# From WAITLIST to Readiness

A Big Year of Response & Resilience

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25





#### **Our Vision**

Building resiliency and creating strong futures with children, youth, and their families in our communities.

#### **Our Mission**

We provide caring and compassionate support, education, and advocacy for children, youth, and their families in our communities as they journey through the criminal justice system.

#### **Our Values**

At Child Witness Centre, we are a team of compassionate and diverse members who utilize trauma-informed practices to provide tailored support to children, youth, and their families.

We are guided by the following values in all the work that we do: inclusivity, integrity, collaboration, respect, and resiliency.

# Our Impact in 2024-25

1,088 Children and Youth

**827** Caregivers

**3,142** Youth Symposium Participants

5,057 Lives Impacted



#### 2024-25 Board of Directors

Child Witness Centre is guided by a dedicated and experienced Board of Directors who provide strategic leadership, financial oversight, and a steadfast commitment to our mission. Thank you for your vision and governance that helps us respond to the complex needs of the children and youth we serve.

#### **Officers**

Kendra Abraham (Chair) Tomas Blazejowski (Vice-Chair) Alexis De Leon (Treasurer) Paula Fecteau (Secretary)

#### **Directors**

Bernadette Behm Manish Garg Reid Pridham (Past Chair) Lisa Goertz Ryan Selves
Lisa DeBaets Nicole Hobbs Ritu Singh
Matthew Demarte Danny Joseph Chris Warden

#### **Land Acknowledgement**

At Child Witness Centre, we seek to honour the land on which our successes have been built, and the Indigenous peoples who have been living on and caring for this land for thousands of years. Find our full land acknowledgement at: childwitness.com/land-acknowledgement/



# The Past Year for Child Witness Centre was Remarkable

In 2022, we faced a heartbreaking reality: a waitlist emerged for the very first time, something we had always worked tirelessly to prevent. An increase in referrals, coupled with limited resources, meant some of the most vulnerable children in our community were left waiting for critical support.

Thanks to your generosity, and through increased funding from both government and community sources, we were able to eliminate the waitlist in March of 2025!

Every child who needs help is now receiving it – without any delay. This is more than a program milestone. It is a powerful reflection of our community's values: that no child should ever have to face the justice system alone.

Our staff and multi-disciplinary team have held space for **countless stories**, honouring the truth of each child and helping them and their families begin to move forward and rebuild their lives. Their strength inspires everything we do.

The financial recovery that enabled this achievement was **made possible by you** – our generous donors and

champions, as well as the relentless efforts of our development and financial teams. Growing our budget to meet this urgent need required boldness, perseverance, and unwavering belief in our mission. And while celebrating this win, we also humbly accept the fragility of our economy and political environment.

Coordinated lobbying efforts have helped grow our government funding from **53%** of our total revenue last year to **61%** this year. Much of that growth came through competitively secured grants for project-based work. Notably, we also received a **\$35,000** 



**Kendra Abraham**Board Chair

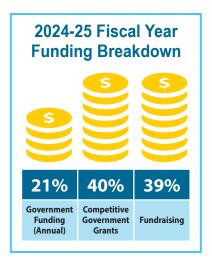


Robin Heald
Executive Director

increase in annualized funding from the Ministry of the Attorney General – support we are sincerely grateful for.

However, because our overall budget has grown at a faster rate to meet the community demand, the proportion of annualized government funding actually declined slightly – from **22%** to **21%**. This highlights the ongoing challenge of securing stable, long-term funding to match the increasing need.

Your amazing partnership has made it possible for us to return to providing timely, compassionate, and professional support to young people and their families, from the moment they are referred to our services. We are profoundly grateful for the kindness and generosity of our



donors, funders, and community which has sustained our mission for **over 43 years**.

This past year, **more than 1,000** local young survivors and their families received our life-changing supports. The difference it made is already evident – and the ripple effects of healing and resilience will continue for many years to come. The impact of being truly seen, heard, and supported by our team will remain in the hearts of those we serve for decades.

The work is far from over. We've built the capacity and now must protect it. We will need to continue to roll up our sleeves and face the inevitable challenges with tenacity.

We move forward with hope, knowing that together, we're making a real and lasting difference in the lives of local children and youth. That knowledge makes every effort worthwhile.

