

Secure Treatment in Ontario:

A Guide for Family- Initiated Applications

*A resource to help you
understand the program, the
steps involved, and what to
expect along the way.*



A note before you begin:

If you are reading this guide, you are likely navigating one of the most difficult periods of your family’s life. Seeking support for a young person in crisis takes courage, and we want to support you as best we can.

This guide is meant to help you understand what Secure Treatment is, what the process looks like, and what to expect at each step. Please do not hesitate to reach out at any point.

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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 not a punishment. It is a clinical intervention within 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 families often wonder about:

- **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 at the same time, Secure Treatment is a health and mental health intervention, not a legal consequence. If your child has significant active youth justice charges, it is generally recommended those be resolved before entering the program. The child's legal representative can help navigate this.

- **Is this a permanent placement?**

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

Thinking ahead about what comes next

Before your child can be admitted, there needs to 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. Our team can help you think through this.

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 be true:

Other supports 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 things like:

- 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 worrying on their own. The risk must meet a specific legal standard related to a mental disorder. If you're unsure whether your child's situation meets this threshold, our Intake team is happy to talk it through with you.

3. Two Application Processes

There are two separate applications involved in getting a child into Secure Treatment, and they serve very different purposes. Many families 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 your 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 reviews the referral, including the child's clinical history, safety concerns, and what has already been tried2. Eligibility is assessed3. If eligible, the child is placed on a waitlist. There are a limited number of secure beds in Ontario, so waitlist times vary4. When a bed is soon to become available, a Program Acceptance Letter is issued5. The family, CAS worker, or physician then begins the separate court process

You don't have to figure this out alone.

If you have questions before or after submitting your application, or if you're not sure whether Secure Treatment is right for your child, our team is happy to discuss with you. We can arrange a phone call or a tour of the facility so you can get a sense of the environment and ask any questions you may have. Reach out to us anytime.

Please keep in mind: receiving a Program Acceptance Letter is an important milestone, but it does not mean your child will be admitted yet. Admission can only happen after 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 your 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> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A parent, guardian, or CAS can file <p>Age 16 or older, and agreeing to treatment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A parent, guardian, or CAS can file	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. You receive the Bed Offer Letter from Syl Apps Youth Centre2. The applicant retains a lawyer3. The lawyer files the Secure Treatment Order (STO) application. The applicant's lawyer is responsible for notifying the Office of the Children's Lawyer (OCL) once the application is filed4. The child is assigned their own independent lawyer through the OCL

Age 16 or older, and not agreeing to treatment:

- A physician must be the one to file the application

5. Evidence is gathered and submitted (such as affidavits and clinical documents)
6. Court hearings take place and the judge makes a decision
7. If the order is granted, the child is admitted to Syl Apps Youth Centre

A few important things to know about the court process:

- *If your child has significant active Youth Justice charges, those may need to be resolved before admission can happen.*
- *The judge will review 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 your situation involves a 30-day Emergency Admission, the process is different and does not require a court order. Please speak with our team if this applies to you.*

4. Age and Your Youth's Voice

Whatever the child's age, their voice matters in this process. Here is how age and their wishes shape what happens:

Children under 16

For children under 16, their agreement to treatment is not a legal requirement, but that does not mean their feelings and wishes are ignored. They will have the opportunity to meet with a lawyer from the Office of the Children's Lawyer (OCL), whose job is to listen to your 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 they do not want treatment, especially when the safety concerns are significant. A physician is not required to be the legal applicant for youth under 16. The court application can be filed by a parent, guardian, or Children's Aid Society (CAS).

Children 16 and older

For children who are 16 or older, their wishes carry more legal weight in this process.

- If a child agrees to treatment: a parent, guardian, or CAS can file the court application
- If a 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

A child's perspective is taken seriously at every stage of this process, regardless of their age. The OCL lawyer's role is specifically to make sure their voice is heard, not just by the court, but throughout the process.

5. Legal Representation

The court process involves legal steps that require proper legal support. We know this can feel overwhelming, especially on top of everything else you are already managing. Here is what you 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
- If Children's Aid Society (CAS) is involved, their legal team should be brought in early, the evidentiary threshold for the court is significant
- Physicians applying on behalf of youth 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)

Once the application is filed the child will have their own lawyer — at no cost to you

After the Court Application is filed, the child will automatically be assigned an independent lawyer through the Office of the Children’s Lawyer (OCL). This is provided at no cost to your family and 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. This ensures they have their own independent voice, separate from yours, and separate from the system’s.

