

Secure Treatment in Ontario:

**A Guide for Child Welfare
Professionals**

Understanding the program, the steps involved, and how to support children and families through the process.



A note before you begin:

The children and families you support through this process are navigating one of the most difficult periods of their lives. Seeking Secure Treatment for a young person in crisis is a significant decision, and the professionals involved play a meaningful role in how supported families feel along the way.

This guide is designed to help you understand what Secure Treatment is, what the process looks like, and how CAS workers can best support youth and families at each step.

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1. What is Secure Treatment?

Secure Treatment (ST) is a specialized mental health program under Ontario's Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA). It is designed to provide intensive, structured support for children and youth who are living with serious mental health needs and where those needs have created a significant safety risk, to themselves or to others.

Secure Treatment is a clinical intervention, not a punitive one. It is a highly structured environment where a young person can access the focused mental health support they need when other approaches have not been enough to keep them safe.

Two things that are important to clarify:

- **Is this connected to the justice system?**

No. Secure Treatment is not part of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) and is not a response to criminal charges. While there can be situations where a young person is involved in both systems simultaneously, Secure Treatment is a health and mental health intervention. If the child has significant active youth justice charges, it is generally recommended those be resolved before entering the program.

- **Is this a permanent placement?**

No. Secure Treatment is time-limited and focused on treatment and stabilization, not long-term housing. Most treatment orders last approximately 180 days, though some may be shorter or occasionally extended depending on the child's needs.

Planning for what comes next supports better outcomes

Before a child can be admitted, there should be a plan for where they will go and who will support them when Secure Treatment ends. This isn't meant to add pressure; it is meant to ensure that the work done during treatment connects to a stable and supported environment after. As the CAS worker, your involvement in building that plan early can make a meaningful difference.

2. When is Secure Treatment Considered?

Secure Treatment is a significant step. It involves 24/7 care in a secure, locked setting, and it is only considered when a young person's needs are serious enough that other supports have not been able to keep them, or those around them, safe. Recognizing that some young people need a level of support that cannot be provided in the community, at least for a period of time.

For Secure Treatment to be considered, the following must all be true:

Less intensive options have been tried first

Secure Treatment is not a first step. Before it can be considered, less intensive supports must have already been explored and found to be insufficient. These can include:

- Intensive community mental health services
- Crisis intervention and stabilization supports
- Hospital-based stabilization
- Outpatient therapy and counselling
- Specialized residential placements
- Behaviour support services

The child has identified mental health needs

Secure Treatment is designed for young people with complex and severe mental health needs. There must be documented evidence of those needs, such as:

- A formal mental health diagnosis, or
- Documented involvement with mental health services where needs have been clearly identified

There is a serious and ongoing safety risk

Secure Treatment is considered only when there is a persistent, significant risk of bodily harm, to the child or to others, that cannot be safely managed in a less secure environment. This risk must be directly connected to a mental disorder and meet a specific legal threshold under the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA).

Secure Treatment is not intended for behaviours that are difficult or concerning on their own. The risk must meet a specific legal standard related to a mental disorder. If you are uncertain whether a child's situation meets this threshold, our Intake team is available to talk it through with you.

3. Understanding the Criteria: A Note for Child Welfare Professionals

As child welfare professionals, it is important to understand how Secure Treatment decisions are assessed, so that applications are well-supported and families are not led toward a pathway that will not be available to them.

Secure Treatment decisions are based on the pattern, persistence, and clinical drivers of risk over time, not on isolated incidents, placement breakdowns, or system pressures.

The court must be satisfied that the risk of serious bodily harm is caused by a mental disorder, not solely by behavioural, relational, or environmental factors.

When documentation reflects this distinction clearly, it supports a stronger application and a more informed court process.

This distinction also matters for the families and child you are working with. Being clear with them about what Secure Treatment is, and what it is not, helps set realistic expectations and reduces the distress that comes from pursuing a path that may not be the right fit.

4. Two Application Processes

There are two separate applications involved in getting a child into Secure Treatment, and they serve very different purposes. Many applicants find this confusing at first, which is completely understandable. Here is what each application involves.

A. The Program Application — submitted to Syl Apps Youth Centre

This application determines whether the child meets the clinical criteria for the Secure Treatment program at Syl Apps Youth Centre. It is a clinical review, not a legal one.

Who can submit this application?	What happens after it is submitted?
<p>Anyone who is part of the child’s circle of care can apply, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents or guardians • Children’s Aid Society (CAS) workers • Physicians • Mental health clinicians • Schools or other service providers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Syl Apps Youth Centre (SAYC) reviews the referral, including the child’s clinical history, safety concerns, and what has already been tried 2. Eligibility is assessed 3. If eligible, the child is placed on a waitlist. There are a limited number of secure beds in Ontario, and waitlist times vary 4. When a bed is soon to become available, a Program Acceptance Letter is issued 5. The family, CAS worker, or physician then begins the separate court process

Questions before or after submitting? We are here.