— Kendra & Robin

# Together, We're Changing Lives for Brighter Futures

The work we do plays a vital role in shaping brighter futures for the children, youth, and families we serve. None of this would be possible without the unwavering generosity of our supporters. The feedback below is a powerful reminder of the impact we're making together, and how we're building a stronger, more connected community.

"I am beyond
thankful my Caseworker
sat with me at the courthouse and
helped me when I needed to remember
to breathe. Having Monet beside me
was even better. They gave me the
confidence I needed to carry myself
through testifying."

Client

"I was moved by how the
Centre felt like a welcoming
and comfortable space. I appreciate
how my child felt respected, and was
spoken with directly, instead of feeling like
adults were talking about him as though
he wasn't there. He was very much a part
of the process in a way that I think was
empowering for him."

Caregiver

# Waterloo Region Courthouse | Palais

"My caseworker helped me feel comfortable and knowledgeable during the whole process. She answered every question I had, no matter what it was. Every child who is a victim/witness to a crime should have access to their programs."

Client

"You were there for me when I needed it most. I can't thank you enough for all that you did."

Client

"Nothing like this ever happened to us before and we were lost. When the caseworker called and explained the process, it made me feel so much better. She was always there when we had a question and made the whole thing bearable."

Caregiver

# Helping Child Victims Heal & Move Forward

While the criminal justice system may **not** be designed with children in mind – **we are!** This past year, we provided trauma-informed support to **1,088** children and youth victims and witnesses – covering the spectrum from the time of criminal investigation, through to a court resolution. The majority of cases involved abuse or violence, which meant a critical need for healing and mental wellness support. We also supported **827** caregivers, providing them with resources, strategies, and tools to better help their child.

#### > Eliminating the Waitlist: A Major Milestone

In late 2022, we were forced to **start a waitlist** that prevented us from immediately supporting all children referred to our services. We knew delays would mean heightened anxiety, missed court preparation, and prolonged trauma. That's why we launched our big five-year fundraising campaign, "Child Victims Can't Wait", in 2023 – to overcome this crisis.

Thanks to new funding, amazing donors, expanded staffing, and process improvements, we **eliminated** the waitlist two and a half years after it began. Now, every referred child and their family can promptly begin **the pathway to healing** (shown right).

#### A Few Keys to Our Collective Success



# More Staff = More Reach

We grew our team to handle growing need



#### Improved Triage System

Faster intake and tailored service delivery

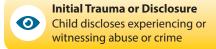


**CAN'T WAIT** 

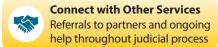
#### **Partnerships**

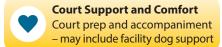
Collaboration with agency partners, Crown Attorneys, and schools

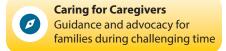
# The Pathway to Healing











**Fantastic coverage** about overcoming the waitlist was provided by CTV News Kitchener, Rogers TV Waterloo Region, Waterloo Region Record, CambridgeToday, CityNews AM 570 (Mike Farwell), and Bounce 99.5 FM (Angie Hill & Sarge)!







# Client Support Advancements

When supported, young survivors are set on a **far more positive trajectory** in their relationships, schooling, housing security, lifestyle choices, career success, and more. Here are some ways we're **strengthening** our supports towards greatest outcomes.





#### > New! Client Education Videos

When a child or youth has been a victim or witness of abuse or crime, it can be an overwhelming and confusing time for them and their families. Sometimes it's simply the unknown about the future that generates anxiety. That's why we produced these videos – to instill greater confidence and understanding of what might be ahead. A big thank you to **Astley Family Foundation** for making these resources possible. Together, we're equipping survivors towards positive mental health and wellbeing.



Check out the client education videos at: childwitness.com/client-ed-videos/

# > Developing Our Counselling Supports

One of the biggest challenges our clients face is lacking immediate access to mental health supports and counselling. To help bridge this gap, with the help of funding from the **Ontario Trillium Foundation**, we are developing in-house, brief counselling services – with plans to pilot the program in the fall of 2025. This will allow youth to receive timely support while waiting for longer-term care, easing pressure on community services and addressing a critical need.



# > Guns & Gangs Training

We collaborated with Waterloo Regional Police Service to provide gun and gang violence training at University of Waterloo on December 4, 2024. Our team, some of our partners, and guests heard from several insightful speakers – including survivors of sex trade work, gang life, and gender-based violence. Thank you to the **Ministry of the Attorney General** for providing funds towards this amazing knowledge sharing. (Views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Province of Ontario.)

