



Durham Children's Aid Society Community Engagement Plan

Background

As an agency, Durham Children's Aid Society (Durham CAS) has made a commitment to redesigning the child welfare system. Supported by our vision that families receive the support and resources needed to thrive in their cultures and communities, and guided by our new Strategic Plan, this work is anchored in anti-oppressive, diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, including recognizing and dismantling anti-Black racism and addressing the systemic challenges and service disparities that impact racialized communities.

In 2016, working with members of the Black community, Durham CAS established a Community Advisory Council (CAC). Its mandate was to raise and discuss systemic issues related to child welfare in Durham Region's Black and/or equity seeking communities, while also making recommendations to the agency, in a collaborative, transparent forum.

The CAC has played an important role in the agency's equity and anti-Black racism journey, helping to organize community functions, leading vital conversations, helping agency staff deepen their understanding. CAC advocacy on Trite Reporting led to the creation of a Trite Report Policy, the first of its kind in child welfare.

However, with the implementation of the new Strategic Plan, it has become evident that even broader community engagement and deeper collaboration with the partners and organizations serving Black children, youth and their families, is necessary to dismantle anti-Black racism within the child welfare system. In addition, the voices and lived experiences of the youth interacting with Durham CAS are necessary to ensure the programs and services available reflect their needs.

With this in mind, the time has come to move beyond the CAC's current structure. This means it is being dissolved as we implement a plan that re-envision and enhances the agency's civic commitments.

Overview

Dismantling anti-Black racism within child welfare requires a systemic response. Under the new Community Engagement Plan, Durham CAS will work with partners throughout Durham Region to empower Black children, youth, and families by providing support and helping them understand and navigate the child welfare system. In addition, the barriers and biases which lead many Black families into the care of Durham CAS will be addressed.

This will be achieved in three ways:

- Consultations
- Community Partnerships
- Ongoing Response Development and Evaluation

Durham CAS is creating a new Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement (DICE) Lead who will manage execution of the Community Engagement Plan and all its elements, with oversight from the agency's Director of Diversity, Equity and Communications.

Community Engagement Plan Elements

Consultations

To effect change, the challenges, concerns, and experiences of the Black community must be clearly identified and documented. This helps ensure that any programs and services offered by Durham CAS are responsive to the needs of the community and are implemented in an accessible way.

This will be achieved through a series of internal and external consultations with key stakeholders.

External consultations

Having the voices of African-Canadian parents and communities reflected in an advisory capacity will allow Durham CAS to more clearly understand, account for, and respect the narratives of Black children and youth, as well as their families.

A consistent and ongoing public consultation process is being established and will be conducted electronically and through bi-monthly Town Hall Meetings, to gather the lived experiences of Black children, youth and families within Durham Region.

To ensure accessibility throughout our community, an online feedback form will be created and hosted on the Durham CAS website. Responses can be provided anonymously to a series of open-ended questions. There will also be a section for respondents to share additional thoughts and feedback.

Bi-Annual Hall Meetings will also be held to collaborate with the community in a more personal forum.

Internal consultations

Until now, the narratives and experiences of Black youth in care have been absent from the existing advisory structure. Durham CAS's Collective Hands Committee will work to collect the feedback and experiences of these youth.

The agency will also consult with staff who identify as Black and Black bi-racial, to better understand their own experiences working within the child welfare sector and gather their thoughts on service gaps and areas of improvement when working with racialized families.

Establishing Partnerships

To effectively engage with the local African-Canadian community, Durham CAS must expand the network of agencies it works with to include organizations who are also supporting Black and Black bi-racial families.

By honing in on several key areas of focus, these partnerships can leverage existing resources and expertise, while also developing new services, programs and supports that are responsive to the feedback previously collected.

These include:

Area of Focus – Black Social Services

Throughout the Region of Durham, very few frontline agencies provide immediate wrap-around services to Black families.

The agencies below have been identified through anti-Black racism consults and feedback provided by staff and families.

Durham CAS will create a committee consisting of staff from these agencies to identify the most effective programs and resources for Black families, offering services through a trauma-focused and anti-Black racism lens. The committee will be led by Karen Saunders, One Vision One Voice Lead at Durham CAS.

From an ongoing perspective, these services will be used to support families with multiple needs and can also help ensure a smooth transition after a family is no longer involved with Durham CAS.

The proposed partners are:

- **Community Justice Alternatives (CJA) (Legal)**
 - CJA works with youth involved in the criminal justice system and provides diversion and prevention services to youth who may be at risk of becoming criminally involved.

- **Durham Family Cultural Centre (Health Care)**

- Durham Family and Cultural Centre seeks to strengthen family well-being through community-based prevention and early intervention services.

