

2023 / 2024

Annual Report

CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY
OF TORONTO



CHILDREN'S
AID SOCIETY
of TORONTO

LA SOCIÉTÉ
DE L'AIDE à
L'ENFANCE
DE TORONTO

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Board Chair Message

YEUGENIA KAZANTSEVA



Dear CAST Community,

It is with pleasure that I address you as the Chair of the Board of Directors for the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST) and share my reflections on the significant work and progress we achieved during the 2023-24 fiscal year.

Over the last 12 months, leadership across our Agency has been pivotal. Operating 24/7, 365 days a year, the dedication and resilience of our staff, leadership and volunteer Board of Directors illustrated our steadfast commitment to CAST's mission and the children, youth and families we serve.

Our Board members invested a significant amount of time, effort and resources to support the evolution of the Board structure, committees and processes. This work has been instrumental in enhancing our governance and effectiveness, and reinforcing clarity, transparency and a deep understanding of the Board's responsibilities.

We also concentrated on Board member recruitment and welcoming new members who bring a broad range of expertise and experience. Their addition will further strengthen our Board complement, enhance our governance and ensure we continue to provide strategic support to the Executive Team while stewarding our relationship with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS).

Additionally, in the second half of the year, our Board focused on recruiting a permanent CEO for CAST, resulting in the selection of Lisa Tomlinson for the position in May 2024. It was essential that a thorough, thoughtful and comprehensive search was conducted to attract a strong base of candidates from both within and outside the child welfare sector. To lead this effort, we established a Board CEO Search Committee comprised of CAST Board members, which was supported by an Advisory Panel. The Advisory Panel included representatives from the MCCSS, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, CUPE 2316, our Youth Council and community agencies we collaborate with. This multi-faceted recruitment approach helped to ensure we gathered invaluable insights and feedback throughout the process.

Over the last year the Agency and Board continued to carry out a lot of important work simultaneously and I want to express my gratitude to Lisa Tomlinson and the entire CAST Executive Team for their ongoing dedication

and focus.

Their exemplary leadership has been crucial in driving the organization forward throughout this period and leading the implementation of the updated 2023-25 Strategic Plan and Key Performance Indicators.

With more than nine years of service, I have grown deeply attached to CAST, the mission and all of the dedicated individuals who work here. I have learned so much from the organization's size, complexity, the challenges the sector is experiencing and the vital work that is done. Each year has brought great learnings and an opportunity to stay open minded and do better. I encourage my colleagues to continue to embrace these opportunities and stay on track with the mission.

As I bid farewell, along with fellow departing Board members Iqbal Ali, Randy Carter, Derek Eng and Marshall Schnapp, I have the utmost confidence in the strength and dedication of the remaining and new Board members, the Strategic Leadership Team and our Agency staff.

In closing, I express my profound appreciation and pride in the work accomplished over the past year. Together, we have demonstrated the power of collaboration and commitment, and I am confident that we will continue to enhance our services and supports for children, youth and families in the years to come.

Thank you for your ongoing support and dedication to our Agency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yeugenia Kazantseva". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Yeugenia Kazantseva
Board Chair
Children's Aid Society of Toronto

CEO Message

LISA TOMLINSON



Dear CAST Community,

I am delighted to address you as CEO of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST) and to share our 2023-24 Annual Report. At CAST, the last year was a dynamic one that involved growth, learning and a lot of change for our Agency at all levels. As an organization we faced transitions, and through it all our dedicated staff and strong leadership were pivotal in navigating these changes.

Our renewed 2023-25 Strategic Plan guided our efforts, enabling significant progress on our Key Performance Indicators thanks to the collaborative efforts of our staff. We are already planning the next phase of our Strategic Plan and look forward to sharing further details soon.

In partnership with CUPE 2316 and its members, the collective agreement was accepted and ratified. This settlement reflects our mutual commitment to fostering a positive and productive working environment for our staff. To further support employee workplace needs, we implemented our Workplace Strategy, allowing for hybrid work arrangements for roles where feasible.

From a Service perspective, the new Ready, Set, Go program and Quality Standards Framework were implemented, which required an extensive amount of time and work from our dedicated Service teams. Our Agency also successfully implemented all 18 of the Ontario Ombudsman's recommendations and our efforts were acknowledged in their annual report. We continued our focus on in-home care and preventive measures to support children and youth, and their families.

Alongside the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), Ministry of Health and other Greater Toronto Area child welfare agencies, our Agency began critical discussions regarding Service delivery gaps for children and youth with complex needs.

