



Native Child and Family Services of Toronto



January 5, 2018

BU41.1.14

Chair and Members of the Budget Committee
c/o Josephine Archbold, Committee Clerk
City of Toronto
10th Floor, West Tower, City Hall
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Re: City Budget 2018 – Recommendation to Preserve Toronto Public Health Funding for the Ambassador Program

We are writing on behalf of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Jewish Family and Child Services of Greater Toronto, Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto and the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada to urge you to reject the \$25,000 funding reduction to the Ambassador Program proposed in the City's 2018 Preliminary Budget.

Cutting these funds will jeopardize the continuation of a program that has helped hundreds of at-risk youth to complete their high school diploma, access post-secondary education, gain life skills, and access new employment opportunities. Ending this program would put up to 30 youth annually at increased risk of poverty and homelessness, which would only add to government costs such as shelter services and social assistance provision.

The Toronto Public Health Budget Notes on the City's Preliminary Budget propose "the elimination of contracted services related to the Ambassador Program." The document provides no clear rationale for this proposal to eliminate funding. In fact, the report states that eliminating funding would "have a negative impact on youth from equity-seeking and vulnerable groups" and would "decrease access to education and training and these students' opportunities to complete their high school diploma."

We urge you to reconsider this ill-advised budget cut which would put the future of a successful and impactful program at risk.

City funds are vital to sustaining high participation rates in the program (see background information below).

Importantly, the Ambassador Program is aligned with several key City strategies including:

- the Youth Equity Strategy (e.g. Recommendation 9: “Advocate towards and support where appropriate, equitable access to education and training for youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime”)
- the Poverty Reduction Strategy (e.g. Recommendation 11: “Create employment opportunities for low-income groups with high unemployment rates”); and
- Anti-Black Racism Strategy (e.g. Recommendation 1: “Increase access to high-quality programs for Black children and youth”).

The Children’s Aid Society of Toronto is currently working with Native Child and Family Services Toronto to include program components for Indigenous children, within the spirit of reconciliation.

Thank you for considering the needs of some of the most vulnerable, and marginalized young people in Toronto when you are making budget decisions.

For more information please contact Cheryl Mangar, Supervisor, Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (416) 462-1010 x25, or Heather Milstein, Director, Child and Youth Services (416) 924-4646 x 2077.

Sincerely,



David Rivard
Chief Executive Officer
Children’s Aid Society of Toronto



Valerie McMurtry
President & CEO
Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada



Janice Robinson
Executive Director
Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Toronto



Brian Prousky
Executive Director
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Kenn Richard
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Native Child and Family Services of Toronto

Background

The Ambassador Program is run by the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (PARC). PARC is a preparation for independence program serving youth in care and former youth in care of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST), Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CCAS) and Jewish Family and Child Services (JF&CS). PARC provides multiple individual and group supports to over 400 youth aged 15 and over in care and transitioning out of child welfare care annually. PARC is staffed by a culturally diverse team of skilled workers with many years of experience working with youth. We work within a strength based framework and embrace harm reduction practices.

Since 1990, PARC has been a part of the Ambassador Program, and has received City funding (through Toronto Public Health) towards this innovative, responsive program. The Ambassador Program operates as an Independent School Program, within the structure of the Children's Aid Society. The partners involved with this program include the City of Toronto's Public Health Department (TPH), the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (PARC), Central Toronto Youth Services (CTYS) and the Michael Pinball Clemmons Foundation (MPCF).

The Ambassador Program helps youth aged 16-25 in, or transitioning from the child welfare system and other homeless and at-risk youth to achieve their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) or obtain credits towards the pursuit of post-secondary education.

The Ambassador Program follows the curriculum established by the Independent Learning Centre, or ILC. This curriculum encompasses a full high school curriculum that meets the requirements for Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) and enables students to access credits regardless of their age, grade level, or number of credits completed.

In addition, the participating students in the Ambassador Program speak out at different schools or other community groups and share their story (Speak out). Speak Outs are delivered to grade 7 and 8 students around the City of Toronto and couple a strong "stay in school" message, as well as an emphasis of building on strengths and life skills, and contributing to communities. The Ambassador youths' Speak Outs profoundly affect young people's perception of the forces influencing premature school dropout and drug and alcohol use.

Each year 30-36 youth participate in the Ambassador Program. This past year, 29% youth in the program identified as Black, 49% identified as White, 5% Asian, 3% Arabic/Middle Eastern, 5% Latino and 9% as mixed racial background. 24 females and 12 males participated. Given the proportion of racialized youth served by the program, it is well aligned with the Ontario Anti- Black Racism Strategic Plan and the Ministry of Child and Youth Services initiatives.

