



Durham Children's Aid Society
Building Bridges for the Success of our Children and Youth
Community Round Table
November 21, 2015
buildingbridges@durhamcas.ca

Summary of Question and Answer Sessions

Following a presentation by the Executive Director and the Anti-Opressive Practice Integration Leader (AOPIL), there were two 45 minute sessions which allowed community members an opportunity to ask questions of Durham CAS. The information shown below is not a verbatim account, but rather a summary of the questions and answers.

Questions were directed to the Society's Executive Director, who responded directly or called upon other staff members to respond (including members of the senior staff Leadership Team, the AOPIL, and other child welfare and/or legal services staff). In some cases, more than one staff member responded to the question.

Question:

Is there an impetus to increase or sustain the number of families or children you serve in order to increase or maintain funding dollars to the agency? Is this a flaw in the Durham CAS funding formula which hurts our children and families?

Answer:

- Ministry funding is not solely based on the number of children in care of the Society. The number of children in care was more a part of the funding formula in years gone by.
- The funding formula has changed over the last few years, it is based primarily on service to the community.
- There has always been a volume element, but it is equally based on the needs of the community and how we can best serve the children and families.

Question:

In regards to the statistics about the racial breakdown of children in care, as presented by (Executive Director) Wanda Secord, how many of the 13% of Black youth are in the care of white families and how many white children are in the care of Black families?

- The Durham CAS database doesn't currently collect this data.
- This will be noted as data to collect as the agency continues to develop this area.

(The questioner indicated he is willing to assist the agency with this process.)

Question:

How long does it take for CAS to place a child to the family? This is the case of a Black child in the care of a white family to be sent to a Black family.

Moderator:

This is the case of a Black child who is in care of white family and a Black family is awaiting to receive that child. How long is that process?

Answer:

- Repatriation is always something we are working on from before children come into care.
- We try hard to strengthen families, work with families, so children don't come into care. We look at family members and kinship arrangements first.
- If these are not possible, we try our best to culturally match children with caregivers, this is critical, while working concurrently trying to get the child back to their family as soon as possible. Each situation is different, the timetables are different.
- There was a further question on any data around that. This is data that we need to continue to work on. Timing is case specific, something we are always working on, trying to do as quickly as possible, and ensure the child is safe.

Question:

In the presentation, speakers said OACAS informed Durham CAS practice and these practices have been adjusted regarding how workers work. Knowing that Durham CAS does not have an anti-Black racism protocol, how do they adjust their work? The Anti-Oppressive (AO) strategy didn't speak to anti-Black racism. How do you incorporate this within the agency and within foster homes, psychological assessments and Parent Capacity Assessments? How is anti-Black racism practice carried out not just with Durham CAS but with service providers?

Answer:

- AO practice is a framework created by the OACAS, copies are provided, please take one.
- It is very broad, there is a lot about organizational change and development.
- Durham CAS is just starting the integration process, the Durham CAS AO Organizational Needs Assessment informed the initial basic changes that are required to be made.
- Foundational pieces are being worked on, this led us to the work being done here today.
- 2 years ago Durham CAS started working with the Black Congress of Women.
- Durham CAS continues to work with community members, need to work collaboratively.
- Re: no anti-Black racism specifically in place currently: When working with service partners making critical assessments, is there an anti-Black racism component with these partners.
- Cannot say with confidence it is happening right now, we are on the path, it is in development.
- Staff are encouraged to utilize the Collective Hands Committee* (**Durham CAS internal committee focused on needs of Black children and youth in care*).
- Anyone interested in moving this effort forward (anti-Black racism), please leave contact information with registration sign-in sheets by adding a side note saying interested in volunteering and your contact information.

Question:

When racialized or minoritized staff face safety risks due to their social location/identity, like a Black worker being called the "N" word, where do they turn? How are these incidents documented and by whom? This is not an HR issue, they have to do with service and not employment. Some staff/clients do not want to respect Black workers.

