

Home daycare providers service 'vital' need in community^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Lea Shivts' Niagara Falls home is an oasis for kids, with colourful murals on the walls, a tiny little Chihuahua to pat, books on everything from dinosaurs and minerals, games, antique toys and mountains of arts and craft supplies using environmentally friendly materials such as stones, sticks, feathers and pieces of pasta and string.

But mostly unseen to the kids are an array of safety features not seen in typical homes: her cleaning supplies are securely locked up, the doors have locks above adult shoulder level, and each exterior door is rigged with alarms that screech if doors are opened.

As one of about 73 home child care providers contracted by the Regional Municipality of Niagara's licensed home child care program, Shivts must abide by strict safety standards governed by provincial legislation. Every month, home child care support workers from the Region make unannounced visits to ensure everything is in compliance and to provide ongoing support and resources.

The Region is one of two licensed home child care agencies in Niagara to contract home child care providers. It covers providers of care to children whose parents qualify for subsidized child care, while Wee Watch licensed home child care program contracts providers for both subsidized and full-fee families.

Helen Lake, manager of home child care with the Region's children's services department, said providers like Shivts play a crucial role in allowing families who might not be otherwise able to work to have a safe haven for their children.

Many provide care on weekends and overnight when most child care centres are closed, which is vital in a region like Niagara where tourism and retail jobs often require off-peak hour care, she said.

"For families working shifts or on-call, it provides a valuable service," said Lake. "It services a vital need in our community."

Right now, the Region needs about 10 to 15 more home child care providers in communities such as Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Welland, Fort Erie and Grimsby. While people looking to provide regular day hour care are always welcome, Lake said there's a particular need right now for off-peak hour care.

Many people don't realize home care can be a rewarding career, said Lake: it pays \$40 per day per child for regular day hours — it can pay even better for overnight care — and up to six children under age 13 can be in the house. This includes no more than two children under the age of two years at any time, including the providers' own children. The province also provides up to \$20 extra per house per day.

"It can be a good career choice," said Lake.

Legal requirements include completion of required documentation, policy reviews, criminal background checks of adults including frequent visitors, an interview, a fire inspection, liability insurance, standard first aid and infant/ child CPR, any pets being inoculated, inaccessible cleaning supplies and locked up medications, being smoke-free and attending a couple of workshops a year.

But Lake said new care providers don't go it alone: the Region can provide help with startup costs, with ongoing support and also finding children in need of child care.

"It's a very supportive process," she said. "We're very open and willing to answer any questions that anybody might have."

Lake said parents using licensed home day care have the peace of mind knowing there are multiple levels of security features and rules in place.

"It's reassuring to know you have all these standards in place," she said. "It gives parents that confidence."

The Region also offers parents of children in child care who want it to access to a resource consultant who can help develop goal plans and/or make referrals to partner agencies providing services such as speech and language therapy or mental health assistance during crucial early development years.

Shivts is proud of the fact the children she takes care of love coming to her home: one girl she cared for year ago in Toronto still makes the trek to see her in Niagara Falls.

"They become like family," she said, spending time with Afrah Parmar, a nine-year-old Mary Ward Catholic School student in her care.

"She likes my hot sandwiches, right?" Shivts says.

Afrah, nodding eagerly and smiling in-between eating grapes, confirms. "We make cookies too," she said.

Shivts, who won an award of excellence from the Region last year, said having a home day care business was a "dream" she had. "I love everything about it," she said. "I love kids very much."

Lake said Shivts exemplifies the home-like environment that the providers create for children.

"We're very proud of our providers and their commitment to our work," she said.

The Region is hosting an informal home child care expo in the atrium at regional headquarters kitty corner from Brock University on Nov. 3 from 10 a.m. to noon and 6-8 p.m., where people considering becoming home day care providers can meet staff and ask questions.

-reprinted from Niagra This Week

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: regulated family child care ^[4]

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