If you have questions about the program or are unsure whether a child meets the criteria, our Intake team is available to consult with you. We can arrange a call or, where appropriate, a tour of the facility to help the child and family understand the environment before making a decision.

Please keep in mind: a Program Acceptance Letter is an important step, but it does not authorize admission. The child cannot be admitted until a judge approves a Secure Treatment Order through the court process described below.

B. The Court Application submitted to the court

The Court Application is a separate legal process. It asks a judge to authorize a Secure Treatment Order (STO), which is what gives legal permission for a child to be admitted to the program

Who files the court application?	What does the court process look like?
<p>This depends on the child’s age and their own wishes about treatment:</p> <p>Under 16:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acceptance Letter is received from Syl Apps Youth Centre 2. The applicant retains a lawyer 3. The lawyer files the STO application. The applicant’s legal counsel is responsible for

- A parent, guardian, or CAS can file

Age 16 or older, and agreeing to treatment:

- A parent, guardian, or CAS can file

Age 16 or older, and not agreeing to treatment:

- A physician must be the one to file the application

notifying the Office of the Children’s Lawyer (OCL) once the application is filed

4. The child is assigned their own independent lawyer through the OCL
5. Evidence is gathered and submitted (affidavits, clinical documents)
6. Court hearings take place and the judge makes a decision
7. If the Secure Treatment Order is granted, the child is admitted to Syl Apps Youth Centre

A few important things to keep in mind:

- *A suitable discharge placement should be identified before admission, as Secure Treatment is not a long-term solution.*
- *Significant active Youth Justice charges may need to be resolved before the child can be admitted.*
- *The judge will assess whether the child meets the legal criteria under the CYFSA, including whether there is a significant risk of bodily harm connected to a mental disorder.*
- *If the situation involves a 30-day Emergency Admission, the process is different and does not require a court order. Please contact our team if this applies.*

5. Age and the Child’s Voice

A young person’s age and their wishes about treatment both shape what the process looks like. Regardless of age, every child has a right to have their perspective heard.

Child under the age of 16

For a child under 16, their agreement to treatment is not a legal requirement, but their voice still matters. The child will have the opportunity to meet with a lawyer from the Office of the Children’s Lawyer (OCL), whose role is to listen to the child, understand what they want, and bring their perspective to the court.

The judge will take the child's views seriously. However, the judge also has the authority to approve the order even if the child does not want treatment, particularly when safety concerns are significant. A physician is not required to be the legal applicant for child under 16.

- The court application can be filed by a parent, guardian, or Children's Aid Society (CAS)

Child 16 years and older

For a child who is 16 or older, their wishes carry more legal weight in this process.

- If the child agrees to treatment: a parent, guardian, or CAS can file the court application
- If the child does not agree to treatment: a physician must take on the role of legal applicant. That physician will need to:
 - File the court application
 - Testify before the court
 - Have their own legal representation
 - Explain to the judge why the legal criteria for risk of bodily harm are met

As a CAS worker, you can play an important role in helping the child feel informed and prepared for their meeting with the OCL lawyer. Letting the child know that their voice will be heard, and that the OCL lawyer is there specifically for them, can help reduce fear and build trust in the process.

6. Legal Representation

The court process involves legal steps that require proper legal support. Here is what child welfare professionals need to know:

The applicant will need a lawyer

- Parents and guardians will need to retain their own legal counsel to file the court application. Unless CAS is the legal guardian, this will be a requirement of the parent/guardian.
- CAS legal counsel should be brought in early as the evidentiary threshold for the court is significant, and early consultation strengthens the application.
- Physicians applying on behalf of a child aged 16 or older who are not consenting will also need their own legal representation.

- Once the application is filed, the applicant’s lawyer is responsible for notifying the Office of the Children’s Lawyer (OCL).

The child will have their own independent lawyer

After the Court Application is filed, the child will be automatically assigned an independent lawyer through the Office of the Children’s Lawyer (OCL), at no cost to the family or CAS. This is a required part of the process. The OCL lawyer’s role is to meet privately with the child, understand what they want, and represent their wishes to the court, independently of the family, CAS, or the facility. This ensures the child’s voice has its own place in the proceedings.

What Syl Apps Youth Centre cannot do

Syl Apps Youth Centre (SAYC) is not able to provide legal advice, file court documents, or take part in the initial court application process. Our role is clinical. Your agency’s legal counsel is the right resource for navigating the court proceedings.

If the family is concerned about the cost of a lawyer, they may be eligible for support through Legal Aid Ontario.

Phone: 1-800-668-8258

Website: legalaid.on.ca

We encourage you to share this with families early in the process.