Answer:

- We have had this experience. We don't tolerate this treatment of our staff, it is disheartening in this day and age that this is still there. We do take these things very seriously, we work with our staff on this, talk with clients that we don't tolerate this. We will be posting signage in our lobby about respect, not tolerating abusive language or behaviour towards our staff.
- As an example, when we had this experience with a youth in care, our reaction was to educate the youth who made the comments, educate the child or youth about the inappropriateness of their behaviour, but more importantly, support the staff in this dialogue. We have effected change in some situations. It is situation specific – staff see it as opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with a child, and emphasize that comment is not appropriate and not tolerated.

Question:

Anti-Opressive Practice (AOP) looks to the family to guide the work in social work, how do you manage this when mandated to investigate? How do you balance this when seeing the family as the expert?

Answer:

- Engagement has been worked on over last few years.
- We know families have best knowledge of their own families.
- Giving families laundry lists of to-do's not effective.
- Durham CAS works with families to engage them in planning.
- Recently in the process of implementing the Signs of Safety (SOS) Clinical Model which is strength-based engagement, a new team is in place to assist with this process.
- Service delivery staff are knowledgeable of this and are working on strength-based model.

Question:

How do racialized people on the CAS board (and staff) feel? Are they heard, are they supported? Do they have awareness of equity issues in their own community?

Answer:

- That is what we strive for – all staff feeling supported, we value our staff, and we value our board members for their contributions, perspectives, and the experience that they bring to this work.
- (Director of Intake Services responded about her experience) I can say yes to those questions. As a member of staff, I have on many occasions raised issues from a perspective that is different to that of others in the room. There has been a consistent openness to hearing these issues, and a consistent openness to addressing issues.
- In terms of awareness of equity issues in my community – I am aware of equity, I live it every day, experience it, I am raising my children and live in Durham Region – so I have an awareness of equity issues. I feel I can say that of most or all of our racialized Black staff.

Question:

With education (Durham District School Board, Durham Catholic District School Board) being major contributors of referrals to Durham CAS, will policies be revised to meet the need in educating them in recognizing and identifying when referrals need to be made?

Answer:

- Education is major referral source.
- In the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), everyone has the duty to report if they feel there is a child in need of protection.
- Durham CAS determines if there are protection needs.
- Durham CAS works from the AO perspective and assesses the information coming to us to determine if there are protection concerns and then how we will be approaching children/families using the AO lens and what will be most effective.
- Important to note duty to report is not incumbent on just education and police to ensure children are safe in the community. The duty to report is the responsibility of all people.
- (Moderator's comment) Community members report stories of calls from education being trite, CAS called due to no lunch, child brought roti for lunch.
- Reiterated that Durham CAS assesses information coming to us regarding whether it is a protection concern
- We tell referrals when it is not a protection concern
- Intake Reception Team (IRT) uses the opportunity to educate callers about issues, what is or is not a protection concern
- Intake department does apply the AOP lens framework to what is/isn't a child protection referral
- We work with board of education and other referral sources to sift through what is and what isn't protection
- Being reported to Durham CAS doesn't necessarily lead to an investigation approach

(Comment from Member of the Planning Committee)

- The vignette shown earlier is a matter of cultural competence – if workers don't understand culture, don't respond appropriately.
- Need understanding with frontline staff to have cultural understanding

Question:

We all know racism takes different forms, overt or covert. A hiring manager would ask what makes you think you're the right fit. I have worked under a manager who asked me to not look at names on resumes that sound foreign.

How does AO practice work to ensure biases are removed from the hiring practice at Durham CAS? For instance is software used for this? Want to ensure the agency is looking not just at names, but at the content of resumes.

Answer:

- We want diverse staff and more diversity in our staff, and have worked on this for several years, but there is more work to be done. We have considered this, and do not discriminate based on names that sound foreign.
- We are working on recruitment processes to ensure barriers are removed. We made a conscious decision not to remove identifying information (including names), this is part of our process. We look at content of resumes, and are looking to diversity our staff complement.

Question:

How many AO officers are there in Ontario? Is there a structured sensitivity training for staff, white and Black? Sometimes Black people do not understand sensitivities of what's going on either.

