



The Corporation of the  
City of Sault Ste. Marie  
**COUNCIL REPORT**

June 23, 2025

TO: Mayor Matthew Shoemaker and Members of City Council  
AUTHOR: Peter Johnson, Fire Chief  
DEPARTMENT: Fire Services  
RE: Hope's Cradle

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with information regarding Hope's Cradle.

**Background**

A resolution was brought forward on October 10, 2023, stating:

*Whereas a person may choose to bring their pregnancy to term, but may not be willing or able to care for the child due to extenuating circumstances that may include, but are not limited to: poverty or financial hardship; gender based violence; involvement in human trafficking; struggles with mental health and/or addiction; religious and/or social stigma; sexual violence such as rape or incest; and*

*Whereas these factors could also contribute to individuals being unable to access services within the system such as abortion or adoption; and*

*Whereas stigmatizing the need for a person to surrender a baby without question or penalty has led to babies being left in unsafe situations, resulting in the otherwise preventable death of some infants, and*

*Whereas while the preservation of birth parent information, relationships and cultural backgrounds are all very important, saving the life of the infant in these dire situations must be the first priority; and*

*Whereas Hope's Cradle is a safe alternative to an unsafe abandonment, serving as a last resort for birth parents and infants who need it; and*

*Whereas alternatives that encourage prevention of unsafe abandonment will save the lives of these infants.*

*Now Therefore Be It Resolved that staff be requested to work with appropriate agencies and report back to council with recommendations for the implementation of Hope's Cradle in a central location in Sault Ste. Marie.*

Hope's Cradle is a secure, temperature-controlled, safe surrender site installed at a designated community site. It allows a parent or guardian in crisis to anonymously and safely leave an unharmed newborn in the care of authorities. It has been developed in partnership with the non-profit organization Gems for Gems. The initiative is designed to prevent infant abandonment and offer a compassionate option for individuals who feel they have no other recourse.

The cradle is accessible from the outside of the building and is equipped with a silent alarm system that notifies internal personnel immediately upon use. Inside the cradle, parents are offered supportive resources and a letter explaining the process and available help. The safety and well-being of the infant are prioritized at all times, and child welfare services are promptly engaged upon use.

### **Analysis**

As part of gathering details for this report, the following community stakeholders were contacted to discuss the resolution: the Children's Aid Society of Algoma, City of Sault Ste. Marie Police Services, Nogdawindamin Family and Community Services, and Adopt Ontario.

All of these community stakeholders have submitted letters outlining their position (see attached).

Hope's Cradle provides a mechanism for the anonymous and safe surrender of newborns through partnerships between a community stakeholder (host site) and child welfare agencies. While Ontario does not have explicit "Safe Haven" legislation, this practice raises concerns brought forward by the Children's Aid Society of Algoma (CAS) and is based on knowledge of child welfare practices, including the Child, Youth and *Family Services Act, 2017* (CYFSA), which is the legislation that directs child welfare practices in Ontario.

The supplied letter states that CYFSA, 2017, establishes a legal framework for adoption in the province of Ontario and establishes openness as the default approach to adoption in this province. Openness in adoption means an adopted child may maintain some degree of contact with their birth parents, siblings, extended family members, or other individuals with whom the child had a significant relationship prior to the adoption.

In summary, Children's Aid Societies are mandated under the CYFSA to protect children and support families. While CAS agencies are committed to child safety, they have expressed concerns that Hope's Cradle:

- Circumvents the legislated intake and assessment process;

- Prevents identification and evaluation of the family's situation, including possible reunification or kinship placement options; and
- Limits the child's ability to know their biological family, medical history, or ancestry.

As such, CAS may argue that supporting the existing child protection framework is more consistent with the best interests of the child and the integrity of Ontario's child welfare system.

The City of Sault Ste. Marie Police Service was consistent with CAS, stating, "while the initiative is well-intentioned, existing legislated processes already allow for the safe and responsible transfer of child custody." Further, Police Services consulted with their Statistical Analysis Unit and senior leadership to determine that there is no data (locally) to support the need for this initiative.