As a result of some children and youth we serve not having access to the services they need outside of the child welfare sector, our Agency has been impacted operationally and subsequently financially. We have been diligently focused on our deficit and financial sustainability and I thank and commend our staff and leaders for their ongoing support of these efforts and for implementing changes that positively contribute to our overall financial sustainability.

Also in 2023-24 we furthered our collaborations with the MCCSS, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada and partners within the communities we serve. We acknowledge and thank all of these organizations for their invaluable partnerships and ongoing support.

Now as we begin a new fiscal year, we bid farewell to our esteemed Board Chair, Yeugenia Kazantseva. After nine years of dedicated service as a volunteer Board member, including the last two as Board Chair, Yeugenia's departure signals an important shift for our Agency and highlights the progress, development and strength of our Board. The Board's unwavering commitment to our Agency, confidence in my role as permanent CEO, support of the Executive Team and their overall contributions have been pivotal in navigating change. I express my gratitude to Yeugenia and all of our Board members for their collaboration, dedication and strategic contributions to our mission.

This fiscal year we will continue to focus on financial sustainability while remaining committed to enhancing Service delivery for children, youth and families. This work may require us to advocate for families beyond our immediate responsibilities, so to ensure comprehensive support across sectors. Overall, I am confident that our collective efforts, partnerships and dedication will continue to drive our work and the progress needed.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lisa Tomlinson', with a long, sweeping underline.

Lisa Tomlinson
Chief Executive Officer
Children's Aid Society of Toronto

Our messages



2024 has been a year of change and transition, along with many accomplishments for CAST and our Corporate Services Department.

Our IT and Property teams have remained steadfast in prioritizing projects and plans that ensure our staff are well-equipped with the essential tools and environments needed to effectively meet their demands and support the children, youth and families we serve. In addition, our Corporate Services Department completed the Return to Office study that was pivotal to the Workplace Strategy that led to the roll-out of a hybrid work environment for staff.

From a financial standpoint, the year posed challenges for our Agency due to a significant deficit resulting from inadequate funding for children and youth with complex needs. This is a challenge across the whole child welfare sector and we're working with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Our Finance team has played a pivotal role in providing extensive analysis to support data driven decision making for management staff to address the deficit, as well as to support advocacy discussions with the Ministry to address this funding inadequacy. We also continue to work with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and our peer agencies in reviewing options to address insurance coverage for our risks in a financially prudent manner.

We look forward to advancing our collaborative efforts both within and beyond our Agency as we concentrate on enhancing our operations and strengthening the supports we provide to our staff and all those we serve.

Keshwer Patel, Chief Financial Officer



The past year has marked significant progress and alignment with our strategic priorities.

Through renewed and strengthened partnerships with community organizations, we ensure responsiveness while enabling children, youth and their caregivers to access services independently from our Agency. Our collaboration with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and our fellow child welfare agencies has also supported our success.

The roll-out of the Quality Standards Framework and Ready, Set, Go has provided valuable insights to support our ongoing implementation of these two important service initiatives. Internally, creative and innovative thinking has driven the development of programming and partnerships addressing substance misuse, mental health and the needs of children and youth with complex needs.

Specifically, our Health Services Department is focusing on areas of critical need including youth mental health.

Equity remains central to our Service delivery, and as we note the gains we have made in this area, we also continue to support staff growth and capacity to provide Service to children, youth and families that is grounded in core principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. Additionally, our collaboration with the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada continues to support equity-informed programming for children, youth and families.

As we move forward, we remain committed to strengthening families and keeping children and youth within their homes and connected to their communities. Our focus on building strategic programming and partnerships will continue to drive our success.

**Nancy Ansong-Danquah,
Interim Chief Operating Officer**



During the past fiscal year, our exemplary Human Resources team was presented with many challenges and opportunities that were successfully navigated and addressed in conjunction with our resilient, resourceful and committed employees.

Our focus has been on enhancing the services, resources and benefits available to support staff wellness, and advancing our Agency's engagement, equity and leadership development goals and initiatives. Maximizing the potential and capabilities of our staff has ensured we relentlessly enrich the quality of services provided to the children, youth and families we support.

In 2023-24, we rolled out a new Workplace Strategy with hybrid/in-office profiles that reflect our Agency's operational and Service requirements and support work-life harmony and staff well-being. In addition, through the collective bargaining settlement achieved, we have strengthened our Union-management partnership, improved terms of employment and ensured optimal business continuity.

