



# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

WINTER/SPRING 2013

## HOLIDAY HOPE: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Assembling holiday hampers for over 700 families truly is an amazing feat. We do have a program coordinator, Kathy Williams and an assistant, Marcia Richards, but the *Holiday Hope Program* wouldn't exist without our generous donors and volunteers.

This year, the program served 712 families. This includes 1,116 children, 176 youth, and 700 caregivers.

This means that our supporters are responsible for 1,992 happy faces over the holidays.

The program is funded by donors, with both financial support and the donation of items for the holiday hampers. Donations come in all forms – from individuals who give what they can to the large corporate donations – and are all appreciated greatly.



Volunteers help with every phase of the program, including coordinating the financial and gift card donations, individual toy donations and the mountains of toys that come from community toy drives. They also coordinate hampers that are completed by donors who sponsored a family. This may sound simple but it's an enormous task.

**176** youth received holiday hampers

The purpose of the role is to research the value of every donation we receive, including checking the price of toys and household items, to ensure that we know how much was raised and distributed through the program.

The work of the assessors is a key part of evaluating the program and ensures accountability. We must be accountable to the donors, our volunteers, the public and Canada Revenue Agency to ensure that the program not only meets the goal of providing a special holiday for hundreds of families, but also that it's done in an efficient and responsible way. While it may not be glamorous, it is a massive undertaking and is no less essential to the success of this program.

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**712** families received holiday hampers

Some donors are groups of family members or colleagues who join forces, are matched with a family and do all the shopping for that family. Some larger employee groups or corporations sponsor dozens of families.

We also couldn't run the program without our devoted volunteers, who this year they gave us almost six hundred hours of their time.

Ensuring that the hampers come in properly and get to the families in a timely fashion requires extraordinary coordination. Not only is the process mind-boggling, the program is equally visually impressive.

It's breathtaking to see the Society's training room turn into a busy holiday factory, packed with games, dolls, teddy bears, clothes, blocks, boots, mittens, household items, books, and decorations destined for the families we serve.

One part of the program is a new volunteer role this year. We had a team of volunteers who were our Fair Market Value Assessors.



# MPP JOHN O'TOOLE HELPS RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT FUNDING ISSUES

Durham Children's Aid Society has been carrying a historical deficit for three years. We have been seeking assistance from the *Ministry of Children and Youth Services* for several years in managing the impact of this deficit on our services.

Past Ministry underfunding combined with a \$1.57 million funding reduction for the current fiscal year has resulted in the elimination of staff positions and new innovative services and supports.

Part of our work has included meetings with our local Members of Provincial Parliament, and we are very pleased that they have expressed their support in helping us with this issue.

Durham MPP, John O'Toole has been particularly supportive on the issue, and recently wrote to the Honourable Laurel Broten, Minister of Children and Youth Services requesting her assistance with our financial constraints. He reiterates a number of concerns that were raised in our meeting with him, and MPPs Christine Elliott and Jerry Ouellette.

"Advocating for constituents and for organizations serving the Durham Riding are an important part of my duties as MPP," says O'Toole. "The right of individuals and organizations to be heard by their government is essential to the democratic process."

In his letter, O'Toole emphasizes his concerns about the need to develop a new funding framework that is fair and applied equitably across the province. He also expressed his concern about our historical deficit. He recognizes our ongoing rigorous efforts to balance our budget, yet there is no mechanism to eliminate the historical deficit.

"Some of the issues raised included service and equity in the funding formula, and statutory protection from liability for CAS Boards," says O'Toole. "Although there was a balanced budget in the latest full fiscal year, the CAS has a deficit carried forward from previous years that also needs to be addressed."

At Durham CAS we certainly understand the economic challenge the provincial government is facing, and we recognize the collaborative role CASs will play in order to mutually find solutions. However, enforcing unanticipated funding shortfalls four months into the fiscal year and not addressing the problem of historical deficits potentially puts children and families at risk.



