



**THE NATIONAL CHILD BENEFIT
PROGRAM EVALUATION
FOR THE CITY OF GREATER SUDBURY**

Children First/NCB Program Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Prepared for:
The City of Greater Sudbury**

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December, 2001



**SDA CONSULTING GROUP
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2001 REVIEW OF THE NCB/CHILDREN FIRST PROGRAMS IN THE CITY OF GREATER SUDBURY

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BACKGROUND

The National Child Benefit (NCB) is a federal benefit for low-income families that aims to prevent and reduce child poverty and to promote attachment to the work force by helping families to move from welfare to work. In March 1999, SDA Consulting Group submitted the *Report on the National Child Benefit Reinvestment Plan for the Regional Municipality of Sudbury*. The report contained a number of recommendations for reinvesting NCB funding in programs designed to benefit families receiving social assistance. Following the presentation of the report to Council, the former Regional Municipality of Sudbury established a strategy to provide a range of supports to low income families. In 2001, SDA Consulting was retained to review a number of Children First/NCB programs currently operating in the City of Greater Sudbury. The review process involved interviews with parents and Children First/NCB service providers, focus group discussions with service providers not receiving Children First/NCB funding and low-income mothers, and site reviews.

SITE REVIEWS

The programs that have been reviewed fall into the following categories of assistance: prenatal and infant support, parent education, early development and assessment, food security, recreation, emergency assistance and transportation.

Prenatal and Infant Support. Our Children, Our Future received funding for four different programs: (1) \$85,000 for Children First, From the Beginning, (2) \$50,000 for Children First, Healthy Eating, (3) \$40,000 for School's Cool and (4) \$92,170 for A Helping Hand. Several of these programs were composed of different initiatives. Under the From the Beginning program and the Healthy Eating program, the OCOF undertook a variety of activities, such as enhancing access to healthy nutritious foods and food supplements for expecting mothers, for women on Ontario Works and for financially challenged women, providing prenatal vitamins, creating buying circles in communities to facilitate access to nutritious foods, purchasing breast pumps, establishing collective kitchens, providing nutritional education, prenatal and parenting resources in a group setting. The objective is to reduce the incidence of low birth weight babies and to provide education and support to parents on pre and post natal issues. A Helping Hand, has three components. The infant layette component ensures that essential baby supplies and clothing are provided to at-risk families. The infant food cupboard component provides additional infant food and responds to other infant needs such as diapers to families who require additional help. The children's furniture component provides

needed furniture and equipment—infant seats, playpens, safety gates, strollers—to low-income and needy families.

Parent Education, Early Development and Assessment. The School's Cool program aims to enhance school readiness of preschoolers in order to better their chances for success at school. This program gives "at risk" children a head start for school, provides an opportunity to identify potential learning or behavioural difficulties, and encourages parents to become involved with the school system and their children's education. Sudbury & District Health Unit was awarded \$19,132 for Let's Grow, a program which mails literature on child development to parents. The literature covers developmental stages beginning with the birth of the child and continues until the child reaches 6 years of age. Among other things, the mail-outs contain information on healthy child development, community resources, information lines, and developmental screening tools. They are meant to provide parents with relevant and up-to-date information.

Walden Play and Learn received a total of \$40,000 for Fair Start which brought together, in one location, during the late spring various specialists such as an audiologist, a speech and language pathologist, a dentist, and a nutritionist. The aim is to identify children who are showing signs of problems in certain areas that will affect their performance at school.

Food Security. The Social Planning Council received \$15,000 to create a new community garden and support existing gardens in low-income housing developments. The garden project was intended to build better relations among people living in the neighbourhood as well as improving access to food.

The Human League was granted \$60,000 in NCB funding for the period from December 1999 to December 2000 for breakfast and snack programs in schools. As of November 2001, the Human League is operating nine programs representing up to 1700 meals per day.

