

**The Adoption Council of Ontario**  
**Adoption Competency Training Program for Mental Health Professionals**  
**Report on Phase I: Needs Assessment & Information Gathering**  
**April 2013**

**Executive Summary of Phase I Findings**

- ✓ Research backs up the need for post adoption supports, including Adoption Competent mental health supports
- ✓ Based on our survey results, there is a significant, urgent need in Ontario for additional mental health supports for adopted children and their families, and for children in care
- ✓ Based on our survey results, there is a significant need for more Adoption Competent mental health professionals in Ontario.
- ✓ Based on our survey results, there is a need for more timely and affordable access to mental health professionals who are Adoption Competent
- ✓ There are a number of Adoption Competent training program curriculums that already exist outside Ontario

**Background to Initiative**

The Adoption Council of Ontario's motto is Kids Need Families and Families Need Support. Through its award-winning AdoptOntario program, the ACO helps children who need families find permanent, loving, adoptive homes. To address the other half of its motto, the ACO strives to increase post-adoption supports to families so that adoptive families have the support they need.

The ACO's experience is that adoptive families need greater post-adoption support in dealing with the mental health of their adoptive children and the family as a whole. The ACO is often contacted by families needing help and support and by adoption workers needing to point families in the right direction for support. Even mental health professionals contact the ACO for guidance on dealing with adoption related issues they are not experienced in dealing with. There are complex issues and dynamics involved in treating an adoptive child and his/her family. Without an understanding of the issues

involved in adoption and the loss and trauma that many adopted children have experienced, mental health professionals can make issues worse for the child and their families. The ACO also understands that there are long waiting lists for those professionals who are more experienced in this area. There are also many areas of the province that simply do not have adoption experienced mental health professionals.

In addition to the many families that have already adopted children in Ontario, the ACO is also cognizant of the currently over 17,000 children and youth in foster care in the province of Ontario. 7,900 of these children are Crown Wards. As the province works to find permanency solutions for these children through AdoptOntario and other avenues, the need for professional support will likely grow.

When the ACO was developing its Strategic Priorities, it resolved to look into this issue in greater depth and develop, if merited, an Adoption Competent training program for mental health professionals in Ontario. The project was divided into three phases as follows:

- Phase I - Needs Assessment & Information Gathering
- Phase II - Feasibility Study, Business Model & Partnership Development
- Phase III - Adoption Competency Training Pilot Program

### **Phase I: Needs Assessment & Information Gathering**

To begin this project the ACO set out on an information gathering exercise to better assess the needs of adoptive families, as follows:

1. Review any relevant research in this area
2. Survey needs of Ontario adoptive families & adoption workers
3. Examine various adoption competency curriculums that exist

### **1. Research on Post-Adoption Supports**

The most relevant and powerful piece of research in this area was a Report issued in October 2010 by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in the

United States. The Institute released a report called *Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed*. The report is a research report that compiled all the knowledge in the area of post-adoption supports. While recognizing that the US is making great strides in finding families for children in need, the report's goal was to increase understanding of the importance of having effective, accessible supports for adoptive families so they can succeed - "...the paradigm has to shift and the priority must be to not only achieve permanency but also to assure that adoptive parents receive the supports they need to raise their children to healthy adulthood."

The report talks about adoption failures and notes that "the economic and social costs to the country are considerable and the toll on children and their families is even greater." Furthermore, the report notes that "... for every adoption that doesn't work out, there are many more - though it must be stressed still a minority - in which the families struggle every day to address the often-serious, sometimes unnerving problems their children developed *before* they were adopted."

One of its primary findings is that "... the layers of issues and dynamics present in complex, chronic adjustment difficulties are often not understood by adoptive parents or the professionals they contact...The type of help parents seek most is adoption-competent therapy, but research indicates that most mental health professionals lack relevant training."

Following on that finding is a specific recommendation that "... curricula on adoption issues need to be created for and provided to the professionals who work with adopted children and their families. Teachers, school counselors and psychologists, medical professionals, social workers and other mental health professionals would all benefit from training in this area."

The Report contained a number of big-picture recommendations related to strategic leadership, legislation, funding and policy in the United States to revamp this whole area and make the paradigm shift as noted above. The recommendations were endorsed by a large number of organizations in the US child welfare and adoption fields, including the Child Welfare League of America and many levels of government. All of the organizations mentioned in the report and others "recognize that the development and use of post-

adoption services is a critical need to sustain families and are united in advancing the recommendations" of the report.

