An Open Letter to Doug Ford from Ontario Schools of Social Work:
Please “pause, consult and reconsider” the closure of the Child Advocacy Office

December 3, 2018

Last week, 99.47% of the children in Canada had the protection of a provincial or territorial Child Advocacy Office. According to Doug Ford’s plan to cut Ontario’s Child Advocacy Office, that number will drop to 61.17% of Canadian children. With the exception of Prince Edward Island and the Northwest Territories, every other province and territory in Canada has a Child Advocacy Office, which is independent from the government, to protect our most vulnerable children.

The Child Advocacy Office (CAO) provides services, advocacy, and an overview of government services for children in the care of Children’s Aid Societies, involved with the Justice system, and receiving disability-related services, such as mental health services and attending schools specifically geared toward their disabilities. It advocates and services First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and was recently working on projects to keep remote Indigenous Foster children in their home communities and to address alarming suicide rates among Indigenous youth.

Through the CAO, young people have access to legal advocates assigned with the sole and independent task of protecting their interests and legal rights when involved in legal processes, such as consent to mental health assessment and treatment, residential and/or foster care, protecting confidentially/privacy, forced hospitalization under the Mental Health Act, etc. The CAO represents children and youth receiving psychiatric care through community-based, hospital-based, and/or residential treatment programs. It is the only body that acts independently from the system and independent from the interests of parents/caregivers (which are sometimes at odds with those of their children). The closure of the CAO will therefore remove any independent legal representation and support for children and youth living in the care of government, social, and medical services. In mental health services, in particular, children and youth will have no independent protection from the misuse of pharmaceutical and physical restraints and isolation rooms, punitive behavioural modification programs where children are routinely denied freedoms, and ECT (electroconvulsive treatment). Those responsible for this proposed closure, especially those with children of their own, might pause to consider where they might land on this issue if their own children were currently receiving such treatment.


A month later, the “2018 Toronto Child & Family Poverty Report” was released, which only addresses Toronto, but nevertheless can help us to reflect upon the dangers of this and other austerity measures, where the most vulnerable have even more taken away from them. This data shows that ten Toronto wards have a child poverty rate between 37% and 47%. This study found that Indigenous, racialized, and newcomer communities are particularly likely to be living without the basic necessities and that an alarming 84% of Indigenous families with children, in particular, live in poverty.
Poor and marginalized families clearly need more material resources, rather than less. Due to the effects of poverty and racism, children from these families are more likely to find themselves using the services related to the CAO’s mandate. The CAO conducts systemic reviews and thus makes informed recommendations for the positive transformation of government policies and practices, facilities, systems, agencies, and service providers’ practices.

The CAO also directly fields calls, emails, or messages from young people. Young people call the CAO to find out more about their rights and to ask for help when a system, facility, or service provider violates their rights. If the CAO closes, there will be nobody to answer these calls, emails, and messages. It is misinformed to expect that facilities, systems, and service providers – or the government – can take on the task of protecting children when they are being harmed. The CAO provides its necessary service because of the need to address the harms that children experience within services. No internal office to the government can replace this vital service.

The bottom line is that more young people will be hurt in government care and custody, and that more young people will very likely die, unless the Progressive Conservative Party repeals this dangerous decision. As Irwin Elman said, please “pause, consult and reconsider” this terrible mistake. We implore that the CAO remain open and fully funded to protect some of our most vulnerable children and youth. We furthermore ask that you take pause and reconsider the austerity measures that are currently underway and the devastating consequences that they will have on our most vulnerable and marginalized children, youth, and families. If this is a government for “the people,” then surely it shouldn't be so callously leaving the most disadvantaged among us behind.

Sincerely,

Maurice Kwong-Lai Poon, Director, York University School of Social Work
Christina Sinding, Director, McMaster University School of Social Work
Andrea Daley, Director, Renison University College School of Social Work
Hugh Shewell, Interim Director, Carleton University School of Social Work
Susan Silver, Interim Director, Ryerson University School of Social Work
Dawn Buzza, Dean, Wilfrid Laurier University Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work
Faye Mishna, Dean, University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
Faculty Members, Algoma University Department of Social Work
Peter Donahue, Director King’s School of Social Work
Robin Wright, Director, University of Windsor School of Social Work
Kim Calderwood, Director, Trent University Social Work Department
Marc Molgat, Director, University of Ottawa School of Social Work
Raymond Neckoway, Director, Lakehead University School of Social Work
Mary Pat Sullivan, Director, Nipissing University Social Work Program