Once again, our focus on people has been recognized with the distinctions of: Greater Toronto's Top Employers (12 years), Canada's Best Diversity Employers (9 years) and Canada's Best Employers for Recent Graduates (9 years).

Our work presents us with many challenging situations and rewarding opportunities, where we can truly make a difference in the lives of those we serve. We will continue our journey of developing valuable relationships and extraordinary partnerships, where together we achieve remarkable success!

Colin Hill, Interim Chief Human Resources Officer

Our workplace



Launch of new Workplace Strategy

In understanding that the pandemic created a new way of working for our Agency, in late 2022 we engaged Avison Young's project management consultants, to lead the undertaking of a third-party study to help inform our new on-site structure. This in-depth initiative involved staff, management and community partner surveys, functional area interviews, and Union consultations.

The results of the study led to our Workplace Strategy that was rolled-out to staff in November 2023, providing a framework for our new hybrid working model that considers our operational requirements, timely and effective Service delivery, and the safety and well-being of our staff. Balancing insights from the study and our Agency's operational needs, the Workplace Strategy pairs every employee, based on their position and responsibilities, with a Workplace Profile that identifies their in-person office requirements.

2023 Engagement Survey

As part of our focus on providing an environment that supports our employees in feeling engaged and supported in growing their skill sets and careers, we monitor the level of staff engagement through dedicated internal surveys. In partnership with Gallup, a third-party provider, we conducted our 2023 "Your Say" Engagement Survey with questions for staff that were strategically designed to identify our Agency's areas of strength and action areas to improve our engagement levels.

Our 2023 Engagement Survey results demonstrated consistent employee engagement and an increase in overall satisfaction since 2021. Survey insights and responses have also provided us with further foundation and direction as we work to enhance engagement across our Agency.

Enhancing Employee Benefits

In recognition of the importance of supporting our staff's mental and physical well-being, in the last year we introduced enhancements to our employee benefits offering. This included the introduction of a new comprehensive Employee and Family Assistance Provider, Homewood Health, that offers an expanded array of services tailored to the needs of our workforce. Additionally, we have increased the funds available through the Healthcare Spending Account to further empower our employees in prioritizing their wellness.

Expanding our Employee Resource Groups

At CAST our staff spearhead and lead Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), offering employees from equity-deserving groups a structured, inclusive and formalized channel and community dedicated to fostering connections, advocacy, networking and career development.

Since introducing ERGs in 2022, we have witnessed the benefits of bringing staff together and enhancing our equity and engagement efforts. In early 2024, we were pleased to facilitate the introduction of four new ERGs for Indigenous, Jewish, South Asian, and staff with disabilities. These are in addition to the existing ERGs including for Black, Muslim, East Asian, and 2SLGBTQ+ staff.

New Leadership Development Training

Our ongoing commitment to fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth led us to launch a new dedicated Leadership Development Program designed for CAST Managers and Supervisors with staff reporting into them, following the successful delivery of the program for Directors. The four-part comprehensive training series was rolled-out over the past year with objectives to equip its participants with greater leadership, self-awareness and management skills to lead high-performing and engaged teams.

Our Service delivery

Launch of Kinship Rapid Search Process

In 2023-24, we continued our priority of keeping children and youth, who could not remain at home, connected to their families, communities and culture through the facilitation of 397 Kinship placements.

In alignment with this priority, our Kinship and placement team introduced a new 'rapid search' process aimed at reducing the duration a child or youth is in care and/or expanding their support network for connections and permanency. This process initiates a rapid search for potential Kin/Kith Caregivers for a child or youth within 24-48 hours after they are brought to a place of safety. This includes leveraging many techniques, including telephone interviews with the child or youth's family members, review of child welfare records and social media searches. Since its implementation in December 2023, nearly 70 rapid searches have been conducted, leading to enhanced family connections and/or Kinship plans that have decreased the time a child or youth spends in care.

Enhancing our Strategic Education Plan

Driven by our Key Performance Indicator to improve education outcomes for children and youth in care to support graduation rates, we've continued our focus on enhancing our Strategic Education Plan that was first introduced in 2021. Informed by CAST's student-specific data and the intersectionality of race, gender, disability, trauma and other social determinants of health, this plan aims to build Worker and caregiver capacity to improve educational supports and academic achievements for young people in and from care, and those receiving services from CAST.