There haven't been any comparable research reports or broad-based policy initiatives in Canada on this topic. However, the Canadian Expert Panel on Infertility and Adoption's 2009 report, *Raising Expectations*, made many adoption related recommendations in an effort to improve Ontario's adoption system. One of them was to "support permanency through the provision of post-adoption subsidies *and supports* for children adopted from the public system." (emphasis added)

### **Research Conclusion**

The comprehensive US research is clear. Adoptive families need post-adoption supports if they are to succeed in raising their children to healthy adulthood. The issues and dynamics in adoptive families are complex. For treatment and services to be effective, the professionals who treat adopted children and their families need to be trained in adoption issues.

## **2. ACO Surveys & Trends in Ontario Public Adoption**

To better understand the needs of adoptive families and professionals in Ontario and the existing state of mental health supports, the ACO conducted two surveys regarding mental health supports: one for Adoptive Families and one for Adoption Professionals. These electronic surveys were developed by the ACO using SurveyMonkey. The Adoptive Families Survey was sent to members of the ACO's adoption community, who were encouraged to forward it on to other adoptive families that might be interested. The Adoption Professionals survey was sent to the ACO's email listing of Adoption Professionals. In a two-week period of time, an astonishing 445 adoptive families and 45 adoption professionals responded to the ACO's surveys.

A brief follow up survey was also sent to the ACO's adoption community to better understand exactly where adoptive families were looking for mental health supports.

## (a) Survey of Adoptive Families - Highlights

445 adoptive families responded to the survey. The families represented a mix of types of adoptions - public (61%), international (31%) and private (14%), with some families doing more than one type of adoption. Some adopted recently, others not - 64% adopted more than 3 years ago. Their children were various ages when they were adopted - 40% were less than a year old, 49% were 1 to 3 years old and 17% were 4 to 6 years old.

Key highlights of the Adoptive Families survey results are:

- **74%** of the adoptive families have used some kind of professional services (other than their adoption worker or their agency worker) since their child/children were adopted
- **64%** of the adoptive families think that one or more of their children have mental health issues - the most predominant being: Anxiety (70%), ADHD (64%), Attachment issues (53%) and Trauma-based issues (46%); **30%** of the families have more than one child with mental health issues
- When asked if their child/children were receiving professional services prior to the time of adoption, **77%** of the families said No
- Only **33%** of the families found it easy to find someone to help them with their child/children's mental health issues
- **70%** of the families were put on a waiting list to see a professional
- **45%** of the families do not consider their professional to be "Adoption Competent" in terms of being able to effectively treat all members of an adoptive family;
- **53%** of families have had to change professionals at least once, the predominant reasons being that there was no improvement (38%) or the professional didn't seem to understand my child (33%)
- **86%** say it is very important that the mental health professional be Adoption Competent
- **67%** of families are at least partially paying for these professional services out of their own pockets
- **91%** do not think there are enough qualified mental health professionals in Ontario capable of helping adoptive families
- **99%** think more adoption related training of mental health professionals would be of benefit to adoptive families

- And worthy of note, even after answering 38 questions, **142** of the families took the time to provide substantive “other” comments about their experiences and struggles finding appropriate mental health supports for their children and their families

## **(b) Survey of Adoption Professionals - Highlights**

45 responses were received from Adoption Professionals. Of the professionals, 61% worked for a public child welfare agency and 50% were in private practice, with some doing both. Of the respondents, the largest focus of adoptions were public adoptions (84%) with about half of the professionals also involved in private adoptions and/or international adoptions. 22% of the respondents had been involved in kinship adoptions. The professionals who responded were an experienced, seasoned group. 60% of the respondents had over 15 years experience in this field, while 78% had 8 or more years.

The Adoption Professionals corroborated the experiences of the adoptive families in their survey responses.

Key highlights are:

- **68%** of the professionals report that over half of the children they have placed have special needs; 64% report that more than 20% of the children they have placed have mental health issues
- When asked if in their opinion adequate mental health professional services were provided to the children they had placed, prior to their adoption, only **7%** said a definitive Yes, **37%** said To Some Extent, fully **23%** said No, and another **14%** said they Weren't Sure
- When asked if the families they are dealing with are getting the help that they need on a timely basis, **73%** said No.
- When asked if they think there are enough Adoption Competent mental health professionals in Ontario, **97%** said No.