Answer:

- 7 AO Officers in Ontario
- Durham CAS was one of the first to embrace AO practice and hire full-time AO position in this capacity in the province
- This is a new and evolving journey for the organization
- We hired an external consultant to do an initial AO Needs Assessment and are working on those recommendations
- Please see OACAS AO Framework ([public document available on OACAS website](#)), which you can see is about organizational change and more general to creating the initial foundation. With this foundation we can then do a deeper dive into specific forms of oppression such as Anti-Black racism and Anti-Colonialism, Queer theory, Black feminism, critical race theory, etc
- When we started our journey, each and every staff was trained in a 2-day AO Intro training that was quite intense
- Training looked at power and privilege, challenging white power, and was quite uncomfortable as it should be
- We are now holding monthly mini training sessions for staff, foster parents and volunteers on particular areas such as sexism, homophobia and Transphobia, racism, anti-colonialism and so on which our staff are helping lead
- As we become more familiar with AO and as we begin to strengthen our foundation, implement some of the initial recommendations, we can then go deeper into the more advanced areas of anti-Black racism and so on.
- Please have a look at our AO Q and As on our website and there are some hard copies here

Question:

Wanda Secord mentioned using the Signs of Safety (SOS) model in Durham. This model does not incorporate anti-racism or anti-Black racism into the model. How will this be integrated into the model? In best practice, you don't attach anti-racism on afterwards. How will this be working for our community when it doesn't address this up front?

Answer:

- Anti-Oppression (AO) is the lens that we have as a foundational piece for work in interventions. In terms of the anti-Black racism question, I can't say yes, realistically, but looking at families, including Black families, through the AO lens, is our approach.
- The SOS model originated in Australia, and is embedded across the globe, including in Canada and the United States. In Ontario about 12 child welfare agencies are looking at this model. The model does not embed classic AO practices, but it forms a partnership between child welfare and the children, youth and families that we serve. It goes back to basic social work training and is a collaborative service delivery model. Research suggests that it has a significant impact on better outcomes for children, youth and families.

(Moderator follow-up question)

Demographically, the Black population is so unique in Toronto and Durham. The SOS model does not address anti-Black racism. Historically when models are used that don't address it, it results in overrepresentation. How do we integrate this model knowing it doesn't work for our community?

Answer:

- The model is designed to approach our families differently, it is about building partnerships and collaboration. Our AO practice ensures we are more respectful and engaging with a diverse population.
- There are only a handful of agencies that have committed to Anti-Oppressive (AO) Practice in the province.
- There are lots of models that go across the system – We need to integrate the SOS model with our AO practice. It will not be easy, it will be a challenging process for us. Because we have chosen to take on AO, we will need to do this as an agency and we will be doing it in isolation or perhaps with a few others, if we do, but not the whole field as most agencies would not have a strategic AO plan like ours
- *(The Director of Intake Services)* was recently at a conference with the developer of the SOS model. She asked him the question of how the model works with families. He responded that SOS is a “nimble” practice – agencies can take the model, and shape it, in order to meet the needs of the community. The model is based on inquiry, on the agency asking questions. If the family is Black, what does that mean, how do we appreciate that, and use that to help move them forward. This model is not the “be all and end all”, but it is what we are using now.

Question:

I have listened to comments and am frustrated. Statistics from 2011 and 2015 shows an increasing number of Black children in care. How can we drive this down? The Toronto Star exposé spoke to this. The most defining issue we struggle with is how to drive these numbers down. How do we do this? What are the preventative strategies in place that include partnership with the Black community? We cannot drive down without this partnership.

Answer:

- That is what this event is really about
- We are asking how do we engage with the Black community to work together to provide best services possible to ensure children are safe, in own homes, in own communities?
- Durham CAS has many resources, many great staff, we don't do it alone
- Hoping people in the room will want to assist/volunteer suggestions
- Hoping participants will assist and make suggestions
- This is the beginning of building partnerships with all of you

Question:

How many Black and Brown staff at Durham CAS, including in management? Do you have a succession plan to diversify your management?

Answer:

- As I presented earlier, we have not done a race census for our staff. We do have a number of Black managers
- This is something we are conscious of as we look to ensure that we have a staff that is reflective of our community.
- We (the agency) are mainly white. This is something we are aware of, and are looking to our staff complement.