What our team at Syl Apps Youth Centre cannot do

We want to be clear about this so there are no surprises: Syl Apps Youth Centre is not able to provide legal advice, file court documents on your behalf, or take part in the court application process. Our role is clinical, we are here to support the child’s mental health and treatment, not to navigate the legal proceedings. Your lawyer is the right person to guide you through that process.

Worried about the cost of a lawyer?

If retaining private legal counsel is not financially possible for your family, you may be eligible for support through Legal Aid Ontario. We encourage you to contact them early in the process.

Phone: 1-800-668-8258

Website: legalaid.on.ca

6. The Process: Step by Step

Here is the full journey from first application to admission. Every family’s path will look a little different, but this gives you a sense of what to expect:

- 1** Submit a Program Application to Syl Apps Youth Centre (SAYC). Not sure if this is the right step? Our team is available to answer questions and, if helpful, can arrange a phone call or a tour of the facility before or after you apply.
- 2** SAYC reviews the application internally to assess eligibility. A pre-screening conversation with our team may be offered.

3	If your youth is found eligible, they are placed on our waitlist. We know waiting is hard. We will be in touch as things progress.
4	When a bed is soon to become available, we will reach out to arrange a screening. This includes the chance to tour the facility and meet with our staff — so you and your youth can see the space and ask questions.
5	A Program Acceptance Letter is issued. The applicant then 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 your youth, who will meet 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, your youth is admitted to Syl Apps Youth Centre for approximately 180 days.

7. Questions Families Often Ask

It is completely natural to come into this process with questions, worries, and assumptions. Here are some of the things families often wonder about:

Families sometimes wonder...	Here is what we want you to know:
<i>“Will Secure Treatment help resolve my child’s justice charges?”</i>	Secure Treatment is a mental health program, not part of the youth justice system. While both can be happening at the same time in some cases, it is generally recommended that significant charges be resolved before your youth enters the program.

<p><i>“Does the facility take care of the legal paperwork?”</i></p>	<p>Our team is here to support your child clinically, but the legal application must be filed by the family, CAS, or physician along with their own lawyer. We are not able to assist with legal filings or advice.</p>
<p><i>“Does getting accepted to the program mean my child is going in?”</i></p>	<p>A Program Acceptance Letter is a really important step, but admission cannot happen until a judge grants a Secure Treatment Order. We will be with you through that next phase too. Note: 30-day Emergency Admissions follow a different path and do not require a court order.</p>
<p><i>“Does the doctor just write a note to support the application?”</i></p>	<p>If your 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 have their own legal representation.</p>
<p><i>“Will my child be able to stay there long-term?”</i></p>	<p>Secure Treatment is focused on treatment and stabilization, not long-term housing. Most orders are around 180 days. That is why having a discharge plan in place before admission is so important, it helps everyone work toward a supported transition from the start.</p>
<p><i>“Can Secure Treatment be used because there are no other options available right now?”</i></p>	<p>We understand how desperate it can feel when support options seem limited. However, Secure Treatment cannot be used to fill a gap in available placements. It must meet specific legal and clinical criteria related to safety and mental health needs.</p>

8. What to Gather Before Applying

Pulling together documentation can feel like a big task, especially when you are already stretched. Here is what will be helpful to have ready. If you are missing something or unsure, our Intake team can help guide you.

- Clinical documentation, such as assessments or formal diagnoses
- A summary of your child's safety history and any risk concerns
- Medical and immunization records, including your child's health card
- Hospital records, if applicable
- A general understanding of the legal criteria for Secure Treatment (our team can help with this)
- A plan for legal representation
- An identified discharge plan, where your child will live and who will support them after treatment
- Clarification on any outstanding Youth Justice matters
- Letters or documentation from other service providers involved with your child, such as mental health agencies, probation officers, or Children's Aid Society

9. 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 for you

Whether you have just started exploring this option or are well into the process, please don't hesitate to contact our Intake team. You do not need to have everything figured out before you call or write. We can help answer your questions, talk through whether Secure Treatment may be fit your child's needs, and support you in understanding each next step.

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

Please note that our team can offer information and guidance about the program and the process, but we are not able to provide legal advice or support with court applications. Your lawyer is the right resource for that part of the journey.