#### > Technology Improvements for Efficiencies

Thanks to some year-end granting from **Department of Justice Canada**, we were able to consolidate our client files into one new database. This will save our team valuable time inputting data and creating reports, while retaining utmost privacy. Our frontline staff will use it to seamlessly support our clients from beginning to end in our services.

# Child & Youth Advocacy Centre (CYAC) of Waterloo Region

We are proud to be the lead of this **child and youth friendly** collaborative, focused on providing wraparound support under one roof during criminal investigations and beyond. Our role is to provide oversight of the CYAC and services through our Child and Youth Advocate Program. **Together**, the strong multidisciplinary team supported **838** children and youth involved in **540** criminal investigations last year alone. **311** of them received support from one of our System Navigators during investigations.

## > Enhancing our Services

We were successful in our application to National Service Dogs to obtain a second accredited facility dog to work with the children and youth who access services at the CYAC. Our first facility dog, Monet, has been with us since March of 2020. Her impact with clients in the judicial process has been simply amazing. We're hopeful our second dog will join our team by the end of 2025. They will provide an invaluable additional layer of support to victims who must share about their abuse with police and child protection services.



**Child and Youth Advocacy Centres Canada** (CYACC) is a newly formed organization that will unify and elevate the work of CYACs across our country. We're delighted to be a founding member! The association will help by providing training, resources, and accreditation standards. It will also serve as a hub for policy development and government advocacy efforts. Stay tuned for more to come!

**As an agency with over 40 years of experience** responding to gender-based violence cases, we've scaled up our mentoring of other CYAC agencies launching Child Witness Programs in their regions across Ontario.

#### > Growing Impact

As a partner in the Family Violence Project (FVP) of Waterloo Region, we have added a new referral intake point, in seeking to foster more upstream prevention. Working with Waterloo Regional Police Service and Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region, we now support young witnesses of conflict in the home prior to charges being laid. Through this early intervention, we can provide guidance and resources on staying safe in a home where conflict may escalate. We can also connect them with services to reduce the possibility of the cycle of violence continuing.

It was wonderful being part of FVP's Learning Symposium on December 5, 2024. Through informative panel discussions and booths for FVP partner agencies, attendees learned more about the justice system and supports available for children.





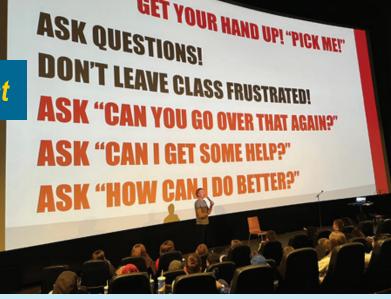
WATERLOO REGION





# 2024 Youth Symposium Impact

In a world that presents many challenges, our next generation needs our help more than ever. That's what made it **wonderful** to be back for the **17**<sup>th</sup> **annual edition** of this very exciting and unique multi-day program, after being forced to cancel since the 16<sup>th</sup> edition in 2019.



The 2024 edition of Youth Symposium was run from Tuesday, April 16 to Thursday, April 18. A total of **over 3,000** grade 8 students and teachers from **almost 50** local schools attended at Galaxy Cineplex Cinemas in Guelph (day one) and Waterloo (days two and three).

#### > What Took Place

Students and teachers heard from some of the best speakers in the country for youth audiences. This amazing line-up delivered powerful messages on a variety of important life topics, all in the spirit of spurring these youth onto great success in high school and beyond!

Presentation themes included dreaming BIG, goal setting, anti-bullying, healthy dating, abstaining from drugs, resiliency, inclusion, accountability, and more. There was a significant focus on the physical, emotional, and mental health of students, as they prepare to begin high school.

Students also learned how Child Witness Centre can support them through the justice system if they are ever a victim or witness of abuse or crime.



The difference that the Youth Symposium can make in the lives of youth is priceless – and will surely have a long-term ripple effect in our community. A lot of glowing feedback received from students and teachers speaks to how they've been equipped with confidence, inspiration, and empowerment to thrive – both now and well into the future.



"What I learned is don't let failures stop you from trying new things. Don't base your decisions on others' opinions. Do what you want even if it might not be cool."