The City of Toronto's Public Health Department provided \$50,000 to the Ambassador Program. The budget breakdown consists of: \$10,000 for students' program travel, \$10,000 for student honorariums and \$30,000 for the program coordinator's salary. These funds

provided the Ambassador students with weekly financial incentives as well as TTC tokens and monthly bus passes.

The Ambassador Program also maintains a student nutrition program in partnership with the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, Food Share and Toronto Public Health. This grant is requested yearly and is administered by the Ambassador Coordinator. Students are responsible for weekly menu planning, weekly grocery shopping and the preparation of healthy meals. This support greatly enhances attendance as many youth live independently under the poverty level, as well as improving health through access to nutritious food.

The young people who participate in this program have not succeeded in traditional school programs, and are not reaching their educational outcomes. This is a model of independent learning in a supportive setting. They receive life skills supports and academics. They also receive training and support in public speaking and develop self-esteem and some leadership skills in speaking to younger children about the importance of setting goals, completing schools and learning life skills. The results for the younger children are very inspiring, and the process is very empowering for the students in the Ambassador program.

Although these young people have been through some traumatic experiences, with supports they are able to also draw on their strengths and talents to make substantial progress towards their academic and life goals. This program combines nurturing, mentoring and significant support towards the youths' goals which they can work on at their own individual pace. In 2017, the students registered have completed 13 courses to date, and are on track to complete 19 more. They require an average of 9 courses each to get their OSSD, or others are eligible to take a transition course to go to Post-Secondary education. The goals of youth in the program include:

- Bridging to Post Secondary as a Mature Student (6 youth)
- Obtaining their OSSD with PARC then going to Post Secondary (4 youth)
- Obtaining the OSSD with PARC (5 youth)
- Upgrading in maths/sciences to transition to Post-Secondary (2 youth)
- Supports to enter apprenticeship/workforce (2 youth).

The youth attending the Ambassador School Program also receive wrap-around supports from PARC Adolescent Workers, and have access to a range of other individual and group services from individual support to life skills development programs. The program opportunities offered through PARC include: Transitions from Care group; Financial Literacy; Elements-Entrepreneurship; Arts programming, Nutrition and Wellness programs, and Summer Employment opportunities. All of the youth groups are designed to facilitate youth developing the essential core set of skills that they need to live and function independently. Youth can also access housing assistance, employment counselling, vocational assessments through Jewish Vocational Services partnership and funds for post-secondary education (bursaries through the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, OSAP, etc.).

Since 1990, over 830 students have gone through this program, and many have gone on to

post-secondary studies and employment. This is a big achievement since the rates of post-secondary enrollment for youth leaving care are much lower than the general population. The Ambassador Program has provided strategic supports to a number of youth to mitigate these risks, and improve outcomes. This program is also working with a high percentage of racialized youth annually, and is helping them to overcome many systemic barriers including racism, to achieve their academic goals. In addition, this program works with some young parents who do not have alternative significant supports.

In addition to lower rates of high school graduation and post-secondary participation, there is evidence that youth leaving child welfare care experience higher rates of homelessness and receipt of social assistance resulting in poorer outcomes, and also impacting on City Budgets.

By funding this program, the City is successfully investing \$50,000 into building strengths in 30 or more young people annually who are transitioning out of care and may be experiencing homelessness, or are at risk of homelessness, in order to help them build their capacity and academic credentials to succeed. These are essential building blocks to help prevent future poverty, reliance on welfare and risks of chronic homelessness.

Creating more successfully educational trajectories to youth at risk of homelessness or receipt of social assistance saves the City funds in the long run. For example:

\$129,780/year – savings when 15 youth no longer rely on Ontario Works . This is 2.6 times the annual City’s contribution to the Ambassador’s Program.

\$50,000 - savings when 28 youth no longer rely on a youth shelter for 30 days. This is 100% of the City contribution to the Ambassador’s Program.

In our view it is short-sighted to cut this successful prevention program, targeted to such a vulnerable Toronto population. Without successful intervention these youth will not successfully transition to adulthood and economic self-sufficiency. They are also at greater risks of racism, discrimination, unemployment, and poverty.

The Ambassador Program is a successful and positive inter-agency initiative involving, the City of Toronto Public Health Department and community agencies. The City covers about 35% of the overall cost of the Ambassador Program. The remaining 65% of the funds needed to support the program comes from of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto (CAST) and the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada, who cover the cost of the teacher, and 70% of the coordinator’s salary. In addition, the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada and CAST fund the other wrap around supports from PARC.