

## A Family That Stayed Together

*Client Assistance Fund – Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton*

Life had overwhelmed Alex and Stephanie<sup>i</sup>.

The couple, in their early twenties, had five children under the age of 7, three dogs and two cats. They didn’t have the skills to cope and their home was a mess.

“It was an absolute disaster,” says Dominic Verticchio of the Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton. “The children could simply not remain in those unhealthy and unsafe conditions.”

In the recent past they would have faced a difficult future. The family would have been broken up and the children would have been put in foster care.

“But just putting the children in care would not have solved the root problem,” says Dominic. “It would have just made them homeless.”

Fortunately for Alex and Stephanie there is a new program offered by the Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton called the Client Assistance Fund. The program was made possible by funding from the National Homelessness Initiative.

The focus of the program is prevention. Families are given short-term accommodation while their homes are cleaned and repaired. If their home cannot be made safe, they are given short-term accommodation while other suitable housing is found.

The children are not placed in foster care. The family remains intact.

“We take an approach where we don’t get hung up why the place got to be so bad,” explains Dominic. “We focus on the issue.”

For this young couple, the issue was simply that they had trouble coping. “They didn’t let the place go, it overcame them,” says Dominic.

The solution was to put the family up in a hotel for 2 nights. During the day, while the children were in school or daycare, Alex and Stephanie rolled up their sleeves and worked with a cleaning crew hired by Children’s Aid to make the home clean and healthy.

Then the focus was on giving them the skill set to maintain their place so it wouldn’t overcome them again. A parent support worker helped the couple with all of the life skills they needed, from setting a cleaning schedule to helping them learn good parenting techniques and hygiene habits.

The family stayed together. The condition of the home was greatly improved. And the clients were given the ability to keep it that way.

The program has been a great success. Hundreds of children, who would have otherwise been placed in care, have stayed with their families while the problems were addressed. In fact, during the first nine months of 2002/03, the Society’s admissions have decreased by 10% - or 84 children – in comparison to the same period last year.

To achieve these impressive results, the program only spends an average of \$214.62 per child, a very cost effective number when compared with per diems, salaries, travel, court costs and other expenses to put a child in care.

But the most important aspect of the program is not the financial savings; it is the positive impact it has on families, like Alex, Stephanie and their children. Nine months after their cleanup, they are all doing well.

Dominic brings their story to a close with a simple statement that holds much meaning for five young children and many others like them.

“There is no longer an issue.”

<sup>i</sup> The names of the clients have been changed to protect privacy.