

Children’s Aid Society of Toronto: Black African Caribbean Canadian Committee

Community Consultations: Spring & Fall 2015:

Purpose, Findings and Recommendations

Introduction

The Children’s Aid Society of Toronto (CAS of Toronto) established the Black African Caribbean Canadian¹ Committee (BACCC) in 2010. The committee was formed to improve services, enhance understanding of and develop strategies to address issues of disproportionality and disparity in the delivery of services to Black families and children. The scope of BACCC and of other agency initiatives has since expanded to include issues of systemic structural racism identified by Black families and service providers. The Anti-Oppression, Anti-Racism Policy passed by our agency’s Board of Directors in 2006 has provided a critical foundation for the committee’s discussions. BACCC continues to operationalize some of the key directions included in the agency’s Strategic Plan.

An initial literature review clearly demonstrated how prevalent issues of disproportionality and disparity are in the child welfare field across North America. BACCC undertook an extensive analysis of the CAS of Toronto’s service data, which identified significant local issues of disproportionality in our services to Black families and youth in care. A critical component of the action plan to date has been the refinement and subsequent sharing of this data internally, with key stakeholders (e.g., TDSB, Toronto Police Services, and the African Canadian Legal Clinic), and with members of the Black community.

Approximately 60 members of the Black community, members of our Board of Directors, senior management and front-line staff attended consultation sessions on May 25, June 1 and June 2, 2015 in the northwest, central and east parts of Toronto. These sessions were facilitated by Diversity Consultant Jean Samuel.

In addition to agency staff, the participants included parents who had current or previous involvement with child welfare or with our agency, adults who had experience in the care of child welfare, social service staff who had previously worked for child welfare, community leaders and residents, service providers, leaders in faith communities, and organizations in partnerships with child welfare. Those attending the consultations were very candid in sharing

¹ The terms “Black African Caribbean Canadian”, “African Canadian”, or “Black” are used interchangeably in this document. The acronym BACCC refers to the CAS of Toronto’s Black African Caribbean Canadian Committee.

personal stories, observations, challenges and often intense frustration regarding the impact of the agency's services. They also shared their beliefs and feelings about the impact of racism and disproportionate services on their own lives, and the lives of other children, youth and families in the community.

The community expressed an appreciation for the invitation to this discussion and the CAS of Toronto's intention to address these critical issues; however, they also expressed skepticism about potential outcomes based on their experiences of similar discussions in the past.

The deep anger and passion with which participants spoke had a profound impact on agency staff and Board members who were present and who reinforced our commitment to address issues raised, take action and improve outcomes. It was encouraging to hear a number of community members express offers to work collaboratively with the CAS of Toronto to address community needs more effectively, improve outcomes for children and families, and keep children safe.

Purpose and Format of CAS of Toronto Consultations

The purpose of these consultations was:

- To share the CAS of Toronto service data regarding Black children, youth, and families within the community;
- To talk openly and honestly about disproportionality and disparity of service contact between child welfare and the Black community and to define specific issues from both the community's and the service provider's perspective in order to arrive at solutions; and,
- To learn from the community about ways in which the services of the CAS of Toronto can be improved through reflection on their experiences of child welfare services.

Four consultation questions were developed and made available to each participant attending the meetings in order to elicit input and feedback:

- What is your experience of child welfare services?
- What suggestions do you have to improve child welfare services?
- What are the challenges faced by Black African Caribbean Canadian children and families?
- How could CAS of Toronto collaborate and engage with community organizations to improve services to Black families?

a) Summary of Findings

At the three spring community consultation sessions consistent themes emerged:

1. Service providers and members of the Black community expressed significant anger about many years of disparity in the level and nature of involvement of Black families and their children with child welfare and the perceived lack of prior concern or action on the part of the CAS of Toronto to address these issues.
2. The Black community experiences a high level of cultural insensitivity and racism, particularly anti-Black racism, operating in all stages of child welfare service. A belief persists that the agency's leadership and staff are not able to fully understand the impacts of individual, societal and systemic-structural racism on the Black community, and are likewise not able to fully adopt and operationalize skills and knowledge to work more collaboratively, and racially equitably, with Black African Caribbean Canadian children, youth and families living in the Greater Toronto Area.
3. There is a high degree of fear and mistrust of child welfare services. There is also a consistent concern that child welfare staff members are not listening to parents and caregivers and not asking the right questions, which has resulted in parents and caregivers feeling misunderstood.
4. There is a critical need for culturally grounded services and supports for Black families involved, or at risk of becoming involved, with child welfare services.
5. There was an understanding that child protection services are needed to keep children safe from abuse; however, there is a need for more education and transparency about child welfare services and the service options available to Black families. Parents, in particular newcomers to Canada, are unaware of the Canadian cultural context and child welfare laws.
6. Service providers in the Black community have creative ideas about service options, significant levels of expertise and resources, and want to partner with the CAS of Toronto in the design and delivery of such services.
7. There is a perception of collusion between the major institutional systems namely education, criminal justice, and child welfare. Systemic-structural racism continues to negatively impact Black children, youth and families. It was noted that this impact is strongest for Black males.
8. There are many socio-economic pressures on Black African Caribbean Canadian families that also operate in bringing them to the attention of child welfare services. There must

be greater focus on the social determinants of health as major contributing factors to family stress and subsequent parenting challenges.