Police Services has also raised operational and legal concerns about the anonymous surrender of children outside of a formal legal process. Key issues include:

- The potential conflict with section 218 of the *Criminal Code* (Abandonment of a Child), which remains open to interpretation;
- Challenges in conducting investigations or validating that the surrender was voluntary, non-coerced, or free from criminal circumstances; and
- Difficulty in tracing any history of abuse or neglect if the identity is unknown.

Police Services prefer intervention through the formal CAS referral and legal custody framework already in place to ensure appropriate oversight and accountability.

In consultation with Nogdawindamin Family and Community Services, there was concern about the implementation of this initiative. The concerns discussed centred around the lack of ability to continue with continuity in maintaining Indigenous heritage and cultural background. There would be detrimental impacts on a child's well-being that resembled actions such as the "60's scoop" and the legacy of residential schools.

The Chief Executive Officer from Nogdawindamin strongly encouraged that the City consult with the seven North Shore communities and other Indigenous agencies in Sault Ste. Marie to establish a path forward before implementation is decided.

Nogdawindamin Family and Community Services have opposed the implementation of Hope's Cradle due to the risk of cultural erasure and the historical context of child apprehension in Canada. Concerns include:

- The loss of identity, ancestry, and connection to community which may have long-term psychological and spiritual impacts on Indigenous children;
- A continued pattern of separating Indigenous children from their culture, echoing harmful legacies such as the Sixties Scoop and residential schools; and
- The inability of Indigenous child welfare agencies to assert jurisdiction or support culturally appropriate alternatives when the child's origin is unknown.

From a reconciliation and rights-based perspective, Indigenous leaders and agencies advocate for solutions that prioritize family preservation and culturally informed care.

Discussions with the Adoption Council of Ontario (ACO) focused on acknowledging the intent behind Hope's Cradle to provide an anonymous avenue for parents to safely relinquish their child; they also state that the program contradicts legislation currently laid out in CYFSA 2017. Citing "the act speaks directly to the implementing prevention, early intervention, and community support services for children and their families". ACO has offered to provide support, education, and outreach to staff or families.

Adoption Council of Ontario has ethical and professional reservations, including:

- The lack of transparency and documentation in anonymous surrender can hinder future adoption planning, openness arrangements, and the child's right to access their origin story;
- Missed opportunities for open adoption or family-based solutions, which are increasingly considered best practice in Ontario; and
- Concern that Hope's Cradle could create a parallel, informal pathway to adoption without oversight from Ontario's adoption authorities.

ACO supports enhanced crisis intervention services, pregnancy support, and access to counseling within the existing legal framework rather than the creation of an alternative surrender mechanism.

While Hope's Cradle aims to provide a life-saving and compassionate option for parents in crisis, as stated in the letters attached, key community stakeholders do not support its implementation. Their concerns are rooted in the potential for unintended consequences, particularly around the loss of identity, disconnection from cultural heritage, and deviation from Ontario's established legislative framework for child protection and family services. These concerns must be weighed carefully, particularly around the long-term implications for the child's

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identity, access to heritage, and legal safeguards provided by current provincial legislation. An ongoing dialogue with these stakeholders is essential to ensure that any action taken reflects a shared commitment to the best interests of vulnerable children while respecting legal, cultural, and ethical considerations.

Given the input received from stakeholders involved directly with adoption and children's services, staff recommends not proceeding with a Hope's Cradle initiative at this time.

### **Financial Implications**

The upfront financial implications of implementing Hope's Cradle are estimated between \$30,000 and \$50,000. The initiative will also incur ongoing operational costs, which are currently not available. A suitable location would also have to be determined prior to implementation.

The funding of Hope's Cradle would also have to be further reviewed with community stakeholders should Council decide to proceed.

### **Strategic Plan / Policy Impact / Climate Impact**

This is an operational matter not articulated in the corporate strategic plan.

### **Recommendation**

It is therefore recommended that Council take the following action:

Resolved that the report of the Fire Chief dated June 23, 2025, concerning Hope's Cradle be received as information.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Johnson

Fire Chief

705.949.3333

[p.johnson@cityssm.on.ca](mailto:p.johnson@cityssm.on.ca)