(Moderator follow-up question)

Is there a timeline to remedy this? Is there a succession plan for diversifying management and the staff complement?

Answer:

- We are hiring staff to be reflective of our community, not just Black staff, this is something that is important to us.
- We are working on a formal succession plan; there will be a component of the AO lens applied to this process. I am not able to give a timeline for this process.

Question:

Why should I take anything said here seriously? SOS, AO. When we ask questions, there is nothing that is targeting the Black issue that exists in Durham. Nice statements regarding indigenous, LGBT, but when coming to the Black community, "yes we are looking at it". In 2015 you don't know the racial make-up of your staff. Why waste time working with you if it is becoming waste of time and nothing is accomplished? Where are the concrete plans to accomplish something?

Answer:

- I appreciate the sentiment
- What we're doing today is our attempt to say "here we are, we don't have all answers, we want to engage with the Black community in a real way"
- We are inviting questions, will post answers even if unknown or in development
- This is our best way to show we want to be and will be accountable, and you'll be able to call us on that

Follow up comments from community member:

- *Looking for more than "you want to be accountable", we want concrete plans, a team to work with our people to resolve issues.*
- *It's 2015, this is a historical issue*
- *Other organizations not pretending to work with us*
- *Upset that we don't know staff racial compilation*
- *Sounds like another buzz word, "give it time and it will go away"*
- *How will we know it won't go back to business as normal, no more buzz words, we want concrete plans*

(Comments from Member of the Planning Committee)

- *Your frustration is felt – when the Building Bridges planning committee came to the table, they felt the same way*
- *We are here to hold Durham CAS accountable, won't rest until it is done*
- *Join us to make it happen*
- *Durham CAS board members represent us, it is their responsibility to hear us*
- *If our children are taken away from us, our very existence is threatened*
- *(referring to agency): You've hurt us and you're going to listen*
- *(referring to questioner): Make it happen with us, join us and make it happen*

Question:

The AOP Leader - where does she sit in the organizational structure? And if you are serious about AO, shouldn't that position report directly to the Executive Director?

What was the rationale behind having the AOP Leader reporting to the HR Director? Why not have the position report to the Executive Director if Durham CAS is really serious about embedding the practice?

You have hired the AO Leader, does she have direct reporting relationship with the Board and the Executive Director? And if not, when will this be the case?

Answer:

- When the current AOPIL joined us, we had the position report into Human Resources, that is still the case. Human Resources is about our people.
- As participants are learning today, AO is throughout the organization, working at all levels of the organization, including front line, up to the Executive Director and the Board of Directors.
- The AOPIL is moving the AO Workplan forward. Even though the reporting structure is to the HR Director, the AOPIL's responsibility is to the organization as a whole.

(Follow up comment from Moderator)

The push is to change the reporting structure from the HR Director to report to the Executive Director and the Board.

Answer:

- I will take this suggestion under advisement. I work closely with the AOPIL regularly.

(Follow up question from Member of the Planning Committee)

The more important issue in terms of reporting – say the AO Leader reports to Director of HR and this hits her the wrong way – how do we know there is not the risk of her being told to exit?

Answer:

- AO is an important foundational element of Durham CAS in 2015. With that in mind, that position (the AOPIL) works across the agency.
- Durham CAS is committed to AOP. If the person (in the position) chose to move to another organization, that does not mean we would stop doing AO. We have embraced AO at the organization whether it reports to the HR Director or the Executive Director.

Question:

I've come across in my workplace many situations whereby a child is brought into CAS care and the mother is trying to work with the worker. What presents is the worker is not releasing the child to the parent or family members. Feels like an individual war between worker/mother. Worker seems to be saying "you're not doing this, will punish you until you become a role model for child/public".

Is this a team effort to reassess or re-evaluate the worker/situation? Are there team players to evaluate documentation of information given, not going on hearsay vs. facts? Want to know where is the accountability, is it a team decision when child is released or individual decision of the worker who may have a personal war against mother?

