Killing us with statistics

Children’s Authority ‘slow on execution’ but...

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ROCKY START: Sharifa Ali-Abdullah

An ongoing investigation into the propriety of Children’s Authority director Safiya Noel’s decision to relocate a teenage boy from the authority’s care centre to her home caps off a turbulent two years for the authority. In this
special to the Express, SHEILA RAMPERSAD continues her look at whether the authority is achieving its mandate. Part I was published yesterday.

Frequent staff changes at the Children’s Authority is frustrating children’s homes.
“The people at the authority we interface with change often and there are always lots of new people; we are never sure of their social work qualifications,” said one children’s home manager. “People keep calling for information that we have already submitted. We are asked to submit care plans and other documents. We do that and a year later someone else calls asking for the same documents. When I submit care plans, I expect someone would read them, assess them, identify the children who need further assessment, psychological care, etc, and assign case workers to them. That is not what happens. Something has to be wrong.”

A prominent children’s home submitted to the Express the following list of challenges they face with the authority: frequent changes of staff, social workers often do not conduct the required follow-up on clients they place in the home, appointments are often cancelled at short notice, other appointments are demanded today for today, lengthy delays for assessments, lack of critical documentation on children, difficulty contacting social officers, failure to carry out some services such as school transfers, and homes having to arrange transportation for children when appointments are held at the authority’s Wrightson Road, Port of Spain, office. A ministry official said the authority sometimes refuses to transport children because “they have no bus route pass”.

Asked about these complaints, director Safiya Noel said in a February 20 interview, “The issue of turnover is one of the contributing factors. Others are insufficient staff. We have 1500 cases and eight team members to do follow-ups; there is no way they can do it. Staff doesn’t increase; as we lose, we replace. We don’t have enough staff on the ground.”

Most of the authority’s staff is concentrated in administrative areas such as Registry, Legal Department, Foster Care and Adoption, Accounting and Finance and IT. Seventeen people are in the Investigation Unit, seven in Emergency Response, eight in Child and Family Unit and nine in licensing and monitoring.

Steamy relationship with ministry

In addition to discontent among staff and at children’s homes, the authority has had a steamy relationship with its line ministry across two administrations, the People’s Partnership and now the People’s National Movement (PNM).

Former minister Clifton de Coteau let out an exasperated sigh at the mention of the authority when contacted for this review late last year. Asked for his assessment of the authority given that it was operationalised during his tenure, he said, “They were living up in the clouds. They didn’t want to face reality about doing things. They wanted everything in pristine condition before they could do anything.”

He added that while the authority was “killing us with statistics”, he was doubtful about their level of execution. Current minister Ayanna Webster-Roy, whose ministry initiated an independent investigation into decision of the authority’s director to relocate a teenage ward of the State from the authority’s child support centre to her home, declined to be interviewed for this review. But sources say Webster-Roy has a turbulent relationship with the authority in which her oversight role is continuously resisted.

“The CATT and former minister did not have a cordial relationship; that has continued,” said a well-placed source. “The antagonism must end. There still seems to be this perception that it is the ministry vs them and they (the authority) are not realising that everyone has to work together. They are working against governments and key stakeholders.”

The antagonistic relationship is believed to have motivated the ministry to invoke Section 21 of the Children’s Authority Act to issue reporting guidelines to the Children’s Authority.

Responding to questions from Independent Senator Paul Richards on April 26, Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister Stuart Young said a document entitled “General Guidelines to oversee the relationship between the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) and the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago” was sent to the authority in May 2016.

Those guidelines, he said, outlined the reporting relationship between both entities and specified that the authority must provide to the OPM monthly board minutes; monthly reports on financial disbursements; roster of the names of children and their ages who qualify for monthly upkeep; and financial contributions received from external bodies or institutions.

He said, for community residences, the authority is required each quarter to submit: a list of licensed community
residences, a list of community residences awaiting licensing or renewal, a list of community residences whose licences have been cancelled and the reasons for this, and documents supporting the payment of financial support to the children in care at the community residences. He said the authority is also required to inform the minister of its plan for public campaigns and proposed public statements and its annual report detailing its activities over the financial year.

Furthermore, Young said, from time to time, the minister may also request special reports from the board on specific matters and could convene meetings with the board as required.

Given the generally problematic relationship with its stakeholders, the Express asked Noel whether the authority has any method of evaluating its relationships with stakeholders.

"We do not have a system that is fully built," she admitted. "That framework never came off the ground. This is something we have to treat with. We have had a number of stakeholder meetings and always this feeling of the authority being rigid—I have heard that. But when you hear the examples they give, some we can treat with and some not. But to hear that after 20 months of operation the Children’s Authority is still perceived as being rigid, it is something we have to look at; we definitely have to look at it."

An e-mailed interview request on May 9 to Senior Counsel Stephanie Daly, longest-serving chairman of the authority, has not been answered.

Purchase of Audi vehicle

While numerous conflicts have developed between the authority and its line ministry, sources say the relationship got off to a rocky start in 2015 when the authority demanded a luxury Audi vehicle as part of then-director Sharifa Ali-Abdullah’s compensation package. Then-minister de Coteau refused the request.

A source close to the project of operationalising the authority, who requested anonymity, said the authority requested for its first director the motor vehicle allowance given to public officials. Sources say de Coteau suggested a four-wheel-drive, assuming that would better fit the needs of someone whom he thought needed to drive all over the country but the authority negotiated for and received the Audi.

The Express has confirmed that the Audi remains in the authority’s fleet and was up to last Thursday being utilised by the current director.

Board members dissatisfied

The term of the board of management of the Children’s Authority expired on April 1 and replacements have been named. The last board was led by Stephanie Daly SC; other members were Reaaz Dabiedeen, Dr Joanne Paul, Vidya Rampersad, Angela Iloo, Anna Maria Mora, Dhanesh Maraj, Shannen Marie Russell, Hazel Thompson-Ahye and Derek Forrester. Noel is an ex officio member. Only Thompson-Ahye has been returned on the new board.

Members of previous boards complained that matters that were supposed to come before them often did not. One former board member complained of feeling like an intruder; another said they did not see relevant information and correspondence.

"We were supposed to be aware of policy and help in shaping policy but that was not the case,” said one former board member. “Reports were laid in Parliament that some of us never saw. Information was privileged.”

One echoed de Coteau’s criticism that the authority’s role is not only to provide statistics.

“The Children’s Authority’s claim to fame should not be statistics alone. They are there to protect children and advocate for the rights of children generally regardless of who they upset; they shouldn’t be tiptoeing around issues they consider sensitive.”

Among the “sensitive” issues in which the authority refused to intervene was publication of photographs reportedly of Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi’s children posing with high-powered firearms. Former board members note also that memoranda of agreement between the authority and other agencies to establish roles, protocols and who does what are still outstanding. To date the authority has signed no MOU with any of its partner agencies.

"I have to re-engage each stakeholder to find out why we have no MOUs,” said Noel. “My understanding is the bureaucracy in other agencies (is responsible for the delay).”

Chief among the authority’s partner agencies with which no MOU exists is the Police Service, where the Child Protection Unit (CPU) is lodged.

• Concludes tomorrow