

Service Delivery Examination

Edmonton Region Child and Family Services (CFS) Review of Inner City Youth Housing Project

E4C is a contracted agency which operates the Inner City Youth Housing Project (ICYHP), a residential group care facility in Edmonton. Edmonton Region CFS contracts with E4C to provide housing and support services for high risk youth and licenses the ICYHP facility for five beds.

On September 4, 2015, Edmonton Police Service (EPS) charged a 17-year-old youth with second-degree murder, robbery and possession of a weapon. At the time of the arrest, this youth was under a Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO) with the province and was living at the ICYHP group home (91 Street location).

As a result of this incident, the Human Services Minister requested a review of the ICYHP group home. The scope of the review included examining staffing ratios, agency programming, resident safety, facility licensing and the contractual agreement between E4C and Edmonton Region CFS.

Edmonton Region CFS conducted interviews and reviewed files and relevant documentation to assess the quality of care being provided by the group home, and to determine learnings for continuous improvement. The E4C agency was informed of the review from the onset.

Timeline:

- September 4, 2015: A youth who resided in this ICYHP group home was arrested and charged by EPS with second-degree murder, robbery and possessing a weapon.
- September 4, 2015: E4C decided to close ICYHP to placements while the group home was fumigated and had scheduled maintenance completed.
- September 5, 2015: Comments by an EPS officer resulted in media attention on the group home that continued to be reported publically in the ensuing weeks.
- September 8, 2015: Minister Irfan Sabir committed that Human Services would conduct a review of the ICYHP group home.
- September 8, 2015: Review Terms of Reference were drafted, with a completion date of September 22, 2015.
- September 8, 2015: Edmonton Region CFS Review team began data collection, which included documentation review and interviews.
- September 23, 2015: Findings from the review were presented to regional managers/executive and provincial managers/executive.
- September 24, 2015: Edmonton Region CFS debriefed the E4C Chief Executive Officer (CEO) on the review process.
- October 5, 2015: By mutual agreement of Edmonton Region CFS and E4C, ICYHP's facility license was suspended for 90 days, pending the outcome of the review.
- October 15, 2015: Edmonton Region CFS met with E4C CEO to discuss the first draft of the review.
- November 10, 2015: E4C determined it would not re-open this ICYHP group home.

Overview of Contract Expectations:

Program Description:

ICYHP's goal is to assist youth in successfully transitioning to adulthood. The approach is to support youth in taking the next step in their lives whether that is independence, supported independence or a transition back to family.

ICYHP staff work with each youth and their guardian to create a transition plan that is viewed as achievable and desirable by the youth. Discussions of transitions will begin upon intake and ICYHP staff will work with youth to ensure they are on track, achieve success and complete the transition plan. Staff work with each youth from their starting point by building open and supportive relationships.

ICYHP staff support youth through one-to-one relationships, focused supports, advocacy and provide connections to community agencies. Practice frameworks follow the principles of Harm Reduction and Solution-Focused Therapy, using a client-directed, strength-based and outcome-focused approach.

ICYHP serves a high number of youth who have a history of traumatic experiences and transient lifestyles. ICYHP is typically the last housing resource for many youth, as they have been banned from traditional youth placements, family/extended family, and shelters. ICYHP's flexible expectations allow the youth to settle into a more home-like environment. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for their actions and realize they can develop skills to help them move towards a healthy, independent adult life.

ICYHP is a voluntary placement; as such, youth choose whether they would like to stay with ICYHP and they can come and go freely with the expectation that they will return for curfew.

The objective is to have youth become comfortable in their new environment and begin learning and growing. Staff support youth through the following expectations:

- youth are to be home for curfews,
- no drugs/alcohol and/or related paraphernalia on the premises,
- no sex on the premises, and
- no violence or threats of violence.

