

Highland Shores Children's Aid Holds Annual General Meeting

Highland Shores Children's Aid (HSCA) held its 3rd Annual General Meeting today. Members of the Society elected the Board of Directors that will help set the course for the agency for the coming year. At the meeting, the following individuals were elected to the Board for three year terms:

Nominee from existing Board Members: Caitlin Dougherty
Nominees from new candidates: Donalda Simmons, David Slater

Returning members of the Board are: Michael McLeod, Phillip Peters, Jay Taugher, Marilyn Curson, Elaine Phillip, Peter Knudsen, Jacqueline Pennington and Alan Whyte.

In addition, Sandra Lewis-den Otter will continue in her appointee role to the Board for the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory and Eric Crowe will continue in his appointee role to the Board for Alderville First Nation. The appointee to the Board from the Quinte Children's Foundation will be confirmed this month.

Two outgoing members of the Board, President Darcey French and Board member Jacqueline Whittingham were recognized by the Society for their service. A special presentation to Mr. French honouring his work on the Board was also made by a member of the HSCA Youth Advisory Committee. A highlight of the evening was hearing from several members of the Youth Advisory Committee who spoke about the Committee's initiatives.

Another high point was the presentation of the JJ Kelso Award for outstanding contributions in the field of child welfare to Sybil Foley who retired this year as Program Supervisor with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Kingston office. Sybil has worked tirelessly in the community to further the needs of children and families, not only those involved in child welfare but those involved in all of the service sectors she was responsible for as a Program Supervisor for the Ministry. She has made a tremendous impact on child welfare in Hastings, Prince Edward and Northumberland Counties. Her service as a practitioner, reviewer and program supervisor is unique and it has given her the knowledge and sense of the business that has helped the various agencies she has worked with move forward and progress.

Commenting on Sybil's receipt of the award, Mark Kartusch, Executive Director of Highland Shores said, "I have had the pleasure of working with Sybil for many years and have always been impressed with her dedication to the children, youth and families we serve. She is passionate about the work that we do and has proven time and again to be a staunch advocate for those in need. We wish her all the best in her retirement and thank her for the wonderful contribution she has made to the field of child welfare over the course of her impressive career."

In his Executive Director's report provided at the meeting, Mark Kartusch outlined how today more than ever, communities expect more from their public institutions and that includes expecting more from their Children's Aid Societies. At the same time, government is expecting Children's Aid Societies to do more with what they have, or in some cases, with less. Children's Aid Societies want to improve their services and make sure that our most vulnerable children are safe and families are getting the support they need to thrive.

"Highland Shores already has a track record of being adaptable, with its first and then second amalgamation. We have had to work hard as an organization, harder than most because of the work necessary to amalgamate in addition to conducting the normal day-to-day operations of a Children's Aid Society. The amount of work to amalgamate was far more complex and involved than any of us envisioned, yet we found ways to use this as an opportunity to create an even better pathway for organizational success.

At a service level we have implemented a new service model which has most families only having one worker that will remain with them through the duration of our involvement instead of having one at the beginning and then being transferred to another if they need additional help. We also worked with our neighbouring Children's Aid Societies and educational institutions like Loyalist and St. Lawrence Colleges and Queen's University to create a protocol to improve the success of our youth in post-secondary education.

We have continued to find permanence for the children and their families we work with which has resulted in fewer and fewer children in care. We ended last year with 490 children in care, which is more than a 9% reduction from the previous year and is down 23% since 2010 when we ended the year with 636 children in care. We have reduced our admissions by 7.5 % in the last year and by almost 12% since 2010. This reflects a long term trend of youth who have been in our care now moving into adulthood. It also reflects a concerted effort to find safe alternatives to bringing children into care by working more collaboratively with families and involving their network of family and friends to help when help is needed. It's also a result of our ongoing work in finding adoptive families for children who can't go home. Last year we found forever families for 28 children ranging in age from under 1 to 13 years old."

While the Society continues to focus on getting the best possible outcomes for its clients, it needs to be in keeping with what is affordable. Mr. Kartusch reported that while HSCA ended the fiscal year with a surplus of just over 1.8 million dollars, the agency is expected to live within a budget that is 2% less each year for the next five years and ultimately 22% less than when Highland Shores was created. This means each year the Society will be expected to cut approximately \$900,000 from its budget. "We took significant staffing action last year and closed our Residential Treatment program to prepare us for this future pressure. We have also seen the benefits of doing our work well, through reduced costs of fewer children in care and more children being supported in their homes safely. As well, we have begun to realize some of the benefits of administrative streamlining as a result of our amalgamations. This surplus can now be used as a buffer in future years and one we hope to add to this year and next year", he said.

The Society continues to work towards its first collective agreement and tries to balance the fiscal realities and the need to ensure staff receive fair compensation comparable to other Societies. Work is also being done to continue bringing the cultures of the three legacy organizations together to build the common culture of Highland Shores.

Highland Shores Children's Aid is also preparing for the implementation of the Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) so that it is seamless and effective, despite the magnitude of the changes it will create. Most of all, the Society will be focusing on implementing its Strategic Operating Plan. The plan will guide the agency in its efforts to continuously improve its service and along the way become more efficient. This will increase the Society's overall effectiveness and is the way to become a strong and sustainable organization that provides the help children need to thrive and families truly need to be strong.

Mr. Kartusch also provided an overview of the Society's new Mission, Vision and Values statements as well as its core values and strategic directions for the next several years.

In closing, he reflected on the recent passing of a long time foster parent, Jim Mallon. "Jim and his wife Carole were active foster parents with Hastings/Highland Shores from January 1998 to May 2013. During that time Jim approached fostering with the same incredible zest and energy that he did with his career in education and in his many hobbies and passions. Jim was an active member of the Hastings Foster Family association and was a member of its executive. As well, he became a member of the provincial foster family association where he eventually became president. He initiated the foster family legal fund to help ensure foster families could be freed from the worry about being involved in what can be a complicated legal environment in child welfare. He ensured there was good training available through the agency and in the province for foster families so they could become even more effective in their roles.

Jim was on the Board of Hastings CAS and back in 2003 was a part of a committee initiated by the board to improve educational outcomes for the children in our care. At that time there was only one child in post-secondary education. Now the Society has over 70 which is among the highest in the province. His help extended to our amalgamation where he, along with others, provided a voice for foster families. Perhaps more important than all of these accomplishments is the care he and Carole provided to children and youth who needed them. They formed life-long attachments and many of those young people as adults have now come back to support and help other members of the Mallon family. Their tributes to him really underline the true impact that these foster parents have had. It is unfortunate in life that we sometimes have a few bad apples that colour the rest and it is hard not to get caught up in that. But I think it is important that we take opportunities, even in sadness, to remember just how big an impact foster families like Jim and Carole and the many, many others have on children who have nowhere else to turn."

Following the Annual General Meeting the Highland Shores Children's Aid Board of Directors appointed the Board Executive for 2014/15 as follows:

President: Michael McLeod
Treasurer: Jay Taugher

Vice President: Phillip Peters
Secretary: Elaine Philip

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