Recreation. The Sudbury-Manitoulin Children's Foundation received \$85,000 to operate the Send a Kid to Camp program. The Foundation raises funds to provide at-risk, low-income children with a summer camp experience. In 1999 it served 603 at-risk, low-income children, in 2000, 703 children in 2000, and 723 in 2001.

In December 2000, the City of Greater Sudbury granted the Human League \$85,000 in NCB funding for its PLAY program which gives children and youth from low income families access to recreational, sports, leisure and arts activities. Since April 2000, 230 children have been served and referrals continue to be made.

Emergency assistance. The Social Planning Council received \$450,000 in NCB funding to distribute to families on Ontario Works with emergency needs. So far, the Emergency Fund has helped more than 2000 families in need. The most common requests have been for furniture such as children's beds and cribs, kitchen tables and sofas, medical costs (such as allergy medicines for children), baby items and accessories, food, transportation, dental costs, laundry costs and daycare expenses.

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Transportation. The Social Planning Council and GEODE were given \$65,000 in NCB funding to create a Community Transportation Cooperative of organizations who need transportation for their clients. As of October 2001, 395 children and 337 adults had received help with transportation. Currently, there are nine volunteer drivers donating time to the program.

SURVEY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Managers of the twelve CF programs being evaluated, as well as the staff directly responsible for the delivery of the programs were interviewed and a structured questionnaire was administered. In total, six managers and ten staff members participated in the survey.

Most of the respondents had a good understanding of the focus of the NCB initiative; however, in general, the level of awareness of the Children First programs was moderate among managers and low among staff. Nearly half of the service providers stated that information was not being shared between CF programs.

The annualized number of clients who had received services from Children First programs ranged from 57 to 142,762. Nearly half of the service providers did not know how many Ontario Works clients they were serving; some commented that it was difficult to engage these clients. Aboriginal people were over-represented among the clients of agencies providing CF programs. Despite this, about half of the agencies are not providing services to Aboriginal people in a manner that differs from the way they serve other clients.

A similar proportion of the services reviewed has not served Francophones appropriately. For example, information had been provided in English only, or there were no staff members who could speak French.

The successes of the CF programs identified by service providers were helping families, creating community partnerships, establishing some universal programs, providing vital services, developing awareness of client needs, supporting healthy child development, and improving educational outcomes for children from low income families.

The key challenges were developing partnerships with other community service providers, the lack of available funding for program staffing, the inability to serve everyone who needed or wanted the service, and reaching vulnerable clients. Positive factors that facilitate access to their services for the most vulnerable clients were the provision of transportation or childcare, community-based service, partnerships with other community agencies, and increased publicity for the service.

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SURVEY OF PARENTS

In total, 100 clients who were participants in CF services or programs were surveyed by telephone. The profile of respondents is typical of consumers of social services: most were women in their 20s or 30s receiving Ontario Works or Employment Insurance benefits. The key cultural groups in Sudbury were represented in the sample (Anglophones, Francophones, and Aboriginal people), as were residents from various communities in the CGS.

"The staff was helpful and not judgmental; the program alleviated my financial problems and relieved stress." (SPC Emergency Fund)

"I was sick so the staff came to my house to get the information they needed. They picked up my son and brought him to camp. He had a good time and wants to go again." (Send-A-Kid-To-Camp)

"It was a good experience for my kids. They had fun and when they're happy, I'm happy!" (Human League—PLAY)

While two-thirds of the clients were not familiar with the CF initiative, a similar proportion **were aware** of several of the CF programs or services. However, many clients were unclear about the names of programs and which ones they had accessed. Nevertheless, in describing the services they had received, a vast majority of the respondents reported that the programs were easy to access and, overall, they were highly satisfied with the services they had received. Clients reported that they were satisfied because of the benefits for themselves or their children. Most mentioned that they appreciated the concrete help with material items (food, clothing, furniture, or payment of fees) or services such as transportation, pre-school assessments, home visits, or referrals to other community services. Many also commented on social-psychological benefits such as their child's enjoyment, filling a need in their child's life, giving their children an opportunity the parents could not otherwise have afforded to provide, opportunities to talk to others, and getting relief from stressors in their lives. The participants described how the programs had impacted positively on their lives and those of their children most frequently by expressing appreciation for receiving a bit of financial relief (e.g. through the assistance with transportation, payment for recreational fees, or receiving food or other items).