"This is so valuable for students – someone other than their parents or teachers, reaching them at their level, and inspiring them to think and act differently."







While many of our staff were key to making the program happen, we couldn't do it alone! We're so grateful for the help of a large crew of volunteers and partners. This incredible program is also only made possible by the support of several generous sponsors.

# Outreach Accelerated

Our renewed commitment to **outreach** and **prevention** initiatives was met with success this past year! **Each opportunity** brings many benefits, including increased awareness of our services, stronger community interaction and engagement, and meaningful connections with youth.

These proactive efforts not only inform, but also serve as early prevention. Issues are addressed before they escalate, helping youth feel supported and fostering a sense of belonging in the community. Outreach has included presentations in schools, places of worship, service clubs, and more. One particularly impactful presentation inspired two new volunteers to join us in advancing our mission!

# We provide support, education and advocacy for children and youth who are or may become victims or witnesses of above or crime Fostering heal Wellbeing

May 11, 2024: Rebecca (on left) and Kaitlin (on right) with Monet at the Waterloo Regional Police Service Open House. They were happy to talk about our work with many individuals and families who stopped by.

# **Volunteer Support Shines**

Our volunteers are **vital** to the vibrancy of our organization. **Every minute** they give strengthens our impact – whether they're raising funds, supporting events, offering administrative help, contributing professional expertise, or something else.

Special thanks to Ken who maintains our space as our handy-person extraordinaire and Carl as the caretaker of our yard and spirits. Our office volunteers, Angie, Nadiia, and Wendy spent countless hours caring for our space, making it homey and welcoming for our clients.



**June 21, 2024:** Professionals from Equitable came to volunteer their time and expertise to explore our marketing and communications initiatives.

In our 2024-25 fiscal year, we had a total of **67 volunteers** donate their time and talents. **More than 4,250 hours** were contributed to our programs, services, and events – supporting everything from cutting our grass to community outreach.

We are **very thankful** for the compassion, energy, and commitment of every volunteer and board member. Without them, our jobs would be harder and we would have fewer minutes with our clients. For that, we are **endlessly grateful**.

# Community Involvement

We love being active in this amazing community! Here are some of the events we were part of during the past year.



June 2024: Together with some special guests, we had a lot of fun celebrating Monet's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday at Global Pet Foods in Waterloo.



August 2024: Laura Cook (far left) and Monet were part of the judges panel at Waterloo Ribfest.



October 2024: Walked a few kilometres at Waterloo Park for National Service Dogs' 4th Annual Paws in Motion Fundraiser.



**September 2024:** Participated in the United Way Waterloo Region Communities' March of 1,000 Umbrellas. Walked from Waterloo City Hall to Kitchener City Hall.



November 2024: Championed women's rights and ending gender-based violence at Zonta Club of Kitchener-Waterloo's community gathering.

# **Growing in Truth and Reconciliation**



**August 2024:** The Healing of The Seven Generations' Annual Canoe Day on the Grand River.



**September 2024:** The Healing of The Seven Generations' Every Child Matters walk in Kitchener.



**February 2025:** We organized a march in honour of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People.



**March 2025:** Visit to Crow Shield Lodge, including an intimate knowledge-sharing circle.

# Robin and Her Family Share *Their Survivor Story*

**Content warning:** This subject matter could be triggering for some individuals. Themes include child abuse, sexual assault, family violence, and suicide. Please exercise discretion and take care of yourself.

#### > A Glimpse into The Source of My Passion for Our Services

**Beginning before the age of five,** and continuing **for over a decade,** I was sexually, physically, and emotionally abused at home.

Children's Aid Society was involved during those years after the abuse was disclosed by my oldest sister to them. They were the organizational resource offered to my



family, but no charges were laid at that time, even though each of my siblings and I spoke our truths.

Our offender – my stepfather – was never removed from the home, or arrested, until much later when we pressed charges ourselves and no longer lived there.

The system at that time was underfunded and poorly trauma-informed. The care implemented for us was family group therapy with both my mother and stepfather present. This well-intended therapeutic endeavour increased our trauma. When we spoke the truth, we were penalized after the session. Only one child sexual abuse therapy group was available due to a cash strapped and completely inadequate system, and I was the only one of us that was able to attend. My sisters were not offered this resource. At no time during my family's court journey were we offered testimonial supports, advocacy, remote testimony, a therapy dog, or referrals. This has had an impact on our outcomes and the length of our survivorship journeys.