As part of the Education Plan, an annual Education Support Plan (ESP) is collaboratively developed and maintained for each school-aged child or youth in care. This includes grades, teachers' comments, attendance, courses and credits, learning challenges and supports, and any other learning-related data. ESPs inform plan-of-care meetings and planning/advocacy meetings with teachers and school administrators and are especially vital for supporting and advocating for students during

early school years, in advance of their transition to high school, and when selecting high school courses to support with post-secondary options.

Our Education Liaison also provides resources and facilitates workshops and meetings for our staff, alternate caregivers, and families, focused on school processes and navigating the education system, special education needs and supports, best practices for home learning, and long-range planning for student success.

Community Engagement

► Community Capacity Building

Through Community Capacity Building, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provides funds to identified community agencies to develop partnerships and offer services to children, youth and families involved or at risk of involvement with child welfare. Over the past year, our Community Capacity Building priorities have focused on engaging and stewarding relationships with a dozen organizations to ensure families have access to local, culturally affirming resources that enhance their capacity and networks. Our emphasis has been on creating streamlined referral systems to provide families with equitable, easy and quick access to services and supports to reduce their current and/or future involvement with child welfare. Several of these collaborations have bridged into new programs focused on engaging fathers, supporting mothers with substance use, and connecting youth requiring immediate intervention.

► Partnership Framework

Over the past year, our Strategic Community Partnership and Engagement (SCPE) Team within the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Department has been focused on developing our Agency's Partnership Framework. The Framework is designed to align our Agency-wide partnership practices and processes with our strategic priorities, while collaborating with community agencies and individuals who share our commitment to enhancing services, supports and outcomes for children, youth and families.

The SCPE Team has been and continues to collect feedback from internal and external stakeholders, including current community partners, to ensure the Framework reflects learnings and successful practices from our existing partnerships. In addition, the team has introduced an expression of interest form to streamline the process for community organizations seeking to collaborate with CAST and has created internal channels to raise staff awareness about our Agency's established partnerships and available community resources for families.

Children's Service Sector Table

Our Agency continues to be an active participant on the Children's Sector Table (the Table), a collaborative initiative aimed at enhancing system-level planning in Toronto. The Table, co-chaired by CAST's Intake Director, Ramona Chereches, serves as a platform for our Agency to engage and exchange knowledge with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services-Toronto Region and other child and youth funded agencies in Toronto. Together, we identify and implement projects and initiatives focused on improving community-based prevention services, with goals such as enhancing family well-being, improving the quality of residential care, increasing youth supports, fostering lifelong connections for young people, and enhancing accountability and sustainability.

Members of CAST's management and leadership teams are also active participants in Table Subgroups, with priorities and projects centred on early intervention for children and youth at risk of child welfare involvement, youth transitioning out of care, and addressing disproportionate outcomes for children from Black, Indigenous, and other equity-deserving communities.

Quality Standards Framework and Licensing

In partnership with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, our Agency prepared for and implemented the new Quality Standards Framework (QSF) regulatory changes, which took effect July 1, 2023. The Framework aims to enhance the quality of care for children and youth, empower them with a stronger voice in decisions about their care and reinforce their overall rights.

Over the past year, to support the roll-out of these regulatory changes, CAST Service teams invested significant time and effort in developing materials,

implementing policies and processes and providing comprehensive training for staff and Foster Parents.

The implementation of QSF has transformed the Ministry's licensing review process, shifting the focus from mere compliance to quality improvement to achieve better outcomes for children and youth. Our Foster Care and Extended Society Care licensing review, that commenced in January 2024, received positive feedback for our efforts in adopting and implementing the new Framework, along with recommendations for further improvement. We look forward to continuing this important work alongside the Ministry in the coming year and beyond.

Ready, Set, Go

On April 1, 2023, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services launched the Ready, Set, Go (RSG) program to support youth in care and those transitioning to adulthood. The program extends care to age 23, provides enhanced financial support, and aids youth in pursuing post-secondary education, skilled trades training and employment opportunities.

Our Agency's successful transition to RSG was led by our Service team who prepared and implemented the necessary policy and procedure changes. Through tiered communications and education strategies, our staff were equipped to understand RSG, ensuring eligible youth receive the appropriate supports and financial entitlements.

Relaunching the Soul Journey Program

Funded by the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, CAST's Soul Journey program began in 2006 to provide Black youth in care with learning opportunities and excursions to explore their identities, the African Caribbean Canadian experience and what it means to be Black.