When asked about the additional supports they needed, the largest number of comments focussed on their need for more material/financial support for food, clothing, transportation, affordable housing, and furniture. Many parents also commented on their need for respite/parenting relief. Parents whose children had special needs noted that many of the services did not provide the supports their children needed.

FOCUS GROUP WITH COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVIDERS

“Our community has been very creative in developing programs for low income families”

The participants included management and staff in agencies serving children and families in the City of Greater Sudbury. All except one of the service providers demonstrated their knowledge of the CF/NCB initiative. The participants viewed several CF programs as being highly accessible and effective: these were GEODE's Transportation Co-op, the SPC's Emergency Fund, the Human League's PLAY and Morning Start programs, and OCOF's School's Cool program.

FOCUS GROUP WITH TEEN MOTHERS

“How do I get these services?”

Nineteen teen mothers participated in two on-line focus groups. None of the participants indicated awareness of the Children First initiative, and, apart from the OW Opportunities for Parents program, none of the participants could recall having received services from any of the CF service providers. When asked whether their OW workers had informed them about programs such as OCOF's Helping Hand, infant layette program, all replied that they had not been informed; however, a number of them expressed interest in the program and stated that they could benefit from the services. The comments of the participants indicated that OW workers are in a good position to provide information about the Children First initiative to this population, thereby improving the quality of life for young mothers and their children.

CONCLUSIONS

The Children First initiative has been very successful in addressing some of the vital needs of children and families in Sudbury. Many of the recommendations made in the 1999 *Report on the National Child Benefit Reinvestment Plan for the Regional Municipality of Sudbury* have been implemented. While some problems were noted, local service providers commented that the City of Greater Sudbury has been very creative in using the National Child Benefit reinvestment funds to develop programs to support low income parents. In total, twelve of the Children First programs provided services to more than 9,000 clients during 2000. These programs have strengthened the links between the City of Greater Sudbury and local agencies serving children and families. The client survey showed that, overall, clients are highly satisfied with the services they have received. In particular, they commented positively on the practical supports, financial relief, social and emotional support, and supports to enhance early child development. Clients affirmed that these programs are making a difference in their lives.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Thirty-two recommendations have been developed from all sources of data collected in the various phases of the program evaluation, as well as information on best practices identified in the literature. Key recommendations are as follows:

1. It is recommended that the City of Greater Sudbury undertake to make it easier for families to use NCB programs and services by merging programs that provide the same kinds of services and simplifying the names of programs. For example, the names of the programs could be simplified to reflect the type of support (e.g. prenatal and infant supports, recreational programs, food security programs).
2. It is recommended that the City of Greater Sudbury work with service providers to ensure they are reaching low-income families and meeting overall program goals as set out in the NCB directives.
3. It is recommended that the City of Greater Sudbury continue to support programs that are operating effectively to improve the quality of life for families and children living in poverty. In particular, the provision of financial/practical supports to low income families is vital for ensuring that basic needs are being met.
4. It is recommended that the City of Greater Sudbury act to raise the level of awareness of NCB programs among service providers and low-income families. Such activities may include holding information sessions, distributing posters and brochures in drugstores and doctor's offices, and training Ontario Works workers to provide clients with information about Children First/NCB programs.
5. It is recommended that the City of Greater Sudbury actively encourage front line workers of social agencies to inform families about Children First programs and services and to ensure that each family with children gets an information package about Children First programs.
6. It is recommended that the City investigate the possibility of establishing a central access point with one telephone number be established for all Children First programs providing parents with access to the programs according to their needs.