Client Characteristics:

ICYHP serves youth with the following characteristics:

- Street-involved youth (ages 14-17) without other appropriate resources. Youth may or may not have status under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*.
- Youth likely to have been involved in activities that define or characterize street life, i.e. transience, substance use, criminal involvement (current or past), sexual exploitation including prostitution, school absenteeism, sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

Accreditation:

Contracted group homes that provide services under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (CYFEA) must obtain and maintain accreditation with one of three accredited bodies. ICYHP is accredited with the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

Contractual Agreement with E4C:

Total contract value with E4C for the Inner City Youth Housing Project is \$1,602,368 annually for 20 beds among all ICYHP group homes. The 91 Street group home has five beds funded at \$401,701. The contract includes residential and support services consisting of emergency accommodations, long-term housing, specialized placement for youth identified under *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act (PSECA)*, and community follow-up.

Overview of Licensing Requirements:

Contracted group homes that provide services under the CYFEA must maintain compliance to the Residential Facilities Licensing Regulations (RFLR). A license is issued for a maximum of one year, and the license holder maintains the license by:

- Remaining in compliance to applicable zoning, health and safety legislation.
- Ensuring the applicant and the individuals who will be associated with the operation of the child and youth facility are suitable to operate a child and youth facility.
- Ensuring the environment of the child and youth facility is conducive to the health, safety and well-being of children.
- Ensuring the premises of the child and youth facility provides children with adequate space for activities of normal daily living.

There are further requirements regarding;

- Staff members: must be adults who meet the requirements under Section 18 of the RFLR with regard to character, criminal history, CFS history, First Aid and Training (specifically around precautions to be followed when working alone).
- Records:
 - Maintain records of admission, discharge, and absence from the facility.
 - Maintain personnel records of all employees and volunteers.
 - Maintain records for each youth residing in the facility who is in the custody or under the guardianship of the Director (according to Section 20 for the RFLR).
- Policies: must keep a copy of facility policies and procedures on facility premises, and make them available to employees, volunteers, residents, guardians of the children and the Director.
- A license holder must also ensure adherence to the Prohibitions under Section 23 of the RFLR, including not inflicting or permitting to be inflicted, any form of physical punishment, verbal or physical degradation or emotional deprivation, denying any basic necessity, the use of face down restraints, and several other points.

During a yearly on-site inspection, CFS Licensing Officers monitor to ensure that the facility and grounds are maintained in a manner that ensures the safety of youth.

Additional funding information:

Prior to September 4, 2015, E4C had been working with Edmonton Region CFS to address on-going staffing challenges and neighbourhood concerns. On December 23, 2013, CFS provided E4C with additional funding of \$100,000 to improve the security of its ICYHP group homes and property; of this funding, \$11,869.55 was used by the 91 Street location to purchase and install a security system, window alarms, window replacement, door sensors, fencing and exterior lighting.

Review Activities:

The Edmonton Region CFS review team examined agency documentation including:

- Child intervention files for the youth charged;
- CFS and agency policy and procedures;
- Group home staff schedules;
- Agency documentation including program manual, intake packages, client binders and critical incident reports; and
- Regional contract and licensing files in relation to the agency and the group home.

Analysis:

From a licensing and accreditation perspective, the CFS review team found the ICYHP facility met all provincial licensing and accreditation requirements.

From a contractual perspective, the CFS review team found there was inconsistency among staff in applying the policies and understanding the practices of Harm Reduction. The Harm Reduction approach is a set of strategies and tactics that encourage youth to reduce risk to themselves and their communities by their various behaviours. The goal is to educate the youth to become more aware of the risks of their behavior by providing them with the tools and resources to reduce their risk.

The application of the Harm Reduction approach in working with a high risk youth population is not simply the reduction of, or absence of, rules and structure; but rather an application of the rules and structure following an assessment of a young person's unique circumstances taken in context of their current circumstances. This level of assessment requires a skill set that is developed through a combination of training and experience in working with this youth population.