*Durham MPP, John O'Toole*

It is critical that the provincial government work with CASs to develop a solution on how to manage through this difficult financial time without eroding the child welfare system in Ontario.

We thank John O'Toole for his ongoing commitment to help us address these issues, and ensure continued high quality child protection services.



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**VISION**  
BUILDING HOPE AND OPPORTUNITIES WITH  
CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES.

**MISSION**  
WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY TO KEEP  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH SAFE FROM HARM AND CREATE  
STABILITY AND PERMANENCE IN THEIR LIVES.

# HOLIDAY HOPE: IT TAKES A VILLAGE ... CONTINUED

Many of our volunteers have been helping with this program for years, but we also had the pleasure of welcoming many guest volunteers. These are individuals who are not necessarily on our regular roster of volunteers (such as tutors, drivers, mentors, etc.) but join us especially for *Holiday Hope*. These are groups of volunteers who come to us through employee supported community volunteer programs such as a group from BMW or other organizations such as Participation House.



*Words cannot express our gratitude that is in our hearts for your selfless act of generosity towards us. Bless you and your family this Christmas and for the years to come. Thank you!*

*- Sandra,  
Holiday Hope Recipient*

**1,116** children received holiday hampers

But of course, the exciting part of the program is knowing that almost two thousand people benefit from the program and hearing the stories from the workers about how appreciative the families are when they deliver the hampers. And we ultimately love knowing about all the happy little faces of the children when they open their gifts.



*Volunteers from Participation House*

**592** volunteer hours

Thank you to everyone who helped make *Holiday Hope 2012* a huge success!

## Teddy Bear Toss

We would like to thank Millwork Rona who selected the Durham Children's Aid Foundation as the beneficiary again of this year's Teddy Bear Toss. The event took place at an Oshawa Generals' game in December and collected a record 5,470 bears.

When the Generals score the first goal of the game, fans throw their donated plush toys on to the ice. It's always a thrill to see thousands of flying stuffed animals in celebration of both the first goal and supporting our community's children.



New this year, fans could purchase 'JJ Bear' stuffed toys at Millwork Rona, or at the arena on game day, packaged and ready to toss on the ice, thanks to the support of the Children's Aid Foundation (Toronto). The sale of the bears raised \$2,140; this money supports youth in care, through the Foundation's post-secondary scholarship fund.

A few days after the event, Millwork Rona delivered a truckload of stuffed toy bears, dogs, cats, dragons, penguins and bunnies to our offices; the toys were then distributed through our *Holiday Hope Program*.

# GREAT FOOD, GREAT PEOPLE

"The food and the people are great." That simple statement sums up most of the comments heard at this year's youth holiday dinner.

Three years ago, staff members proposed hosting a holiday dinner for the older youth we serve, many of whom live on their own and may not have anywhere to go for the holidays. In three years, the event has evolved from a small dinner for just a few youth to this year's event for over 80 youth.

The dinner is coordinated by staff and members of the Durham Children's Aid Foundation. The event is funded by CUPE Local 3223, the Society and the Foundation. The committee also secures a great deal of support from donors for food and gift items.

"We are their family. We want to be there for them," says Jennifer Phair, committee member and service supervisor. "As a supervisor, I don't always get to meet our children and youth in person, so it's especially rewarding to come to this event and see the camaraderie, fun and sharing."

Offering a meal is just one part of the event. It's also an opportunity for youth to spend time and have fun with each other, staff, board members and Foundation trustees.

"It's important to give the kids what so many of us take for granted: that we have someone to share the holidays with," says Phair. "We are so privileged, it's important we share this with our youth."

It's also a chance for the youth to relax and open up, unlike in many other aspects of their lives. Many feel isolated, lonely and different. At this event they don't have to be nervous or embarrassed, they feel connected and loved, and can relax with other youth who know what they are going through. They don't have to be ashamed that they may not have family to turn to during the holidays.