This wasn't my only experience with the justice system growing up. In grade five in 1979, I was serving as a child crossing guard when a repeat sexual offender released from jail approached me. There was no direct harm but I reported it, and navigated the terrifying judicial process as a witness, which resulted in the repeat offender being jailed once again. I navigated this process with the support of one police officer and the Crown. As kind and courteous as they were, they were not trauma informed, and it was a terrifying and traumatic experience. No counselling was offered, nor victim supports or referrals. I did not have an advocate, a support dog, or any other professional on my side.

No child or youth and their caregiver(s) should ever have to journey through the judicial system alone. The outcomes for traumatized families are dependent on the services that our agency and wraparound team can provide. I know personally that the results of trauma can range dramatically from the tragedy of suicide to the triumph of a thriving life.

Adequate resources are vital to move forward with healing and wellbeing. Immediate and strong support can make all the difference in the world.

It is because of my experiences that I'm so **passionate** about our child victim services. Together, we are truly changing lives and ending the cycle of harm. "It ends with me."

We are grateful for **CBC's coverage** of Robin and her family's lived experience.

Find the very powerful podcast and corresponding article, plus a video message from Robin, at this link:

www.childwitness.com/robin-survivor-story/







# **Employee Milestones** *Reached*



#### > Laura Cook: 25 Years at Child Witness Centre

March 6, 2000: A young lady who was fresh out of university started as the Administrative Assistant at our organization. A year and a half later, she moved into the role of **Caseworker** and never looked back.

For **over two decades**, Laura Cook has been pouring herself into the healing, wellbeing, and resiliency of kids and families in the criminal justice system! As a

**trauma-informed professional,** she helps them prepare to testify and attends court with them – often bringing along our facility dog Monet as her sidekick.



Laura, thank you for who you are and the amazing work you do for our community!



#### > Linda Mark: Women of the Year Award Nominations

May 23, 2024: We are so proud that Linda Mark, Development Manager, was a nominee for **two** categories at Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest's 2024 Rogers Women of the Year Awards. They were Professional (40+) and Lifetime Achievement.

It was **wonderful** spending an evening celebrating Linda's many years of impact for young survivors!

Linda joined Child Witness Centre in September of 2003. Our organization and community are stronger and healthier because of her accomplishments.



Linda, your passion, talents, hard work, and mentorship are inspirational to many of us!

# **Our Doors Opened**

It was fantastic holding **Open House events** at our two locations in Kitchener in 2024! Our doors were open at the **Child and Youth Advocacy Centre** on Tuesday, May 14 (top right photo) and our **main office** on Wednesday, November 13 (bottom right photo).

At both events, there was a kind and generous spirit in the air, in **coming together** for local young victims and their families! We were pleased to provide visitors with tours of our spaces and a greater understanding of our supports for those who are facing incredible adversity.

A big thank you to everyone who joined us, – which included many donors, funders, partners, volunteers, and supporters!





# Fundraising Events **Success**

#### > 2025 Pancake Lunch

March 4, 2025: It was wonderful for our team to welcome over 375 attendees at St. George Banquet Hall on Shrove Tuesday! The fun included a delicious meal, silent auction, and 50/50 draw! We are delighted that over \$58,000 was raised to support local child victims.



A huge **thank you** to everyone who sponsored, bought tickets, donated, and otherwise provided their support! Our **27**<sup>th</sup> **annual** signature event simply wouldn't have been successful without you. Special thanks to top sponsors: Stanley Park Optimists, WaterloolT, Septimatech, Toyota Motor Manufacturing Canada Inc., and Knell's.



## > 1,000 Challenge Fundraiser

**September 17, 2024:** A celebration took place at Victoria Park Pavilion in Kitchener for all that was accomplished through our 1,000 Challenge fundraiser! **Over \$25,600** was raised through the generosity of participants, businesses, and sponsors, to help wipe out our waitlist. **Thank you** for your awesome support!

# > Fundraising Events Held by Supporters

We are grateful for these incredible events in support of young survivors and their families.



