

Dear Ministers,

On behalf of the [ProsperUS](#) council, we write to you with a sense of urgency seeking your support and collaboration to address the growing crisis that is affecting children and youth in our Windsor-Essex Community. Over the past three years, our community has witnessed and experienced the alarming increase of children and youth with severe diagnoses and complex needs who are coming into the care of the child welfare system, often, despite the absence of child protection concerns as defined within the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA) standards and definitions.

To be specific, we and our partner the Windsor-Essex Children's Aid Society (WECAS) are most concerned with the increase of unlicensed placement utilization due to a province wide shortage of licensed options. Usage of this last resort option has grown in Windsor-Essex from 4 in 2022, to 30 in 2023, and to 24 in 2024, marking a 500% net increase.

Cognisant that this is a province wide trend and with reference to the growing body of data and literature on the issue to which your Ministries have access, we understand that “upstream” contributing factors that impact families include diminishing resources and capacity across all critical social services sectors (i.e. education, health, developmental and mental health services, housing and others). For example, for families with children and youth with Autism and complex medical needs, multi-year waitlists and the lack or denial of specialized therapeutic services, respite services, specialized Outside Paid Resource (OPR) homes and live-in treatment placements has a compounding effect on their ability to manage daily challenges. This is especially so in situations where mental health needs manifest into aggression and self-harming behaviours as they take an emotional, physical and financial toll on the entire family unit.

Seeing this as primarily a systems level issue, it is unacceptable to us that some families are left with little choice but to surrender their children to CAS as they break under the pressure of systemic failures.

Our council –a collective impact partnership comprised of 40+ system leading organizations— has seen and supported the efforts of the WECAS as they have tried to adapt to this unprecedented reality. However, it must be recognized that the provision of highly intensive, specialized, and continuous care that is needed for many of these children and youth goes well beyond the scope of their mandate. For the same reasons, it is also unreasonable to expect foster and kinship arrangements to meet these needs.

While WECAS is doing its best under the circumstance by providing housing and supervision to children and youth in unlicensed placements on a 24-hour 7 day a week basis, they are not an appropriate stand-in for specialized treatments and in-home environments. While this crisis persists, and without adequate government intervention, children, youth and their families will continue to endure trauma and detrimental long-term outcomes.

As such our collective membership puts forth the following recommendations to your respective Ministries:

1. **Increased Funding for Specialized Care Programs:** Allocate additional resources to programs that provide comprehensive support for children and youth with multiple diagnoses or challenges across various service sectors and dimensions (i.e. education,

behavioural, emotional, mental health and developmental needs) inclusive of those with complex special needs. This includes funding for specialized care-settings, 1:1 support in the classroom, therapeutic services, and respite care for families. While local community partners like Hotel Dieu Health Care, Maryvale Children's Mental Health Treatment Centre and Family Respite Services are tremendous partners, the demand for their services is profound. Additional facilities, program spaces, treatment beds, and respite service offerings are desperately needed in our region.

2. **Development of Family Support Services:** Establish and expand support services that assist families in managing the challenges of caring for children and youth with complex needs. This could include intensive in-home care, counseling services for parents and kin, caregiver trauma-informed training, peer support programs for families and financial support.
3. **Integration of Services for Prevention:** Promote the integration of health services by establishing a clinical case manager for all children and youth with complex needs to ensure ongoing planning is in place to support diagnosis and treatment to prevent the need for more intensive and expensive modalities of care. This would improve communication and collaboration between health professionals, social workers, and support organizations and in turn support the reduction of costs attributed to short-term last resort solutions. For instance, a provincial survey completed by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies found that over a three-year time span boarding costs for children and youth requiring an unlicensed placement have skyrocketed from \$5.6 million to \$43.6 million. Locally, the cost of unlicensed placements in the 2024 fiscal year (April to September) has been approximately \$3.4 million.
4. **Recruitment, Training and Resources for Professionals:** Our region needs enhanced funding to support recruitment efforts for respite support workers. Additionally, training and resources for healthcare providers, social workers, and educators to enhance their ability to develop adequate intervention or treatment plans for children with complex needs and their families effectively is needed.

By taking these steps, we can work together to ensure that children with complex needs remain with their families whenever possible and receive the support they require to thrive. We believe that with the right resources and programs in place, we can make a significant positive impact on the lives of these children and their families.

Thank you for considering this important matter. We are hopeful that, with your leadership, we can develop a more inclusive and supportive system for all children in Ontario.

Sincerely,

V. Houston

Vicki Houston, Director, Greater Essex County District School Board, Co-Chair, ProsperUs