7. The Process: Step by Step

Here is the full sequence from first application through to admission:

1	A Program Application is submitted to Syl Apps Youth Centre (SAYC). Our team is available to consult with you before or after submission, including arranging a facility tour if helpful for the child and family.
2	SAYC internally reviews the application to assess eligibility. A pre-screening conversation may be offered.
3	If the child is found eligible, they are placed on the waitlist. Ontario has a limited number of secure beds, and waitlist times vary.
4	When a bed is soon to become available, a screening is offered, including the opportunity for the child and family to tour the facility and meet with SAYC staff.

5	A Program Acceptance Letter is issued. The applicant retains a lawyer to begin the court process.
6	The lawyer files the court application for a Secure Treatment Order (STO).
7	The Office of the Children’s Lawyer (OCL) appoints an independent lawyer for the child, who meets with them privately.
8	Evidence is submitted to the court, including affidavits and clinical documentation.
9	Court hearings take place. The judge reviews the evidence and makes a decision.
10	If the Secure Treatment Order is granted, the child is admitted to Syl Apps Youth Centre for approximately 180 days.

8. Questions That Often Come Up

These are some of the questions and assumptions we hear most often from applicants and professionals:

People sometimes wonder...	Here is what is important to know:
<i>“Will Secure Treatment help resolve the child’s justice charges?”</i>	Secure Treatment is a mental health program, not part of the youth justice system. It is recommended that significant charges be resolved before the child enters the program.
<i>“Does the facility take care of the legal paperwork?”</i>	The legal application must be filed by the family, CAS, or physician and their lawyer. SAYC is not able to assist with legal filings or advice.
<i>“Does getting a Program Acceptance Letter mean admission is happening?”</i>	A Program Acceptance Letter is an important milestone, but admission cannot happen until a judge grants a Secure Treatment Order. Note: 30-day Emergency Admissions follow a different process and do not require a court order.
<i>“Does the physician just write a letter of support?”</i>	If the child is 16 or older and does not agree to treatment, the physician’s role is much more involved. They become the legal applicant and must file the application, testify in court, and retain their own legal representation.

<i>“Can the child stay in Secure Treatment long-term?”</i>	Secure Treatment is focused on treatment and stabilization, not long-term housing. Most orders are approximately 180 days. A discharge plan must be in place before admission begins.
<i>“Can Secure Treatment be used because there are no other placements available?”</i>	Secure Treatment cannot be used to address placement scarcity or system capacity issues. It must meet specific legal and clinical criteria. Helping families understand this early reduces distress and sets realistic expectations.

9. What to Gather Before Applying

Having the right documentation in place before submitting an application helps the process move more smoothly and supports a stronger referral. Here is what is helpful to have ready:

- Clinical documentation, such as assessments or formal diagnoses
- A summary of the child’s safety history and risk concerns
- Medical and immunization records, including the child’s health card
- Hospital records, if applicable
- An understanding of the legal criteria for Secure Treatment
- A plan for legal representation
- An identified discharge plan, where the child will live and who will support them after treatment ends
- Clarification on any outstanding Youth Justice matters
- Supporting documentation from other service providers involved with the child, such as mental health agencies, probation officers, or children’s aid

10. What Strengthens a CAS Application?

When CAS is the applicant, the quality and framing of documentation matters significantly. Courts look for evidence that is clinical and clearly linked to the legal criteria. Here is what tends to make an application stronger:

Strong applications tell a clear clinical story, one that connects the child’s mental health needs to a documented, persistent pattern of serious safety risk, and shows that less intensive supports have genuinely been tried.

- A diagnosed or clearly identified mental disorder, supported by clinical documentation.
- Evidence of a repeated, persistent risk of serious bodily harm that is linked to mental health symptoms, not solely to behaviour, environment, or placement instability.
- A clear record showing that less restrictive interventions were attempted and were not sufficient to maintain safety.
- Clinical assessments from qualified professionals (such as psychiatry, psychology, or hospital records) that directly support the risk conclusions.
- A clearly identified discharge plan, including confirmed post-order housing and supports.

11. How to Apply and Reach Us

The Program Application for SAYC Secure Treatment is available on the Kinark website:

www.kinark.on.ca/forensic-mental-health-youth-justice/

We are here to support you

Whether you are exploring whether Secure Treatment is appropriate for a child on your caseload, or you are already partway through the process, please do not hesitate to contact our Intake team. You do not need to have everything in place before reaching out.

- Email: saycintake@kinark.on.ca
- Phone: 905-844-4110 ext. 2210

Our team can provide consultation on program fit, eligibility questions, and process steps. Please note that we are not able to provide legal advice or support with court applications. Your agency's legal counsel is the right resource for that part of the process.

The child and families you work with are going through something deeply difficult.

Your role in this process, connecting them to the right support, helping them feel informed, and advocating for their needs, matters enormously. We are grateful to work alongside professionals who are committed to the wellbeing of young people, and we are here to support you every step of the way.