In November 2023, Soul Journey was relaunched and renamed to the Soul Journey Coaching program with a greater emphasis on the overall development, independence, resilience and sense of community for Black youth. The re-imagined 10-month program offers participants support to improve academic success, acquire essential life skills and further develop their identities. The program aims to support Black youth's educational and life goals, equipping them for their journey through and beyond care.

Building on our Recruitment Efforts

Over the past year, we have furthered our efforts to recruit community members to support the children, youth and families we serve as Volunteer Drivers, Foster Caregivers and Adoptive Caregivers. Our enhanced communications and community engagement strategy led to an increase in Volunteer Driver applications, who are crucial in ensuring the safe transportation of children and youth to and from family visits, foster care homes, residences and appointments across the Greater Toronto Area.

To engage potential Foster and Adoptive Caregivers who reflect the diversity of the children and youth we serve, we partnered with various community organizations to host and participate in both in-person and virtual recruitment events. These events serve as a platform to educate the community, showcase the experiences of current Foster and Adoptive Caregivers, and encourage individuals from all backgrounds to take on caregiving roles. Our goal is to ensure children and youth, who are unable to stay at home, are connected with alternative caregivers who can support their unique identities and needs.

Our operations

Advocating for children and youth

Throughout 2023-24, we've made tremendous efforts to advocate for appropriate funding to support mandated services for children, youth and families. These actions have resulted in our Agency receiving full reimbursement of third-party costs from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services for Transitional Aged Youth initiatives that support young people in care with mental health and/or substance use challenges as they transition to adulthood.

There continues to be significant financial pressure relating to costs for children and youth with complex needs. Our advocacy work is ongoing with the Ministry for dedicated funding to cover these costs and to ensure that the children and youth who intersect with our Agency and child welfare have support and programs from the Ministry that best align with their needs.

Supporting informed data driven planning and decision making

Over the past year, working to develop more mature processes for Business Continuity Planning and the Enterprise Risk Management program within our Agency has been a priority for members of our Corporate Services Department. This includes collaborating with external

partners and consultants to build frameworks and plans that ensure our Agency and leaders are equipped to maintain ongoing stability and continuity of operations in the event of a major disruption or event affecting our workplace and/or Service delivery.

Enhancing the management reports for ongoing use by Service leaders has also been a focus point, including collaborating with Service teams to refine report content, structure and accessibility. These enhanced tools serve to ensure that the leadership team at all levels in the organization have information to make sound data driven decisions and develop mitigation actions where possible.

Addressing insurance for risk management

In recent years, the insurance premiums for the child welfare sector have dramatically increased, becoming a significant financial pressure for Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies in Ontario. In response to this increase, CAST has been working in partnership with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and our peer agencies to derive alternative approaches to insurance. Though these collaborative efforts, we aim to effectively mitigate future insurance related pressures.

From April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024

By the numbers

CAST calls
received
40,000



Referrals
received
17,237



7,183

Total
investigations
completed



223 children and
youth discharged
from care to
family or kin



**9 out of
10 times**

the work we do is with
children, youth and
families in their home

**Total
number**
of kinship
placements
397



Total number of
children and youth
served through
adoption
36



Board of Directors

Yeugenia Kazantseva

Board Chair

Salim Somani

1st Vice Chair

Julie Rezvani

2nd Vice Chair, EDI

Iqbal Ali

Treasurer

Gerald Mak

Secretary

Andrew Bedeau

Randy Carter

Eugene Choi

Catharine Dutt

Derek Eng

Robert Johnson

Shruti Paul

Marshall Schnapp

Karen Sihra

Financial summary

(In thousands of dollars)

2023-2024

2022-2023

\$

\$

Revenue By Source

Government of Ontario	\$163,174	\$164,267
Government of Canada	\$2,400	\$2,221
Children's Aid Foundation	\$6,931	\$5,014
Other	\$2,650	\$2,313
Total Revenue	\$175,155	\$173,815

Government of Ontario Revenue By Program

Child Welfare Program	\$152,923	\$156,182
Other	\$10,251	\$8,085
Total	\$163,174	\$164,267

Expenses

Salaries & Benefits	\$90,362	\$89,434
Boarding	\$60,146	\$48,280
Other	\$38,979	\$39,488
Total Expense	\$189,487	\$177,202

Summary of Operations

Revenue	\$175,155	\$173,815
Expenses	\$189,487	\$177,202
Excess (deficiency) of revenue over expenses	\$(14,332)	\$(3,387)

Audited financial statements are available upon request.