These include culturally relevant wrap-around supports to families in the form of individual and/or group short-term counseling sessions and assistance to enhance parenting skills, as well as interventions that promote healthy family relationships.

- **Synergy Link (Family Support)**

- Synergy Link is a multi-service agency which helps children, youth and adults transition through challenges with greater ease by facilitating access to support, relief and resources.

- **Ease the Stress (Youth and Family Support)**

- Ease the Stress is a multi-service agency that focuses on youth and teens, in particular those who have been labeled as “difficult to serve”. The agency engages with families and often uses mentorship as a support method.

- **Ifarada Centre of Excellence**

- Ifarada: Centre for Excellence is a Black-led community agency. Founded as a non-profit organization in 2018 by Nicole Perryman, it supports hundreds of individuals and families in communities throughout Durham Region, Toronto, and York Region through its focus on cultural informed practice, anti-oppressive practice, and holistic care.

Currently, the outcomes for youth exiting care are hindered by several systemic factors; this is especially true of racialized youth in general and Black youth. To address this, Ifarada has been awarded funding for a four-year project to determine better outcomes for youth leaving care.

Durham CAS will be working with Ifarada on the project, to ensure Black youth aging out of the system are provided with supports that assist in their labour-market integration and pursuit of additional education.

Area of Focus – Education

Educational attainment and access have been identified as major barriers for Black youth, especially those involved with the child welfare system.

Partnering with educationally focused organizations is a key component of addressing learning-related disparities and promoting overall success.

The proposed partners include:

- **Secondary – Durham Black Educators Network**

- The Durham Black Educators Network (DBEN) was created in response to disparities of educational outcomes and well-being of Black students within the Durham District School Board by a collective of Black educators.

Durham CAS will be seeking to collaborate with DBEN to better understand student pathways and outcomes at the secondary level for Black students.

This potential partnership will consist of quarterly meetings between Durham CAS and DBEN.

- **Post-Secondary – RISE, Durham College**

- RISE, which stands for Reach, Include, Support and Elevate, recognizes that students need a wide variety of supports to be successful in their program of study.

Through one-on-one coaching, mentoring and dynamic programming, RISE specifically works with students who have barriers to success so they can reach their potential and achieve success throughout all stages of their post-secondary education journey.

Starting in September, Durham CAS will partner with RISE to build a working relationship which supports Black students in the community that are facing systemic barriers, to increase their pathways to post-secondary education.

Area of Focus – Thought leadership and awareness building

Durham CAS has made a commitment to become a leader within the child welfare sector, driven by an intentional focus on anti-oppression, anti-Black racism and addressing overrepresentation.

To achieve this, the agency must position itself as a thought leader, focusing on awareness building and educating those within the sector, as well as the public, on issues related to racism and the systemic challenges that impact Black children, youth and their families.

This will be done through strategic alignment with key organizations and by focusing on specific stakeholders in the community.

These include:

- **Durham's Best Start Network**

- Durham CAS is now a member of the Durham's Best Start Network.

Consisting of more than 85 members from 45 organizations, the Network is a space for creating resources, establishing partnerships, and sharing best practices, for organizations who work with children from birth to 6 years of age.

Membership in this Network gives the agency the opportunity to understand changes in legislation, stay apprised of the best practices of other key community organizations and connect more broadly with Black children, youth and families. It will also allow the agency to share its own expertise to educate the other Network members, while advocating for and mobilizing support amongst the membership base, to address the challenges facing racialized communities more broadly.

- **Mandated Referrers:**

- Durham CAS knows that Mandated Referrers play a key role in the child welfare system. There is also a direct link between the referrers and trite reporting, which perpetuates the overrepresentation of Black and Black bi-racial.

With this in mind, the agency will partner with representatives from the local school boards, hospitals and police to host quarterly round table discussions focused on education and capacity building amongst these groups. Durham CAS will also conduct two proactive outreach campaigns per year to book training with Mandated Referrers, using the data collected via the agency's Trite Report Policy to inform which sectors, organizations, and institutions the agency targets during the campaigns.

Ongoing Response Development and Evaluation

Using all the information collected from the internal and external consultations, as well as via its established partnerships, Durham CAS will develop specific programs and responses to address the challenges, disparities and gaps in service delivery that are most detrimental to Black children, youth, and families. These will be executed alongside community partners, or as sole agency initiatives.

An annual review of the plan will be conducted by Durham CAS's DICE Lead at the end of each fiscal year to track, evaluate and measure the effectiveness and impact of the Community Engagement Plan. Results of this review will be shared internally, with the agency's community partners and publicly.

In addition, Durham CAS's Director of Diversity, Equity and Communications, will provide a progress update on the Community Engagement Plan's execution and progress to the Board of Directors on a quarterly basis.