



FOSTER PARENTS SOCIETY OF ONTARIO
Charitable Status # 0873919-09

The Foster Parents Society of Ontario (FPSO) has prepared recommendations for a review of Best Practices regarding the interpretation and implementation of Ministry of Children and Youth Services directives.

Funding;

FPSO is cognizant of the strains of current economic times, which will realistically affect child welfare over the next two or three years. *However, our children's wellbeing and future successes cannot and should not be jeopardized as a result of fiscal restraints that are beyond their control.*

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services fund FPSO with an annual allotment of \$500,000.00 for the purposes of promoting fostering and properly representing the foster parents of Ontario in the province. This would truly enable us to work as part of the professional team.

Protection to Eighteen (18) years of age;

FPSO recommends that the Child and family services Act be amended to allow children to come into care until their eighteenth (18th) birthday, with full and equal supports and services.

Education

High School;

FPSO recommends extending the foster home per diem for our youth in high school. The majority of youth in care find themselves turning 18, having not yet completed high school. This is due to trauma and some of the life experiences that foster children have faced in contrast to the general population as well as when their birthday falls within a calendar year. Lack of a high school diploma is the primary obstacle in the way of our children achieving a post secondary education.

Post Secondary (within the foster home);

FPSO recommends that the per diem be maintained for foster children who are still living in the foster home and attending a post secondary institution until the completion of the post secondary program or their 24th birthday, whichever comes first.

Post Secondary (living on or by campus);

FPSO recommends that all foster children, of post secondary age, who are in a program, and live on or by campus be covered by ECM until the completion of the program or their 24th birthday whichever comes first.

FPSO recommends that Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) at the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rate be applied yearly to the Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) amount in this category.

Permanency

Foster Care and Kinship in Care as a Permanency Option;

The Ministry of Child and Youth Services formally recognizes long term foster care as one of the pillars of permanence for some of our children in care. We understand how important it is for a child to know who they are and where they belong. For some children this belonging is in the foster home. Not all children can return home, not all children are suited for or interested in Adoption, Kinship, Guardianship, and Custody. For many children in care the only real permanence or sense of belonging is to remain with their foster families.

FPSO recommends that data be collected on the long term psychological impact or lifelong damage, to the separation of siblings and consequent individual adoptions. No family of children should be separated in foster care based on a dollar value or the assumption of foster parents being incapable of parenting more than four children. When siblings are raised together in the same foster home, they are able to maintain their identity, common history, and emotional connection. This will produce resilient adults.

Adoption Subsidy;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Child and Youth services direct funds for the purposes of adoption subsidy.

Foster Parents have adopted 58% of all children available for adoption in Canada. If agencies had specific monies designated for adoption subsidies, these monies would enable a greater number of children and youth with challenges to be adopted.

Protection of Youth at Risk;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services formally recognizes the sector of vulnerable youth whose challenges limit their abilities to function. Often to the detriment of these youth at the age of 18 they are referred to community living and removed from their foster families; whereas, they should remain in their foster families as long as required with full per diems. These children currently are being removed from their long term foster homes and the only familial relationships that they have known and embraced. Youth with undeveloped capabilities may need to remain in care indefinitely. Their attachment to their foster parents ensures that they are recognized as valued and thriving members of society.

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services recognizes those youth whose behavioural challenges, and low Emotional Quotient (EQ) encourages them to leave the protection of the society and along with it the security of their foster homes, group homes, or alternative care. This move may be by choice of the youth or requirement of the system. FPSO also recommends these youth be allowed to return to the protection of the Society.

Cost of Living Allowance (COLA);

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth services issue a directive that mandates Foster Home Per Diems be automatically increased each year using Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) released annually.

Mileage;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services issues a directive that mandates agencies reimburse foster parents at the same mileage rate as agency personnel who are currently reimbursed for all transportation of any child in care. This directive reflects any and all future increases.

Cost Downloading

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services recognize that the budget deficits incurred by individual agencies are causing significant financial shortfalls that are increasingly being downloaded to foster parents. The needs of the children must be met.

Safety Equipment;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth services release funds for mandatory safety equipment for children in care, including but not limited to car seats, booster seats, cribs, bike helmets, life jackets. Although foster homes are required to have these things when their homes are opened, they often have to be replaced because of expiry dates.