Throughout the interview process, the CFS review team found that although the agency and their staff were committed to the well-being and safety of youth in their care, some ICYHP staff did not seem confident in their understanding of Harm Reduction, and in turn, whether their work with youth aligned with the region's expectations.

In sharing information with the agency management, it was clear that while the group home staff and, to some extent, the agency management were aware of community concerns, the full extent of the community's perception of this group home was not well known by the agency management. The agency was aware of the more contentious issues with some community members, but was not fully aware of how generally frustrated the community felt. In some cases, concerns had gone unreported as a number of community members had stopped bringing their concerns forward to the agency.

Findings:

The review process noted the following:

- The agency demonstrated an understanding of the needs of high-risk youth and the youth accepted into the home met the criteria outlined in the contract. Both the entrance/intake and exit criteria outlined in the contract were met.
- Some ICYHP group home staff were unable to clearly articulate the program objectives of Harm Reduction. Though group home staff seemed committed and passionate about serving these youth, their lack of understanding of the Harm Reduction program model translated into “loose” or “broad” application of rules that compromised structure. For example, community members observed youth using drugs outside the group home when drug and alcohol use is strictly prohibited inside the group home.
- There was incongruence in the agency’s perception of their relationship with the community and the community’s expressed concerns. The agency believes it has built positive relationships with the community; however, community members expressed varying degrees of anger and exasperation, including concerns the group home may re-open. In some cases, the community stopped reporting concerns directly to the group home. Community members indicated they would actively oppose the home re-opening. The degree of opposition to the home was a disappointment to the agency management.
- Other youth-serving agencies and stakeholders stated the agency is cooperative and a good partner in serving youth. They noted that staff appeared committed and passionate about their work with youth.
- There was evidence the group home staff, the youth and CFS staff had open and regular communication with probation officers for youth placed in the home, including reporting of breaches when they occurred.
- The contract between the agency and the Edmonton CFS required 24/7 in-house staff at a ratio of one staff to five youth. Over the previous 12 month period, the ICYHP home had an occupancy rate of 92.65 per cent. The agency had sufficient staff to meet the expectations in the contract.
- CFS staff expressed that ICYHP has continuously accepted hard to place high-risk youth.
- As of January 2015, ICYHP is accredited with the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for three years. The facility maintains compliance with the Residential Facilities Licensing Regulation.
- At the time of the incident, there were concerns that the home was in physical disarray. This was due in part to a recent outbreak of bed bugs which resulted in having the home cleaned and fumigated. In addition, required home maintenance was about to begin. This was not noted as a concern to the reviewers and appeared within normal expectations for the circumstances.

Outcome of Review:

At this time, E4C has determined it will not re-open the 91 Street ICYHP group home. One of the main factors influencing this decision was a consideration of youth safety. As the group home location has been made public, it was felt there could be a potential risk to the safety of

youth who would live at this home in the future. Concern has been raised that closure of this home will have a negative impact on the Region's ability to place high-risk youth.

E4C and other partner agencies should implement the following strategies to build capacity in caring for these high risk youth and ensure close working relationships with community to address any concerns of neighbours:

- Community/neighbourhood relations and engagement:
 - Implement a "Good Neighbour Agreement" to actively and positively engage with neighbours to encourage community support, goodwill and provide a safe and supportive place for youth to stay. It is recommended that this Good Neighbour Agreement be in place in all group care and residential facilities that maintain contracts with Edmonton CFS.
- Training and orientation for group home staff:
 - Improve staff training in Harm Reduction strategies and how to properly apply the principles and structure required; and
 - Be more proactive to ensure staff understand and apply the Harm Reduction model where it is applicable. I
- Recruitment and retention of qualified staff:
 - Provide a supportive environment to recruit and retain qualified staff.
 - Recognize and address staffing challenges as they emerge and inform CFS early on about on-going recruitment or staffing issues.

Original signed _____
David Wilson
Regional Service Delivery Director

November 12, 2015
Date signed _____