Answer:

- In terms of working with families and case planning, it is absolutely a team effort
- There is an accountability structure in place
- The worker provides direct service to the family; planning is always in consultation with the team supervisor as well as other people
- Other people can include the service directors, as well as programs/committees within the organization
- Signs of Safety is a resource to us in terms of looking at different ways to work with families
- More and more we are working towards involving and including family in that planning/decision making at the beginning stages
- The most significant player in making decisions is the family
- The supervisor, service director would be the accountability structure in place
- Supervisors are always involved, directors and others may be asked to participate in a discussion/decision. It is never an isolated decision made by one individual
- One of the Durham CAS counsel who is a Black community member provided the following clarification:
- The family may not always give full information, assumptions made based on a small slice of information of the whole case
- If a child is out of the mother's care, there is usually court involvement
- She's said that a white social worker comes to house, doesn't understand and apprehends the child; this is not the case
- That white social worker consults with others including legal consultation
- Children do not always come into care – other options include working voluntarily with Durham CAS
- Judges ask questions as well, lawyers/duty counsel represent families, the court system oversees why a child remains in care and is not returned to home

Question:

Cultural competence - who decides – how does the staff team communicate differences in culture where others don't understand. How to increase greater competency? Staff learning to understand differences. How to ensure this is happening so people can understand the case.

Answer:

- We do use our internal resources – Collective Hands Committee, people of the culture, consultation with AOPIL, in understanding cultures, and how to best address/work with them.

- One of the real elements we are working on is understanding what we don't know and being comfortable asking. If we hear a person has been beaten - what exactly does this mean, what does it look like? We have to understand from the child, parent perspective what that means, we can't make assumptions. We need the assistance of the family to make concrete sense of what we are hearing.

(Follow up comment from Moderator)

- *We don't know what we don't know –not sure of the scope of our ignorance.*
- *Assumptions are a natural part of us – although we struggle not to make assumptions, it is our natural tendency.*
- *It is so uncomfortable to talk about anti-Black racism, people have a visceral response to talk about racism. It is about the lens that views and interprets our skin.*
- *Those are things we are struggling with – we don't know what we don't know, we are what we are in terms of our cognitive function.*

Question:

I am a new business owner in Durham. I validate the woman who questioned what's next. It's ok to have the conversation but words mean nothing without action. Recommendation -- more culturally sensitive sessions for staff, not only with white staff, with all staff. Be mindful of that.

Has the information for this meeting been sent to other businesses i.e. barbershops, and those communities that need to work with Durham CAS? The community that has contact with families, not bigger agencies. Need to fill the gaps of what's missing. Look at small businesses in Black community and how they can work with Durham CAS to reduce the numbers of kids coming into care

(The moderator indicated this was more of a comment than a question.)

Question:

Some of our families deal with barriers (educational and other) in other systems that can make it difficult to meet CAS expectations. How do we support families and how does the AO strategy support mental health needs of Canadian African Black families?

Answer:

- We know that non-white (minoritized) people face many barriers across the board (including school, police, etc.).
- There are not a lot of services available in Durham Region, and it is hard to find culturally appropriate services that are local.
- We often have to send people to Toronto for culturally appropriate services. This creates another barrier. Sometimes we can help out with costs, sometimes that is not possible.
- The issue is bigger than Durham CAS, it is a much larger issue with services in our Region as a whole.

(A member of the Durham CAS Board of Directors asked for clarification of the question)

Mental health needs of the community – is the questioner referring to the external community at large, or the community of children and youth in care?

(Moderator response)

- *The Moderator clarified that she understood “community” as the African Canadian Black community of Durham Region, and specifically, the community that the agency works with.*
- *How can the CAS better direct people in Durham region who come in contact with our staff to culturally specific appropriate services?*
- *The Moderator provided the Executive Director with a list of small agencies she is familiar with, and asked if the CAS is prepared to become more familiar with the programs in those agencies and be willing to direct families to these programs?*

Answer:

- Yes, the agency looks to the broader community to identify appropriate resources to help all our families, including our Black community.

(Follow up question from Member of the Planning Committee)

Is there any way of saying the services are required (not sure what this means) – are their vendors out there that can provide this service?

