

Tough times for Big Brothers, Sisters

Decline in revenues, city strike are blamed as agency hasn't placed a child since March

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Hundreds of city children desperate for help, support and guidance have been shut out of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Toronto programs this summer, due to the double whammy of the agency's plunging revenues and the strike by municipal workers.

"It's heartbreaking for us as an organization," says Cathy Denyer, president of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Toronto. "Children are missing life-changing opportunities – at a time of the year when they are at their most vulnerable."

Not a single child has been matched with a big brother or sister since March.

There are 275 kids on the waiting list. Another 160 children, already matched one-to-one with adults, had their cases frozen when supervising social workers had to be laid off. The freeze officially began May 15 and is expected to last until Aug. 15, during which time the agency is scrambling for alternatives.

But those alternatives are restricted by the municipal strike. Some 50 to 60 kids (apart from those already mentioned) lost a chance to attend smaller group sessions when city workers hit the picket lines, closing community centres. Five groups of children were scheduled to attend summer classes organized by Big Brother at community centres in Scarborough, Parkdale, Etobicoke and North Toronto.

Unlike, say, Kevin Kerto, 18, and his sibling, Kenny, 16, who joined seven years ago, the unlucky children of 2009 don't have the same access to a big brother or sister. And, these kids, the majority from single-parent homes, are already dealing, in many cases, with issues of poverty, low self-esteem and loneliness.

Like many parents who seek out Big Brothers/Sisters, Kerto's mother convinced him to join seven years ago. His father died when he was 7, and sibling Kenny was already on board. Kevin credits their Big Brother Glenn Trotman, 37, with changing their lives.

"I'm not going to say I was a selfish kid. ... Well, maybe, I guess you could say a bit," says Kevin, shooting a grin at Trotman during a recent interview. Funny, athletic, a reader and preparing for university, he adds: "Now I know I want to live my life in a way that makes other people's lives better. Big Brother has given me the opportunity to become who I am today."

Such chances are slipping away for this year's crop of youngsters, aged 6 to 18. Many children are still being helped by Big Brothers/Sisters, of course, but the non-profit agency finds itself battling a perfect storm of problems caused when the strike deepened the crisis created by cutbacks and layoffs.

It's impossible to know how many children would still be on the waiting list if the economy had remained good. The waiting list stood at more than 500 names when Denyer took over more than two years ago, and she'd managed to cut it roughly in half. Then it stalled – and the numbers began to climb.

For some kids, it's back up to a two-year wait.

"What child wants to be told they have to wait that long for a Big Brother or Sister?" asks Denyer. "They don't

understand."

Fundraising revenues have fallen by 20 per cent – and more.

The bad news began last November when an annual Big Brothers/Sisters golf tournament raised 30 per cent less money than usual. With an annual budget of \$2.2 million, Denyer quickly cut this year's operating expenses by \$140,000.

That led to layoffs of two social workers who oversaw 75 to 90 matches each, plus volunteer and human resources co-ordinators.

(United Way remains steadfast in its contribution of 18 per cent of the Big Brothers/Sisters budget. But the remainder from events and the private sector has been hit hard.)

"We're hugely impacted by this strike, and it's not fair to the children," says Denyer.

She's not trying to place blame for the labour situation, stressing her role is that of advocate for children.

However, she underscores a point made by Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair, who recently praised summer recreational programs, classes and day camps run through city community centres. Blair urged both sides to push for a deal because children are being hurt. Shuttered community centres leave idle children, who "might make bad choices with idle time," according to Blair.

Kevin and Trotman kid each other about who "lucked out the most" in their relationship. Last year, Trotman and the Kerto boys won the Big and Little Brothers Team of the Year award.

Trotman, a middle manager for a communications company until his February layoff, still considers himself lucky.

"I have more time for the boys this summer," he says. "I've learned so much from them. They've brought such richness to my life."

Trotman's interests have rubbed off on Kevin, who'll attend the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa this fall. He plans to study business administration and dreams of building schools in his mother's native Uganda.

Big dreams – and for that, too, he's grateful.