Many community partners also step up to make this event a huge success. Cam-Scott Transport donated all the food and transported it, and Charcoal Gourmet Catering donated their services. Foundation trustee Kerri Novak and her family made all the desserts. Additionally, we received many donations of household and personal care items that were given to the youth. Every youth received a gift of new, donated items, gift cards, as well as their unlimited pick of gently-used household items. A toaster, some pots or a towel set may seem small, but when we're young, in our own apartment, those 'little' items make a house a home.

"I just love the kids, and I want to give back to my community," says Laura Francis, Foundation trustee. This was Francis's third year helping with the event. "These kids need to know that someone cares – that we care -- about them."



Francis was just one of the many Foundation trustees and staff members who spent weeks planning to ensure that the event not only provided a great meal, but also provided a fun, relaxing time... a chance for youth served by Durham CAS to feel normal and to know that they do have a family that cares for them.

***We are so privileged,  
it's important we share  
this with our youth.***

Grace, one young woman who attended the dinner agrees that it's a great opportunity for youth to get together and feel welcomed and loved. "This is like my family," she says. "It's great to meet others who are in the same situation, and who may not have anywhere to go for Christmas."

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***Laura Francis,  
Foundation Trustee***

## GREAT FOOD, GREAT PEOPLE ... CONTINUED

Grace also says “I got a lot of stuff, which may seem small, but it goes a long way. It helps us live on our own successfully.”

Some youth also commented that it was great to see their workers and other staff in this kind of situation. So often, youth see their workers in meetings, at more formal situations or in times of crisis, but here they had a chance to relax and laugh with staff.

Another young woman, Melissa has attended the dinner for the last two years. She echoed the sentiments of many of the youth who attended when she emphasized the importance of the event because so many youth have no family to have a holiday dinner with.

Like Grace, she also really appreciates the gifts, saying “the food and the gifts get better every year!” Some of the youth even asked if they can help coordinate next year’s event, so they can ‘pay it forward.’

The youth dinner is one of the most heartwarming aspects of our work at this time of year. It truly is a chance to live up to our vision of “building hope and opportunities with children, youth and families.” We can’t wait to do it all over again next year.



*Leslie Heinrichs of Charcoal Gourmet Catering and Jennifer Phair, Service Supervisor.*

### ***Pulling together for families***

Our work at CAS doesn’t take a holiday, so we meet new families daily who need a helping hand in many different ways. This year was no exception.

One such story involved a single dad who had just secured an apartment for himself and his three children. One of our Family Service Workers began working with this family just before the holidays, and as soon as she visited them, she knew she wanted to help any way she could.

The children were sharing a futon and there was little else besides a couple of little toys. So, an appeal was sent out to our staff, asking for help in acquiring household items for this father who was trying so hard to do his best for his kids.

Not only did we need items (hoping for everything from food and clothing, to furniture and gifts for the holidays) we would also need assistance in delivering whatever we could acquire. No small request at one of the busiest times of the year.

Even with staff and volunteers buried in boxes and bows with the *Holiday Hope Program*, the call didn’t go unheeded. Indeed, it would be safe to say that the result was truly an affirmation of the old adage “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Staff secured a couch, living room chairs, beds, a television, a microwave oven, dressers, lamps, dishes, pots, towels, cleaning supplies, food, clothing for the kids (including winter coats and snow pants), and a year’s supply of personal hygiene products. But it didn’t end with the so-called “essentials,” there were also three bags full of toys, gift cards, tickets to the Oshawa Generals, a Christmas tree and many other items to make the holidays special.

This monumental effort was made possible by a small army of staff, and the family was overjoyed. On behalf of the father, the worker passed along to staff “a big thank you all to the angels at the Durham CAS for making my children’s dreams come true.”

This is what the holidays are truly all about: coming together to care for others.

# BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

By Catherine Gillespie-Lopes

Welcome to the Family Access Program. For twelve years, this dynamic program has supported families through the difficult process of separation.

**10,000 hours of access visit per year**

When parenting is interrupted due to child protection concerns the families we serve undergo an enormous transition as the children change residences into foster care, kinship homes or group homes. These transitions are stressful for families and it is important to maintain and support the relationships during these times.

