

South Asian Focus

Bid to nip child abuse in the bud

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The numbers are startling: as many as 15,000 telephone calls go out from community members every year in the Peel region alone, reporting suspected instances of child abuse.

The calls eventually lead to 800 kids having to be separated from their parents or families-- for their own protection-- and having to be cared for by Peel Children's Aid.

"But we firmly believe it is best for children to remain at home, with their parents," said Paul Zarnke, executive director. "Only under certain circumstances does it become necessary to take children into our care to ensure their safety."

In a bid to ensure at-risk children-- and their families-- get help before the situation gets out of hand, Peel Children's Aid has now formally entered into a partnership with four community agencies to provide better services to South Asians, among other communities, to help children at risk and their families.

The agencies are South Asian Welcome Centre; United Achievers Community Centre, for families of Caribbean, European, Canadian and African descent; Catholic Services of Peel Dufferin, for Portuguese and Polish clients; and Dixie Bloor Neighbourhood Centre, for those from Vietnam.

Zarnke hoped this new partnership would help get the funds and resources to such agencies, which would be better able to reach out to and counsel families facing such challenges.

"Peel Children's Aid receives around 15,000 calls every year from residents reporting potential children at risk," Zarnke said. "This leads to investigations of 5,000 cases a year. At any time during the year, we have about 500 kids in our care, while around 800 children access or pass through our facilities every year."

To provide better services to diverse communities, the Peel Children's Aid has expanded its dimensions to provide services to the multicultural community in their own languages and in a more efficient way.

Better awareness

The agency provides protection to children in need, counseling and offering support programs to help keep families together.

Zarnke said while the numbers continue to be sobering, there is today more awareness about such issues in the community, which is very active about setting the alarm bells ringing if they suspect child abuse. Simultaneously, the number of actual cases recorded has declined over the last three years.

"Six to seven years back, the centre used to typically be handling approximately 600 cases at any given point, but these have now come down to 500. At the same time the number of calls have increased; and taken together, this is a good sign."

Peel Children's Aid operates a few residential homes to take care of youth in special circumstances.

"Six of these homes are operated as parent modelled programs, two for pre-adolescents and four to help prepare teens for living independently in the community," said Whitney Rodricks, communication advisor.

Four of the homes are staff-operated to serve children and youth experiencing extreme emotional and behavioral difficulties.

These homes provide short-term assessment or long term residential care for youth aged 12 to 16, who have a broad range of mental health needs, developmental challenges and behavioral needs.

Bill Virgin, director and counselor, South Asian Welcome Centre, said his agency provides counseling services, family unit mediation, parenting groups and parenting capacity assessments in several South Asian languages including Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Tamil and Gujarati.

Established in 1912, Peel Children's Aid has more than 200 volunteers who spend time with children and families in the community.