Damages in the foster homes;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services fully recompense foster family for the damages done to their homes or possessions, by the children in care. Foster parents support obtaining three quotes, without involving and therefore jeopardizing their home insurance policy. Children with behavioural difficulties often act out and damages occur. Unfortunately, some of the agencies are interpreting these damages as lack of supervision, even though foster parents are instructed not to intervene, however should they fail to intervene and this puts the child him/herself, or another child at risk. Foster parents have been charged with failure to protect.

Third party liability;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services provide an insurance rider to agencies insurance policies to cover contingencies or exceptions for foster children in the province of Ontario who are seriously injured. Foster parents should not be expected to cover treatment costs for a seriously injured child under their third party liability insurance due to a shortfall in the agencies coverage.

Overall Funding Recommendations

FPSO Recommends:

- Protection be afforded for youth up to their 18th birthday
- Education
 - Full and equal supports for youth attending high school past their 18th birthday.
 - Maintaining Foster parent Per Diems for youth attending post secondary institution, while residing in foster home up to 24 years of age.
 - Full Extended care and maintenance for youth in post secondary institution while residing on or near campus up to 24 years of age.

- Formal recognition that long term Foster Care and Kinship in Care be considered equal permanency options
- Direct funds for Adoption subsidies
- Protecting Youth at risk due to low EQ, or IQ, by maintaining them in their foster homes with full per diems
- COLA increases based on the CPI index on the per Diems, and reimbursable for youth including the ECM amounts
- Mileage reimbursement for foster parents to be equal with agency personnel.
- Funding for all safety equipment
- Financial reimbursement for Damages in the home, caused by the children in care
- Discontinuation of costs being downloaded to foster parents
- Third party Liability rider on agencies insurance policies

Services and Supports;

Assessment services;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth services fund agencies adequately for assessment services driven by the needs of the children and mandate expediency and accountability in this area. Currently the length of time required to obtain a professional assessment jeopardizes a child's treatment, needs or placement. Without a copy of professional assessments and or treatment recommendations, foster parents are limited in their ability to fully meet the needs of the children in their homes. Foster parents in the province report the lack of documents as one cause of feeling alienated and not part of the professional team. (Definition of Team, Together Encompassing All Members)

Collateral/Clinical Supports

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services initiate a formal review to examine the excessive length of time taken from the onset of referral for an assessment, to receiving the report, through implementation of the service. Our foster children should not be left waiting months or even years for treatment. If our children are not afforded the proper collateral/clinical supports in a timely fashion, we are limiting their future potential.

Statistics;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services ensure that broader inclusive statistical information be gathered then disseminated, which will provide informed decisions thereby achieving the optimal outcomes for our children.

The current statistic stating children remain in their foster home for an average of 22 months is misleading. This is a flawed interpretation of statistics, due to the number of children who are briefly in care due to TCA's, and transitions into Kinship-out-of-care. The value of relevant and more inclusive statistical gathering for any child in care is critical whether they be placed in Foster Care, Adoption, Kinship-in-Care, or Kinship-out-of-Care. Tracking a child through the welfare system, no matter how briefly or how often they come into care (adoption or kinship breakdown) will assist in providing the necessary treatment or options for our children. The gathering of all relevant information and the dissemination of that information would provide more inclusive and relevant statistics that would drive the decisions of the future of child welfare.

Child Care Planning

Assessment Action Record (AAR)

Our understanding of the current mandate and directives of the AAR is as follows:

- AAR completed yearly which will assist in establishing goals and objectives for the year.
- Subsequent plans of care (POC) are to review whether the goals and objectives are being achieved and also to add any new information
- The above is to be in collaboration with the Child care worker, the foster parent and the child.

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Family Services ensures that the above be followed as best practices. Our membership across the province reports that many foster parents are not included in the completion of the AAR or the POC. Foster Parents should be signing the final copy of the POC to ensure its accuracy as the POC forms part of a flow-through document used in Family Services for court where necessary. In addition, many foster parents are not receiving a copy of either the POC or the AAR. These are important records that foster parents should be entitled to receive. It is difficult, if not impossible, for foster parents to ensure that they are assisting in the achievement of the goals and objectives if they cannot refer to the document.

Home Evaluations

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and family Services review the practices of agencies conducting foster home evaluations. FPSO has received reports from within the province stating that some agencies are including foster children over 12 years of age in the foster parent evaluation. This practice violates the foster parent's rights and our individual rights, as well as breach of confidentiality.

Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE);

FPSO has written a number of letters to OACAS, Minister Deb Matthews, and The OnLac Council. We want changes not only to SAFE I & SAFE II questionnaires but also the supporting documentation. We have outlined our concerns and requested that changes be made. Copies attached. The tool does not fully respect the foster parent's human rights or the confidentiality of their extended families. In an organization where the rights, needs and confidentiality of the children and their families are carefully monitored and secured, why are foster parents rights, needs and confidentiality disregarded?

copy attached

Policy

Investigation Procedure;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services write and mandate a standard provincial policy in consultation with foster parents for investigations utilizing the differential response model. Foster Parents raise challenged children, therefore, the investigative process resulting from allegations should reflect a clear distinction from the general public.

We understand the importance of the agencies responsibility to continually verify that the homes they placing children in are safe, appropriate, and within service standards. However, we have grave concerns about the variety of ways investigations are handled agency to agency. Each individual agency has drafted allegation procedure, leaving some foster parents with a more difficult process than others. Homes are closed, foster parents resign in frustration and foster children are disrupted. Moreover, we have concerns about the damages these processes have on the biological children of the foster parents. All children should be universally respected. This is seldom addressed by the agency protocols.

Of great concern also is the manner in which some agencies place foster parents on the provincial abuse registry. Some agencies place their foster parents on this registry the moment a criminal charge is laid. This occurs before a preliminary trial where the agency and the police have to have enough evidence to go to trial. This process presumes guilt without proof and is a violation of the Charter of Rights. Our Canadian Constitution is based on the presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

The sustainability of the foster care system is challenged by the widely varied approaches to investigations and their outcomes. This results in the erosion of foster parents' confidence in a fair and just process.

We believe that if the Ministry of Children and Youth Services drafted a standard policy across the province for foster home investigations, it would need to embrace the differential response model, respectful timing, consistent practices, and courtesy for foster parents as members of the professional team.

Appeals process;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of Children and Youth Services design and assume the responsibility of a true appeal process with documentation to go along with the complaint procedure, as well as take the authority and power to overturn an agency decision based on the appeal.

The agencies have the complaints procedure brochure provided by the Ministry of Children and family services, The complaints brochure is available to foster parents and is a quality document with which we have no concerns. However, we do have concerns about the perception that this complaints procedure is viewed as an appeals process. The document in reality supports any foster parent or client, who has been treated improperly, unjustly or in any way inappropriately, which is valid.

This is not a true appeals process for foster homes which do not have the opportunity to appeal any decision made by agency personnel. If a foster parent does disagree with a decision made by the agency and is granted an opportunity to be heard at the child and family services review board. For a true appeal of a decision, one needs to be able to appeal the decision as well as the process. The details and circumstances need to be heard by an unbiased person who had nothing to do with the first decision.

We are also challenged by the new circumstance of the Agencies stepping in with regard to appeals to the Ministry, and sighting jurisdiction, effectively preventing the foster home from going to any source outside their own agency, to have the decision they are not in agreement with reviewed.

Provincial Foster Parent Bill of Rights;

FPSO recommends the Ministry of family and Youth Services adopt the Provincial Foster Parent Bill of Rights drafted by FPSO for the protection of the foster parent’s rights in Ontario.

Some agencies have developed a list of rights or entitlements for their local foster parents. These documents differ greatly, leaving foster homes without the rights afforded to other community sectors. FPSO is preparing a draft for a Provincial Bill of Rights for foster parents. We would like to see the Ministry of Children and Youth Services review and accept this document and adopt it into provincial policy for use in the child welfare system. Entrenching a foster parent Bill of Rights will both inform and protect Ontario’s foster parents. This will increase retention of foster homes.

copy attached

In closing,

A number of years ago the phrase “members of the professional team” was coined, promoted and used widely. Foster parents and agencies alike embraced the philosophy of the professional team, and gains have been made.

However there is still room for improvement. The Service model has designated foster parents as, “service care providers”, which essentially removes us from the professional team. We wish to be fully recognized as a professional member of the team, not as less than a subcontractor.

We look forward to meeting with you to further discuss our recommendations for improvements in the future of child welfare.

Respectfully Submitted on behalf of the Foster Parents Society of Ontario

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