

Peel Children's Aid Society searching for new foster caregivers]

Peel CAS wants to educate people on misconceptions about being a foster caregiver

By Zachary Roman

Foster caregivers are needed in the Region of Peel.

The Peel Children's Aid Society (Peel CAS) is putting the spotlight on foster care recruitment this month.

Dora Habashi, the Family Connections Service Manager for Peel CAS, supports the organization's placement department and also helps with recruitment, adoption, kinship services, and supporting children in care with special medical needs.

She's been working for Peel CAS since 2008 in a variety of roles, and has been in her current position for about two years. Peel CAS is a child well-being organization that is committed to working with children and families within the Peel Region.

Peel CAS' kinship department works to connect children with their family members and extended family, so, if possible, children can be placed with their family members. It's always Peel CAS' first choice to have a child placed with their family.

"If a child can no longer safely remain with their family, our first step is to determine if there are any relatives or other adults the child has a significant relationship with," said Habashi. "Where it's possible, we try to explore that."

Unfortunately, that's not always possible, and that's why there's a need for foster caregivers in Peel.

Habashi said she always thinks there will be a need to recruit foster caregivers who will be able to provide care and meet the cultural and social needs of children. She said, realistically, a lot of caregivers will be retiring in the next few years, and that organizations like Peel CAS are looking for ways to onboard new caregivers.

A key part of that is dispelling misconceptions about being a foster caregiver.

A foster caregiver is someone who plays a vital role in nurturing a child in what is a very difficult time in their lives. They look after the day-to-day needs of a child, take them to appointments, attend school events, facilitate the child's connection to their family, culture and community, and more.

"They really [play] such a critical role in a child's life," said Habashi.

Peel CAS welcomes caregivers of all genders and cultural backgrounds. There is no need for foster caregivers to be married; Habashi said this is one of the most common misconceptions out there.

"We have applicants who come to us as single applicants and they get approved and are fostering as single applicants," said Habashi.

There's also no need for an applicant to have children of their own to be able to apply.

"I'm sure there's a lot of people in the community who want to be caregivers, and maybe child rearing was not in their future for whatever reason, but they still have a desire to give back to their community or a desire to provide caregiving to other children," said Habashi.

Strong parenting skills, a love for children, and time to devote to a child's emotional and physical needs are key aspects of what makes a good foster caregiver. Financial security is also a requirement of caregivers, though it's important to note Peel CAS covers all related costs to fostering a child. Caregivers must also live in a non-smoking home with a suitable bedroom for the child they're

fostering, and be able to drive the child to appointments as needed.

?Truthfully, children and youth thrive best when there's a full-time caregiver in the home,? said Habashi.

While being a foster caregiver is a big responsibility, it's certainly not one that foster caregivers undertake alone. Peel CAS offers robust, free training opportunities for caregivers, for everything from first aid to Indigenous practices.

Foster caregivers also get professional support from Peel CAS' care team which includes social workers, child and youth workers, and nurses. There's even a foster caregiver support group that meets once a month.

?There's a community of caregivers within our community of Peel? they lean on each other for support as well,? said Habashi.

Foster care is always intended to be short-term, as Peel CAS is always working towards reunifying children with their birth families.

Those who are interested in becoming a foster caregiver can start by visiting peelcas.org to get more information. People are even able to submit an application to be a caregiver online.

?This is very rewarding work? there's an opportunity to give back to your community and to be part of a child's life,? said Habashi. ?It really does take a village, and it's an opportunity for community members to contribute to that village around the child.?

Habashi said specifically there is a need for caregivers willing to care for children with medical and behavioural needs, as well as teenagers and sibling groups. Peel CAS always tries to keep sibling groups together.

Caring for a teen is another area Habashi said there can be misconceptions around, but she explained there's many benefits to caring for children of all different ages. She said she's heard from many caregivers who are still in touch with teens they fostered who are now all grown up and working full time.

?It really is beautiful how some of these older youth maintain a relationship with their former caregivers,? said Habashi.

In speaking to caregivers who have been fostering children for over 25 years, Habashi said the most common reason behind their success is just a simple desire to give back to the community. Habashi is hoping to tap into that desire to give back to get more people interested in being foster caregivers.