

Big expansion for local child care: 510 more subsidized spaces ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Hundreds of local families will benefit from the sudden infusion of \$5.6 million in new money for child care in Windsor-Essex.

"This is really great news — this will allow more families to access licensed child care," says Debbie Cercone, executive director of housing and children's services for the City of Windsor, which manages early-years programs (funded primarily by the province) in Windsor and Essex County.

The \$5.6 million recently announced by the provincial government (\$3.47 million) and feds (\$2.17 million) amounts to a 16 per cent increase in the \$34 million the city normally gets to subsidize child care spaces for qualified lower-income families at licensed child care centres.

It translates into at least 510 more subsidized spaces for kids under the age of four, plus money to help keep non-subsidized child care affordable, provide more services for special needs kids and to entice child care operators to expand their services into the evenings and weekends, Cercone said Monday.

She said this area has few child care centres that offer extended hours, despite a big demand from parents who work shifts.

"We would really like to see that expand," she said, citing surveys of local families who say that the daytime hours are a "huge barrier" in them accessing child care.

"Child care operators close at 6 or 6:30 (p.m.) and (parents) work to seven or eight, so they don't access child care because it doesn't work for them."

For example, many local parents work afternoon or night shifts in manufacturing or nursing, she said.

"They need to have more flexibility in the hours that child care is operating, so we're going to encourage and see if there's opportunities in that area to see some expansion."

One of the few local day cares that offers extended hours is ABC Day Nursery. Cercone will be reporting to city council next month on her department's plans for how best to spend the new money to create spaces and expand hours and services.

Currently there are 4,296 subsidized spaces in Windsor-Essex. The total number of licensed spaces is more than 10,790, which is the number of spaces at daycares that have agreements with the City of Windsor. There are 1,828 children with special needs receiving supported child care.

Provincewide, about 20 per cent of pre-school children access child care. The government wants to see that number doubled in five years to 40 per cent, Cercone said. It's spending \$170 million this year, \$200 million next year, and a total of \$1.37 billion over the five years with a goal of creating 100,000 more spaces.

"The goal is to really allow more parents access to the education system and the employment world," Cercone said.

Another reason for increasing the number of licensed spaces is to shift more children away from unlicensed daycares, she said. Unlicensed daycares have come under increased scrutiny following the horrific heatstroke death of two-year-old Eva Ravikovich outside of an illegally-run daycare in the Toronto area four years ago. The owner of that daycare, Olena Panfilova, was supposed to be watching 35 children when the girl was left outside in a hot SUV.

"Certainly the Ministry (of Education) has taken that issue very, very seriously and really pushed the need to have licensed care," said Cercone.

There are about 60 licensed child care operators at 140 sites in the region. Fully or partly subsidized spaces are given to parents who qualify based on an income test. Go here for more information and to apply. Parents who qualify can pick out which daycare they want their child to go to, and if the city has an agreement with that daycare and there's a vacancy, the child can go there.

Without a subsidy, parents are paying an average of around \$45 a day, said Cercone, who said the new funding will also help keep those prices down.

-reprinted from Windsor Star

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