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Commission spéciale sur les droits des enfants et la protection de la jeunesse
500 boulevard René-Lévesque Ouest, 9e étage, case postale 38
Montréal (Québec), H2Z 1W7

Dear Mme Laurent,

Family Ties is a community organization offering services in English to people living in and around New Carlisle on the Gaspé Coast. Family Ties began in 1995, when community members and the CLSC Chaleurs expressed concern that many local English-speaking families were living in poverty and the children were receiving little stimulation and at a higher risk of neglect. The first program offered was a playschool to support parents in developing the skills needed to prepare their children for school. Over time, Family Ties has grown and adapted to the changing needs of the population and now offers a range of programming for all ages including food security, parental support, early childhood and youth programs *and* literacy support. Family Ties also offers Anglophone parents with children in foster care the option to have supervised visits at Family Ties. This alternative to meeting at the Youth Protection building is less stressful for families.

Family Ties is firmly rooted in the community and, although services are open to everyone, the organization has been particularly successful in reaching vulnerable families and is aware of the difficulties they face. There are particular issues which affect Anglophones in this rural region such as accessing health and social services in English, a lack of English-speaking foster homes, low education levels and high unemployment. Anglophones are not only geographically isolated, particularly as there is very little public transport, but also socially isolated in the mainly French-speaking area of Baie-des-Chaleurs. Since the reform of the health system in Quebec, there has been an increase in turnover and absenteeism of local CISSS employees which has resulted in longer wait times for appointments, particularly for those related to social work and mental health. There are some private services available, but these are not within financial reach of families on low incomes. Not only does this situation cause frustration, as people feel they are not receiving an adequate level of care, but it also does not improve the outcome for the English-speaking population.

The difficulty in accessing health and social services results in an increased number of people facing adversity coming through the doors of Family Ties. This is seen throughout the programs and across all ages. As well as helping families to meet their basic needs with emergency food baskets and donations of gently used clothing or household items, staff support participants with transport issues and accompany those who need to access other professional and community services. Healthy snacks and meals are served at every program and activity as many people experience food insecurity issues. People feel at ease in the home-like environment of Family Ties and staff members model non-judgmental and respectful communication. Participants are able to discuss their problems individually or in group sessions where appropriate. For instance: The Early Years coordinator offers transport to a parent of two young children who, without this support, would not have access to the playschool activities designed to develop pre-



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school competencies *or* the regular workshops to support parents; the Youth Programs coordinator ensures that school aged children have a safe place to talk about their problems and chooses themes that help to build self-esteem and expand life experiences; a group of volunteer fathers act as positive role models by offering boys aged 9-12 the opportunity to take part in physical activities such as sports and outdoor adventures.

Since 2013, the CISSS has partnered with Family Ties to offer the Destination Family program which is based on the *Programme d'aide personnelle, familiale et communautaire* (PAPFC2). This intervention program was developed by the researcher, Carl Lacharité, for children and parents struggling with personal, relational and social difficulties that result directly from situations of neglect or high risk of neglect. Workshops are facilitated jointly by a health professional from the CISSS and Family Ties community worker. Some of the participants were themselves brought up in situations of neglect and it is only by giving people the knowledge and tools to act differently with their own children that the cycle can be broken.

The current level of financial support from the Ministère de la Famille for the *maisons de la famille* is inadequate. Organizations, such as Family Ties, spend many hours researching and applying for funding. According to the Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille, the minimum amount needed to cover operation costs is \$200,000. Family Ties currently relies on 30 different funders to make up the shortfall as the organization receives a base amount of \$96,874 to deliver over 20 programs, operate a building and employ 8 members of staff.

In conclusion, Family Ties is providing vulnerable families with wide-ranging support and reducing isolation through increased positive contact with the community. These services should complement and not replace professional services *and* should be adequately funded by the Ministère de la Famille. Although there are many examples of positive partnerships between Family Ties and the CISSS, we wish to advocate for the improvement of services for families. The CISSS should not be run on a business model, with cost-cutting as the main focus. Not only are there too few health professionals to serve the needs of the people in this area, but those who are employed are suffering due to an overload of work which inevitably results in stress-related illness and absenteeism. The obvious effect is that parents do not receive the support required and, therefore, are unable to meet the needs of their children.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for the valuable work that you are doing to improve the lives of the most vulnerable members of society; i.e. the children.

Yours sincerely,

Heather MacWhirter
Director