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Jones blasts children's, budget cuts

By DAN PELTON
Staff Reporter

To cope with a provincial government that maintains its demands while withdrawing financial support, Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS) is seeking ways to cut costs without compromising the services it provides for children and families in crisis.

Meanwhile, Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones has challenged Premier Dalton McGuinty to "take responsibility for the \$67 million budget cut to Ontario's Children's Aid Societies."

In a press release, Ms. Jones said DCAFS "was handed a 17.1% cut halfway through their fiscal year."

In a prior interview, the Progressive Conservatives' community and social services critic said the Children's Aid programs "are programs that you just can't say you are not going to have any more. The children's aid societies do not have sufficient funds. The government should offer the extra funds for them to fulfill

their mandate or change their mandate."

DCAFS is one of 36 children's aid agencies across the province that have filed for a Section 14 review, which means it hasn't been able to balance its mandate to protect children with the funding received from the province. The DCAFS is projecting a \$1.1 million deficit for its current fiscal year, which ends Dec. 31.

DCAFS executive director Trish Keachie is not anxious, however, to see the mandate change. She has said that reforms under the Liberals' Child Welfare Transformation, put forth in 2004, have had positive results.

The number of children admitted into the care of children's aid societies has decreased by 18 per cent, she pointed out, while there have been five per cent fewer children in care overall. As well, adoptions have increased 29 per cent.

"For the most part, we do not want the mandate changed," Ms. Keachie said in an interview. "There is a strong general agreement that the

changes have been very positive."

Ms. Jones, suggested such gains might be in jeopardy.

"Front-line care workers have already been given layoff notices," she said in her release. "Children's aid societies have a legislated responsibility to provide front-line care for the most vulnerable children in this province, and a reduction in staff will inevitably put more children in harm's way."

In an effort to reduce the deficit, DCAFS has made some staff changes. Ms. Keachie says the agency has taken advantage of resignations or leaves that have reduced costs without affecting direct services. "And we have trimmed our budget in other areas where we can."

In a symbolic gesture to draw attention to the McGuinty government's funding cuts, all management and unionized staff at Children's Aid Societies and children's mental health agencies across Ontario wore blue ribbons last Friday.

"Ontario families have a right to be concerned," said Ms. Jones. "Who is going to be there to answer the phone when an at-risk child needs help? How much longer is it going to

take for a worker who now has a heavier caseload to get to the home of a child in need? I do not believe Premier McGuinty has thought about the repercussions budget cuts and forced layoffs will have for vulnerable children in Ontario."

Two dead in head-on crash north of Shelburne

A head-on collision on Highway 10 near Corbetton Tuesday night took two lives.

Officers of Dufferin OPP detachment report that the crash at about 8 p.m. occurred when a southbound vehicle veered into the northbound lane.

As a result of the crash five people were transported by ambulance to hospitals in Orangeville and Markdale. Two passengers in the southbound car, a one-year-old baby girl and her mother, died from their injuries. Police say the baby's father was the driver and was being treated in hospital "for non life-threatening injuries."

The two occupants of the northbound car are also being treated for non life threatening injuries.

Names of the deceased were being withheld until next of kin have been notified.



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