In most situations, children in out-of-home care fare much better when they have regular visits with their biological parents in safe and supportive environments. Visits at the access centre allow children to experience a positive reunion with their biological parents and can help them to process family issues and the separation.

**The Access Facilitators really get to know us – this makes it easier. We don't feel uncomfortable or judged.**

*– Dad of newborn baby*

For parents, visits are also extremely important—allowing them to strengthen bonds and preserve relationships with their children while they are separated.

The centre is family friendly with large windows, brightly painted murals and visiting rooms with couches, televisions and bins of toys. A kitchenette is available so parents can prepare quick meals and snacks for their children. A playground, video games, movies, games and craft activities are provided to make the centre as comfortable, child-focused and as natural as possible.



The Family Access team consists of 28 Access Facilitators. Spending many hours a week with our families, Access Facilitators get to know our parents and children very well. And, although the Access Facilitators' main responsibility is the supervision of visits, their role is often so much more.

Facilitators become parenting coaches, teaching and strengthening positive parenting practices. Sometimes, facilitators take on nurturing roles for our teenage moms who may not have enough positive support in their lives.

**You guys treat my kids so well and make me feel really comfortable.**

*– Mom who visits with her children at the centre*

At times, facilitators become impromptu mediators when chronic conflicts have developed as part of the family dynamic.

However, no matter what role we take on, our main objective is to maintain a positive environment that is safe and supportive for all family members.

We also recognize the diversity of our families and we work to be inclusive and sensitive to all of their religious, cultural and language practices. This means working with interpreters, and training staff in cultural competencies in order to make each family's experience as comfortable and positive as possible.

The program serves children of all ages. Access Facilitators have a variety of educational

backgrounds making them well-equipped to support families and navigate parenting issues with children of any age.

Access Facilitator, Sara McAllister, has been with the program since 1999. Over the years, she has worked with many families and talks about the strength-based philosophy of the program.

"To me, one of the many valuable aspects of the program is our ability to develop positive connections with families.

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## BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS ...CONTINUED

We build respectful, trusting relationships with people who are sometimes initially resistant and skeptical,” says Sara. “I take pride in knowing that my small role has played an important part in the big picture, and hopefully results in a family achieving a successful reunification.”

**We serve up to  
30 families each day**

Program Assistant, Kelly Emrick, feels the success of the program is largely based on the positive attitude of the Access Facilitators and their focus on relationship building.

“The Access Facilitators are invested in the success of our families—whether that means helping a parent feel more confident to care for their baby or helping a family move from a fully supervised situation at the centre to unsupervised community visits.”

As the Family Access Program moves forward, we will continue to provide quality services for our families and will build upon the strengths of our staff and programming to enhance our services.

We look back with a sense of pride and look forward to working with many more families in the future.



## OUR VOICE, OUR TURN

**By Anna (Sze Yiu) Ho, Social Work Student  
Youth Lead, Our Voice Our Turn Project**

As a youth currently in care at Durham CAS, I have had an incredible journey working with the *Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (OPACY)*.

My work with the office began as a volunteer for the *Youth Leaving Care Hearings 'Our Voice, Our Turn' Team*. In my role as a volunteer, I participated in the first-ever hearings for youth and by youth held at Queen's Park in November 2011. The hearings were held to raise awareness about issues affecting youth in and from care.

I am now employed as a Youth Lead on the *Our Voice, Our Turn Project*. My team and I are working to keep the issues facing youth in and from care as a major priority for the Province of Ontario.

Often times, people strive for betterment of themselves and/or others. However, many times people

strive for change of a particular issue without looking at the bigger picture.

For example, when seeking to increase the high school graduation rate of 44 per cent for youth in care compared to 82 per cent for all Ontario students, we must also examine the youth's entire life. That is, seeking a solution that deals with low educational attainment cannot be considered without also examining links to mental and emotional well-being, housing, income, family and peer relationships and so forth.

