

Union asks to be 'at the table' for CAS reform

By **Mark Pavilons** Editor Local Journalism Initiative

Union representatives want to be involved in reforming a 'toxic, racist' environment at York Children's Aid Society (CAS). The Province is looking into allegations of harassment and racism, which surfaced this summer. In July, the government announced an operational review of YRCAS. 'Our government has been unwavering in our position that we have zero tolerance for racism, bullying and harassment. We want to ensure the health and well-being of staff at YRCAS. We also want to ensure that the children, youth and families of York Region are receiving the services they need and deserve,' said Jill Dunlop, Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues. OPSEU/SEFPO President Warren (Smokey) Thomas says front-line workers must have a real voice in finding solutions to address those toxic working conditions at York CAS. An independent probe has delivered a scathing review of the management at the CAS. Thomas says the society's board of directors must include members of OPSEU/SEFPO Local 304 in drafting a 30-day work plan ordered by the provincial government. 'An independent review has made it clear: the leadership at York CAS has failed the organization and the children it serves,' said Thomas. 'Thanks to the tenacity and determination of the front-line workers at the agency, those leadership failures have now been exposed and confirmed. If the agency is going to heal and begin moving forward again, those front-line workers must have a real say in the reforms that are long overdue. The independent report ordered by the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services found that senior management at York CAS has created a 'toxic' environment in which a pervasive 'culture of fear' and 'racism and anti-Black racism' have left workers traumatized. The ministry ordered that report after the executive of OPSEU Local 304 did a survey of staff that found an overwhelming number were experiencing depression, panic, and emotional breakdowns because of the workplace culture. The agency now has 30 days to issue a work plan addressing the toxic workplace. The chair of the agency's board of directors, Tahir Shafiq, held a meeting with staff about the report, but many were left disappointed. 'For years, we've been telling the employer that we and the services we provide are hurting. And for months, the board has stood behind the senior managers,' said OPSEU/SEFPO Local 304 President Andrew Harrigan. 'Even with this damning report in his hands, the board chair did little this morning to reassure us that the board is ready to take real action against the harassment and racism we face.' Eduardo (Eddy) Almeida, OPSEU/SEFPO first-vice president/treasurer said the board would be negligent not to involve the front-line workers in its plan for the future. 'With courage and conviction, these front-line workers have been fighting for months to fix their broken agency,' said Almeida. 'They're a credit to children's aid because they're putting the families and children they care for above their own safety and security. To not involve them in the needed reforms would be as shameful as the management malpractice that they helped expose.'