Answer:

- The agency has to work with potential service providers to ensure their services meet the needs of children and families that we work with.
- The agency looks towards Toronto to ensure we get culturally sensitive services for the families that we serve.

(Moderator comment)

The agency needs to continue to familiarize itself with services that exist in Durham.

Answer:

- Staff looking for local services often send out an e-mail to all staff asking for recommendations for a specific service for a client.
- Everyone can help out to find the individual or service that can help with that client.
- Of course, the agency could do a better job of working with services in Durham Region.

Question:

I commend Durham CAS, although we need to do better. What is the timeline for obtaining data that we need? Is this a priority? How are complaints received from Black families handled? Cultural understanding, are there any statistics on that? Will you be looking at past cases where mistakes were made, perhaps handled wrong?

Answer:

- Timeline for obtaining data – this will need to be developed, work in progress, some data is more easily obtained than others,
- There is no timeline today, this will be noted in follow-up to this meeting and we will look at this
- Timelines – recommendations, questions will be considered by the planning committee
- Want to get all data, questions, comments and feedback to the group so we can set some priority steps

(Moderator comment)

- *Talking about getting a definitive timeline and reporting back to community in 2016*
- *Information from today including the questions/answers will be responded to in a 2 week period*
- *Time is important, a goal has a timeline to it, hopefully more done by April 2016*
- *Black families complaints – how are they addressed?*

Answer:

- There are two processes for any family, Black or white or other:
 - One way is to take a complaint directly to the Society for potential internal resolution.
 - The second option is to make a complaint to the Child and Family Services Review Board (CFSRB), which is an independent adjudicator set up under the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA).
- If the underlying question is how do we handle a complaint received from a Black family who perceives an inherent bias with how they've been treated by Durham CAS - We have no tolerance for this, this would be taken incredibly seriously; Yes, if perceived bias by worker, would look at past cases; self-examination as well.

Question:

Can you say with confidence that 100% of Durham CAS staff are entering accurate social location data such as race, ethnicity, and language, for 100% of their files? And is the AO Leader leading this process, as there are many nuances in this process. Also, have 100% of Durham CAS staff been trained on how to ask questions about social location (race, religion, language, gender, etc.)? The Ontario Human Rights Commission states clearly that organizations should be seeking this data as otherwise it can lead to inequities in a system.

Answer:

- Can we say 100% of the time every time? This is something we strive for, but can't say it happens 100% of the time.
- We have done training internally with our staff on how to ask this very sensitive question.
- There are segments in society that are feeling very comfortable in identifying their race and there are others that are cautious, especially with agencies like ours.
- We are working to ensure that our staff are comfortable in asking these questions in a sensitive way so we know who we are serving and providing appropriate service delivery.

Question:

To the passionate lady who earlier asked a question... Sensitivity training runs throughout Ontario. When we hear that the AO officer reports to Human Resources, simply means to them that anti oppression is operating for internal staff. What we want to do is talk to the people who make decisions, and at the same time, how much autonomy does the AO officer have?

(The moderator indicated this was more of a comment than a question.)

Comment: (community member)

The Executive Director of a local multicultural organization advised that some of their women clients have issues with the CAS. CAS is one of their (her organization's) community partners, CAS refers women to her organization.

These are often women in violent relationships, and who are also experiencing mental health issues. Due to issues in a woman's life, she may also have parenting issues.

Community agencies run different programs. Sometimes women are not aware of what the issues are, and what is not permitted in Canada like the question of spanking a child.

When women or families are referred to a foster home, the agency needs to try to make sure they educate the family on cultural issues, so they are aware of things such as Black hair care.

Comment:

(Member of the Durham CAS Board of Directors)

The Board Director advised that she tried twice before she was elected to the Durham CAS Board of Directors. She came to the forum today because she was interested in the topic. As a Board member she wanted to commend Durham CAS. This space is an open space – individuals are asking CAS's at an operational level and at a board level, how we engage, and who do we engage. It is about building bridges and relationships. The agency can hear better, trust better, when we know who we need to engage. We know there are AO practices that are being embedded into practice. We can use this opportunity to teach respectfully how to engage so we are respectful in the region of Durham.