When I look at the outcomes of youth as outlined in the report released by OPACY, *'25 is the New 21'*, I see interconnected issues of poverty, crime, homelessness, low educational attainment, and mental health concerns.

The report proposes extending the age of support from 21 to 25, and raising the dollar amount for Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM), the amount provided to youth living independently, but who are still involved with CAS.

***Most importantly, youth should be at the centre of informing changes for youth in the child welfare system.***

*'25 is the New 21'* provides a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of those two policy changes which would save the province \$232 million over 40 years. The report also recommends establishing a tracking system, a legislative committee and an inter-ministerial committee.

# OUR VOICE, OUR TURN ... CONTINUED

Similarly, a report written by youth in and from care with the support of OPACY's *Our Voice Our Turn Team* titled, '*My REAL Life Book*': Report from the Youth Leaving Care Hearings, also recommends extending ECM for youth until age 25.

Another recommendation is the ongoing collection and publication of information on the well-being and outcomes of youth in care. This report is based upon the submissions made by youth in and from care highlighted through six themes: *we are vulnerable, we are isolated, we are left out of our own lives, no one is really there for us, care is unpredictable, and lastly, care ends and we struggle.*

## **Ontario and Canada can do better for their children.**

'*My REAL Life Book*' was officially released in May 2012 and accepted by Dr. Eric Hoskins, then Minister of Children and Youth Services.

Since then, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) has established a working group to create a Blueprint/Action Plan, which was listed as the number one recommendation in the '*My REAL Life Book*.' The MCYS Working Group is comprised of nine youth members who are in and from care and seven community members.

OPACY's *Our Voice Our Turn Project* also received worldwide attention from Bolivia and Japan to other Canadian provinces regarding how we organized our hearings and how to conduct their own.

*The Our Voice, Our Turn Team* has worked diligently travelling across Ontario presenting the reports, and discussing the hearings and the MCYS Working Group. *The Our Voice Our Turn Team*, including myself, went as far as New Brunswick to participate in that province's first ever *Youth in Care Hearings*.

After countless meetings and road shows, I am very optimistic that working towards better outcomes for youth in care will not stop here.

Our team is very excited to work with and support MCYS in implementing the Blueprint. I will continue to advocate for ongoing evaluation of youth in and from care, child welfare workers, and child welfare caregivers, e.g. foster parents.

I believe it is critical that an inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral legislative committee be established to conduct ongoing evaluation and research as well as provide services and/or funding to address existing challenges.

I envision this committee as comprised of Ministers or Deputy Ministers, social workers, child and youth workers, police officers, teachers (particularly those working in Section 23 classrooms), child welfare caregivers, and anyone who can share their expertise regarding youth in care.

Most importantly, youth in and from care should be at the centre informing changes for youth in the child welfare system.

We know that less than half of youth in care graduate high school, and the majority of youth in care must leave their foster homes as the CAS is no longer legally able to support them beyond age 18, while over 60 per cent of 20 to 24 year olds (i.e. those not in or from care) are still living at home.

We know that Ontario and Canada can do better for their children.



Anna (Sze Yiu) Ho

**To learn more about the Youth Leaving Care Hearings and the '25 is the New 21' report, please see the Summer 2012 edition of "Community Connections," available at [durhamcas.ca](http://durhamcas.ca) (under "Get to Know Us").**

**Both reports, '25 is the New 21' and 'My REAL Life Book,' are available at [provincialadvocate.on.ca](http://provincialadvocate.on.ca)**

**Editor's note:** Just as we were about to go to print, the MCYS announced some exciting changes in the supports available for youth in care who are pursuing a post-secondary education. Supports include raising the minimum monthly financial support, providing \$500 per month to youth aged 21 to 25, new mentorship opportunities for young people in care, and new workers to support young people leaving care. Also included is a pilot project of eleven colleges and universities offering fully-funded tuition for crown wards, including University of Ontario Institute of Technology and Trent University. For more information visit [children.gov.on.ca](http://children.gov.on.ca)