When asked what types of services adoption professionals find that adoptive families need, the following are highlights:

- Therapy for abuse & neglect, trauma
- Affordable services
- Attachment issues

- Psychological issues
- Play therapy
- Psycho-educational assessments
- FASD assistance
- Crisis intervention
- Behavior management

When asked for which kind of services adoption professionals find **most difficult** to find professional assistance, the following are highlights:

- Affordable, timely services
- On-going, long term treatment
- Behavior management
- Play therapy
- Attachment therapy
- Mental health services
- Psychiatric services
- Adoption specific issues
- Trauma- based treatment

### **(c) Follow-up Survey**

A brief follow-up survey was performed to try to ascertain from which sector families were mainly getting their support for mental health services. We wanted to have an idea if most families were using publicly funded agencies or using private practitioners and to what extent they were using their employer's assistance plans. As well we wanted to better understand if most families were looking to a particular category of mental health provider so we could better focus our efforts. We asked them to tell us if they were using a social worker, or a psychologist or a family doctor or a family counsellor, or a therapist or a child and youth worker or a psychiatrist. We received 170 responses to the follow up survey. The results indicate that families are receiving support from both public agencies and private practitioners and from a very wide variety of providers. It became clear that an Adoption Competent training program will have to address a cross-section of mental health providers and both the public and private system.

## **(d) Summary of Survey Results**

The survey results from both the Adoptive Families Survey and the Adoption Professionals as well as the Follow-up survey demonstrate:

- There is a significant population of adopted children with special needs and specifically mental health issues
- There is a significant demand for more "Adoption Competent" mental health professionals in Ontario for both adopted children and their families and for children during their time in care
- There is a significant demand for more timely and affordable access to their services
- The Adoption Competent training program will have to address a cross-section of mental health providers and both the public and private system.

## **(e) Trends in Ontario Public Adoption**

In addition to the many existing adoptive families in the province, there are currently over 17,000 children and youth in foster care in the province of Ontario. 7,900 of these children are Crown Wards. As the province works to find permanency solutions for these children through AdoptOntario and other avenues, the need for professional support will only grow. Many of the children currently in care are older and have complex needs. More than 5,000 Crown Wards are over the age of 12, and 82% of the children in care have diagnosed special needs. In addition, 46% of the youth in care rely on psychotropic medication to help them manage. (OACAS 2011 Report)

It is anticipated that approximately 2,000 Crown Wards will be placed in adoptive or kinship homes in 2013. With the introduction in June 2012 of the Ontario government's new adoption subsidy program for families who adopt children 10 years of age and older or a sibling group, it is reasonable to expect that a significant portion of the 2,000 new adoptions will be of children in these categories. These are children with a higher likelihood of having complex needs, particularly mental health needs. It is not clear based on our survey results how much professional assistance these children have had while in care. The increased effort to find permanent homes for

children will only add to the already significant need in the province for more mental health professionals to be Adoption Competent.

### **Conclusion to Survey Results and Trends**

There should be a core group of trained mental health professionals available across the province to not only assist these children and families after an adoption but also to be available to assist children during their time in care. Many of the issues the children have would benefit from early interventions by skilled, adoption competent, mental health professionals. Some of the children's issues can be addressed and improved during this time and then post-adoption, a great deal more information and guidance could be passed on to the adoptive family to assist them.

The surveys demonstrated that it is very difficult for families across the province to find professionals that understand the complex issues and dynamics involved in adoption and in adoptive families. The laudable push to find homes for more Crown Wards is creating an even greater need for professional services that demands urgent attention. Unless there is a core group of trained "Adoption Competent" mental health professionals available across the province to assist adopted children and their adoptive families, the risk of adoption breakdown increases significantly.

### **3. Review of "Adoption Competent" Training Program Curriculums**

Approximately eight years ago, a group of adoption professionals and clinicians across the United States and Canada formed a working group and began discussing the idea of developing a curriculum about adoption. Over time, an agreement was reached that any adoption training would include an agreed upon list of competencies which would be necessary to cover. The following is a list of topics included in all Adoption Competency training:

- Clinical and Ethical Issues in Planning, Preparing for and Supporting Adoption
- Clinical Issues in Providing Therapeutic Services: Grief, Loss, Separation and Identity
- Trauma and Brain Neurobiology
- Clinical Issues in Providing Therapeutic Services: Attachment

- Adoptive Family Formation, Integration and Developmental Stages
- Openness in Adoption and Birth Family Culture
- Race and Ethnicity

The learning objectives of the training are as follows:

- Learn the theoretical framework and therapeutic approach of adoption competent mental health practice.
- Understand the legal and ethical issues that impact adoption
- Develop clinical skills in working with birth families, children and prospective adoptive parents in planning for adoption
- Develop clinical skills in working with adopted children and youth and adoptive families on the issues of loss, grief, separation, identity formation and attachment
- Develop clinical skills in working with adopted children and youth and adoptive families on issues related to the impact of genetics and past experiences on adjustment and the psychological well being of adopted children
- Learn how trauma impacts adopted children and tools and techniques to support recovery from adverse beginnings
- Learn how to support adoptive parents in developing therapeutic strategies in response to their children's challenging behaviours
- Develop assessment and intervention skills with different types of adoptive families and birth families.
- Learn the developmental stages of adoptive families and the process of adoptive family formation and integration
- Develop skills in working with adopted children, youth and adults, adoptive families and birth families on issues of openness and ongoing connections.
- Develop an understanding of the racial, ethnic and cultural issues in adoption and how to work with transracial and transcultural families
- Learn how to assess and refer adoptive and birth families to adjunct therapies for adopted children and youth.
- Learn how to work effectively with service systems and the community on behalf of adoptive families.

The ACO developed a list of criteria upon which to base its evaluation of any curriculum that it considered. The following were the criteria that were utilized:

- **Competency based:** given the research and work carried out in the US, the curriculum should be competency based
- **High Quality:** the curriculum must be of high quality and seen to be of high quality so that it is attractive to the marketplace but more importantly, effective in its ability to help families
- **Adaptable:** the ACO would like to have a curriculum that would be adaptable to a larger audience of service providers
- **Cost:** the costs must be able to be borne by the marketplace
- **Train-the-trainer model:** The ACO wants to ensure consistency of message, quality of delivery, and assurance and relevance of an Ontario-based curriculum
- **Length:** the length must be able to be borne by the marketplace
- **Sustainability:** the program should be self-sustaining on an ongoing basis
- **Flexible presentation & delivery formats:** to reach all parts of the province the ACO is interested in exploring alternative delivery methods, i.e., webinars, on-line training, Skype
- **Roll out on a timely basis:** The ACO would like to be able to run a pilot of the program in 2013 to address the urgent needs that exist
- **Integral part of the ACO education program:** the curriculum would need to fit into the overall ACO education programming
- **Tested and evaluated:** The ACO wants a high level of quality control in any program chosen

A number of different curriculum options were examined. Some specialized adoption training programs such as Joyce Pavao's, Dan Hughes' and Bruce Perry's were considered but due to their high cost, intensive level of commitment and the narrow scope of their focus they were not appropriate for our purposes. These courses are appropriate for already Adoption Competent professionals who are interested in further developing specialties in specific areas such as attachment and the brain-based effects of trauma.

Three viable options, which were comprehensive in their scope of adoption issues, were examined in depth:

- The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)'s adoption competency curriculum;

- The US's Centre for Adoption Support and Education (CASE)'s Training for Adoption Competency (TAC) curriculum; and
- The possibility of developing our own ACO Adoption Competency curriculum.

### **Curriculum Conclusion:**

At this point no conclusion has been made as to which curriculum will be chosen. The various pros and cons of each need to be weighed against what the Ontario market will bear in terms of time commitment, quality and cost. This will be assessed in Phase II of the project as we further develop partnerships and bring in key stakeholders to plan for the most appropriate content and delivery for our Ontario marketplace.

### **Phase I Overall Conclusion**

Phase I has provided the information the ACO required to justify continuing on to Phase II - Feasibility Study, Business Model and Partnership Building. The need for more mental health professionals in Ontario to be Adoption Competent has been demonstrated. The ACO now needs to explore the target audience of mental health professionals and determine whether there is sufficient demand for an Adoption Competent training program. This will be a critical next step in the project. Though an initial survey was developed for mental health professionals and some feedback was received it became clear that a more refined survey and more outreach would be necessary. Significantly more partnership building with professionals in this area is necessary to gain a better understanding of our target audience and what kind of time and cost commitment to a such a training program they would be willing to make.

As part of Phase II we plan to convene a series of meetings with relevant groups to consider the needs that we have identified and possible solutions to them. We will also explore funding gaps and opportunities with them to ensure that any program we develop can be sustained in the long-term.

At the completion of Phase II, the ACO plans to be in a position to run an Adoption Competency Training Pilot Program.