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Shortage of placements for youth means they can end up in hotels, increasing risk for all involved

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BELLEVILLE, ON –(COMMUNITYWIRE)– With limited foster homes available, Highland Shores Children’s Aid (HSCA) has been forced to place a youth in hotels and even Airbnb’s since November.

The province-wide shortage of licensed spaces in foster homes and treatment facilities is leading more agencies to turn to hotels, motels, and Airbnbs. The children and youth who end up in these unlicensed spaces are often the most at-risk and have unique needs that cannot be accommodated elsewhere in the system. These placements, though, come with their own challenges, both to the youth who aren’t being supported to the degree they deserve, and the workers who provide round-the-clock supervision.

This issue has been years in the making but is now reaching crisis levels. Management and workers at HSCA are coming together to sound the alarm.

“The vast majority of youth we support, upwards of 90 per cent, remain with their parents or kin in their community,” explains Jess Uddenberg, Executive Director of HSCA and a former child protection worker. “A small fraction come into our care, and an even smaller fraction end up in unlicensed homes. But even one youth in a situation like this is too many. When we place a youth in a hotel, they’re surviving and their immediate needs are being met, but they’re not thriving. We owe them every opportunity to improve and move forward.”

Sector advocates point to a shortage of placement options and the lack of upstream preventative interventions. Group homes and community mental health programs can have narrow mandates of

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who they can serve that restricts access to those with complex needs. Secure treatment facilities are set up to help youth with histories of addiction, trauma, and violence but spaces are severely limited. This leaves CAS agencies as de facto carers of last resort for hard-to-place youth.

“We cannot have a wait list. We will not turn any youth away. And we embrace each family and youth as having the utmost importance. But there are limits to our role and what we are capable of,” says Uddenberg, whose agency does not run a residential facility but facilitates placement of children and youth. “If a licensed, trained, and outfitted facility turns away a youth based on the risks, the notion that we are by default capable of supporting the child in an ad hoc placement is unreasonable.”

HSCA management and workers are doing their best to address the issue and are exploring options, including the feasibility of setting up their own residential facility with specialized programming and staffing. A province-wide solution requires a real investment in preventative interventions and treatment. Until more options come online, youth and staff will continue to face increased risk.

“Child protection workers come to work every day to do what’s best for children and youth. But in these unlicensed homes, we’re put in situations where we can see red flags, where our safety is compromised, but there is no other option,” says Ceri Jagt, a frontline service worker and President of CUPE 2197 representing roughly 170 workers at HSCA. “Youth with identified mental health challenges, trauma, and addiction deserve help in a controlled environment with higher staffing levels and frequent bed checks. That’s for their safety and ours. But none of that can happen in a hotel.”

HSCA is actively recruiting foster parents. Visit <http://www.highlandshorescas.com/foster/> for more information.

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