9. The voices of Black children in care are not being heard.
10. The collection and analysis of service data related to the Black community is critical and should continue.

b) Recommendations from the Community Consultation Sessions

CAS of Toronto invited those who attended the spring consultations to a follow-up consultation to see if “we got it right” in terms of their feedback and recommendations and to assess interest in their participating in a Community Stakeholders Group or Advisory Committee. On October 28, 2015, over 20 community members participated and gave feedback. The Recommendations below are the final result of that process and reflects the cumulative community voices from the May/June and October meeting:

1. The CAS of Toronto should look more intensively and contextually at issues facing Black African Caribbean Canadian families and children as societal and structural disparities and not solely as individual issues or problems. The agency needs to understand the root causes of issues and problems in many Black African Caribbean Canadian families as highly influenced by their experiences of individual, societal, structural-systemic and anti-Black racism, and see these ecological realities as a central focus to child welfare work.
2. The CAS of Toronto should recruit, hire and engage individuals at all level of the organization who reflect racialized communities and who are genuine in their intentions to build strong communities. This would include members of the Board of Directors and care providers (e.g., foster parents, kinship families). The CAS of Toronto’s performance appraisal system should monitor and increase staff competency in implementing Anti-Oppression Anti-Racism (AOAR) policies and services.
3. CAS of Toronto workers should be provided with ongoing training and support on anti-Black racism and the social determinants of health to understand the impact on these issues on Black African Caribbean Canadian children, youth and families. CAS of Toronto should develop or partner on preventative, community-based services and advocate for necessary supports.

4. A “Black Community Stakeholders Forum” or other form of community advisory group should be developed to: create greater transparency about child welfare services, collaboratively address the service disparities and overrepresentation of Black children and youth in the child welfare system, continue to enhance the understanding of the impact of service for Black families, children and youth, and increase child safety for Black African Caribbean Canadian children and youth within their families in Toronto.
5. The CAS of Toronto should develop an organizational policy and operating protocol (with input from the community stakeholders) that clearly defines and outlines the ongoing need to reach out to different groups in the community, including youth, to participate in the work of providing safety and well-being for children, youth and families in the Black community in Toronto.
6. The CAS of Toronto should engage all their staff, including Black staff, in the organizational work ahead to ensure equitable services and to address anti-Black racism.
7. The CAS of Toronto leadership should be more transparent regarding our challenges towards more equitable services, and utilize the strengths and knowledge in the community to help us problem solve in areas of challenge.
8. The CAS of Toronto should partner with stakeholders in the Black community, and work with the sources of referrals and supports (School Boards, Toronto Police Services; income security programs Ontario Works/Ontario Disability Support Program (OW/ODSP) and other child/family youth services) to develop preventative and diversionary programs and services that reduce and/or eliminate the need for child welfare services while keeping children safe. CAS of Toronto should have a presence and provide some supports at a community level as part of the prevention and partnership work.
9. In their ally role, the CAS of Toronto should be prepared to identify and take a leadership position against inequities, and systemic racism within key systems where there is a disproportionate and adverse impact on the Black community and the children, youth or families that CAS of Toronto is serving. (For example police services, schools, criminal justice, and health services).
10. The CAS of Toronto should work with stakeholders in the Black community to problem-solve some of the challenges in developing meaningful partnerships to improve services to children, youth and families.

11. The CAS of Toronto should work with stakeholders to identify some of the successful programs and policies, and some of the problematic ones that are impacting on the well-being of Black African, Caribbean, Canadian youth
12. The CAS of Toronto should continue to enhance kinship options in a child's community for children who require alternative care due to child protection concerns. CAS of Toronto should evaluate how kinship service is working for Black families and children, look at what is not working and make changes as necessary.
13. The CAS of Toronto should connect each Black youth in care with appropriate support person(s) in order to build sustained relationships that help nurture their culture/identity and support other needs (support person(s) could include: youth workers; community mental health workers; other key relationship significant person; kin; mentors; faith leaders).
14. Black families, youth and community members need access to mechanisms through which they can safely provide feedback on their experiences with the CAS of Toronto and/or bring forward complaints to be addressed, such as an ombudsman type position. This mechanism should be "community facing" so it is known and can be easily identified and accessed by the community.