AO is actively embedded throughout the organization
- AO management positions grow in authority, breadth and scope. Leadership is fully invested in, and supportive of the change process
- Internal financial resources are dedicated and embedded to ensure AO change is sustainable in the long-term
- Heretofore marginalized perspectives are being explored and integrated. HR and QA are integral to the change process
- Access, recruitment, hiring, supervision and promotions are being actively explored/addressed to ensure the diversification of personnel across the organization

STAGE 3 – Anti-Oppressive Shift and Systems Development
- AO is adopted, but with limited commitment of resources and personnel (e.g. AO training and policy are developed in the absence of QA to ensure integration).
- Internal/external AO leaders are designated, but AO work is siloed without leadership's full engagement or stewardship
- AO projects/programs are financed internally, but funding remains susceptible to budget cuts and fiscal redirection
- AO is being implemented, but generally in a manner comfortable for those in positions of power and there is little Q.A. involvement
- Minoritized bodies are being hired, but leadership positions remain scarce and/or short-lived

STAGE 2 – Tolerance of Diversity and Awareness Building
- While systemic oppression continues to go unrecognized and therefore unchecked, "diversity" projects and events are being implemented on a small scale
- Leadership roles for DIVERSITY PROJECTS are scarce or situational at best, and they generally fall to minoritized personnel
- DIVERSITY is seen as a compliance-driven PROJECT, supported only through time-limited funding
- HR begins to enforce Human Rights and Compliance-driven standards
- The underrepresentation of minoritized bodies is noticed, but these absences are rationalized and justified

STAGE 1 – Systemically Normalized Oppression
- DIVERSITY reforms of any kind are deemed unnecessary and irrelevant to the man business of the organization
- There is NO organizational consciousness regarding the issue of DIVERSITY, let alone SOCIAL OPPRESSION
- There are NO resources dedicated to any issues of DIVERSITY in the workplace
- Policy and approach are framed through a socially normalized lens so social inequity (i.e. racism, heterosexism, etc) is not seen to have an impact on day-to-day operations (e.g. fair access, recruitment, hiring, productivity, etc.)
- The underrepresentation of minoritized bodies goes unnoticed and unquestioned

DSI AO Implementation Framework

With key figures throughout the agency committed to the philosophy of AO, and considering the magnitude and scope of the reforms housed in this report, a multi-year strategic plan for implementation is recommended to see a wholesale shift into Stage 4 of the DSI Equity Pyramid. Moving into this stage will require that the recommendations in this AOP Needs Assessment are systematically acted upon. This means that it is imperative that Durham CAS review and adapt the AO relevant processes identified in this assessment, establish the decision-making processes involved to drive implementation and ensure clear expectations and accountability around leadership and practice.

DSI AO Implementation Framework for Durham CAS

YEAR ONE: FOCUS, DIRECTION AND FOUNDATION

1. Ensure the Vision, Mission and Values Statements reflect a clear Anti-Oppressive philosophy and message in order to establish a resolute message for agency personnel, external supports and for the community
2. Developing a 4-5 year strategic plan to engage the DSI recommendations and Action Points found in this report. The first year's focus should detail, design and development infrastructure around (a) Leadership and Direction, (b) Resources, and (c) Policy and Programming

YEARS TWO THROUGH FIVE

LEVER ONE	LEVER TWO	LEVER THREE	LEVER FOUR	LEVER FIVE	LEVER SIX
RESPONSIBILITY ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY	HUMAN RESOURCES	QUALITY ASSURANCE MEASURES	SUPERVISION	COMMUNICATION	OPPRESSIVE PARADIGMS
3. Develop a clear and structured process for the Board and Senior Leadership Team to ensure they are actively taking part in championing the forward movement of the anti-oppressive change process	4. Review and revise Human Resource policies, practices and documentation to reflect anti-oppressive principles and address issues of systemic oppression 5. Develop mechanisms and protocols to prevent and/or address oppressive conduct and culture in the agency	6. Expanding the role and scope of Quality Assurance to improved the agency's capacity to record, collect and maintain data as part of an aggressive strategy to measure and benchmark progress in the AOP change process both in services, programs and organizational culture	7. Review of standard Management-Staff protocols and relations through a dual lens that takes both anti-oppression and emotional intelligence into consideration	8. Development of a comprehensive, communication plan that enhances understanding and awareness of the AO change process externally, while also ensuring AO change is front and centre at all times across the agency.	9. All programming, services and service delivery to be examined and revised to reflect AO principles and practice 10. Ensure (a) that working relationships between CAS agents and Resource Parents are respectful, collaborative, safe and transparent, and that (b) Resource Parents meet the agency's AOP expectations 11. Ensure the working relations between CAS agents and external supports are respectful, collaborative, safe and transparent. Ensure external supports meet the agency's AOP expectations

Ask these three Key Questions as you work on these LEVERS

1. What processes and structures need to be in place to support the AO Action Points recommended?
2. What decision-making processes are needed?
3. What role do those accountable play?

Closing Remarks

Durham CAS is beyond the point of rationalizing oppression in the organization and appears intent on addressing these issues at a systemic level. Importantly, because systemic oppressions are normalized and generally tend to be banal in nature, there will be a tendency not to reflect on them as issues in need of review or reform, so the importance of the year 1 action plan (i.e. focus, direction, infrastructure development and foundation) cannot be overstated as a necessary starting point. That said, if the recommendations made in this report are acted on strategically and at a pragmatic pace without delay, DSI sees no reason that this agency could not continue to build on its outstanding achievements thus far.