Barranca Boutique Salon's "Speed Styling for Charity" event \$1,377 in June 2024



Widows Sons Grand River Chapter's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Charity Ride \$2,575 in August 2024



IBEW Local 804's
Charity Golf Tournament
\$1,975 in September 2024



Little Mushroom Catering's
Tapas & Trivia Night
\$227 in November 2024



18th Annual Elvis Birthday Show (run by Shon & Tammy Carroll) \$3,165 in January 2025



Big Bliss Hot Yoga and Cyclone Spin's Studio Health Challenge \$553 in February 2025

# **Community Generosity**

## > Kitchener Rangers & Rangers Reach

March 2025: The Kitchener Rangers and Rangers Reach are donating \$90,000 to Child Witness Centre over a span of three years! This comes as we strive to **grow** our financial strength and capacity to meet the demand for our services, and avoid the return of a waitlist. We are **grateful** for this incredible community-minded hockey club and all who help make their generosity possible!





May Court Club of Kitchener-Waterloo \$850 in April 2024



Artshine
Arts and craft kits
in April 2024



100 Realtors Who Care Waterloo Region \$10,000 in June 2024



Zonta Club of Kitchener-Waterloo \$9,000 in October 2024



City of Guelph \$5,500 grant and tickets to a Guelph Storm game in 2024



Woodhouse Group: Larry Kelly Christmas Toy Drive Wonderful gifts in December 2024

#### **Endowment Fund**

Thanks to the vision and generosity of Jim Balsillie and Heidi Henschel, sustaining our mission is more achievable. Their support helped us establish our **endowment fund** at Waterloo Region Community Foundation, which provides a reliable source of annual revenue. We are celebrating the growth in this fund **from \$62,000 to \$77,000** this past year – with a long-term vision of growing it to \$3 million, to generate 10% of our annual revenue. This would ensure sustainable funding to allow our team to focus on what matters most: supporting young victims. With the foundation laid, **we invite you to join us** in making this vision reality.

Learn more: childwitness.com/our-endowment-fund/



# 2024-25 Financials Overview



**Alexis De Leon Board Treasurer** 

# > Treasurer's Report

Thanks to the generosity of our community, Child Witness Centre ended the year in a strong financial position. This stability allowed us to meet growing demand and expand access to support for children and youth.

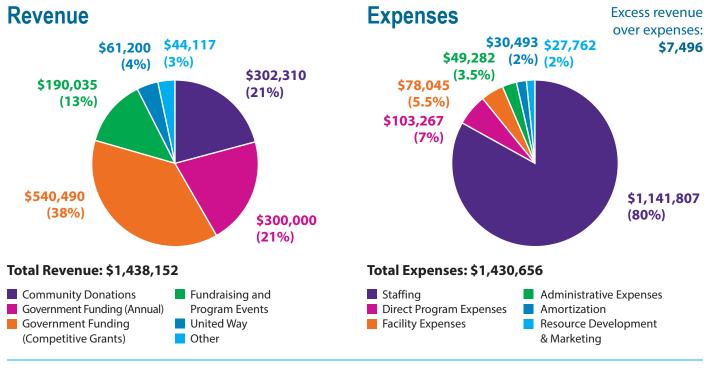
In 2024–25, revenue increased by more than \$244,000 over the previous year. A significant portion of that growth came from expanded government support, including both core funding and competitive grants. These resources are one of the reasons we were able to eliminate the waitlist for service. This makes it possible for every referred child to receive

trauma-informed support during some of the most difficult moments in their lives. This milestone reflects the trust our donors, funders, and partners place in us, and the care we take in managing those contributions.

We remain committed to strong financial stewardship and transparency. Every dollar is used with intention and directed where it can have the greatest impact. That impact is seen in the transformed lives of children and youth navigating the justice system after experiencing abuse or violence.

We are deeply grateful to our donors, funders, partners, supporters, and volunteers. Your generosity, trust, and dedication make our work possible. Every contribution, whether financial, in-kind, or through time and expertise, helps us expand our reach and deepen our impact. Together, we are building a stronger, more inclusive community, and we thank you for being an essential part of this journey.

Our 2024–25 audited financial statements can be found at: childwitness.com/annual-financial-reports

































Your support means hope, safety, and understanding for young people at one of the most vulnerable moments in their lives. Together, we're building a community where every child's voice is heard and every step forward is supported.

# Thank You for Standing With Us!

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