

# Interior cities wading carefully into child care studies <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

KELOWNA - With wait lists for daycare spaces stretching to a year or more, some parents are starting their search even before their child is born.

But there's no way of knowing how many more spaces are needed, or where or who will provide and staff them.

"They (parents) do sound quite desperate at times when they phone and they're in a bit of a panic to find child care," Melissa Hunt, Executive Director of Childhood Connections, told iNFOnews.ca. "When they start to do the search, they see there are wait lists and, for their preferred option there can be a year-long wait list. We'll have moms that come in pregnant thinking they have to get on a wait list because that's what they're hearing in the community."

Childhood Connections is also titled Okanagan Family and Child Care Society and is the agency that helps direct parents to child care providers in the Central Okanagan.

Hunt is also the chair of the Child Care Council of the Central Okanagan and will be helping with a proposed Central Okanagan study of daycare needs – if a \$100,000 grant is secured from the province.

Central Okanagan cities are making a joint application for funding but other Interior cities, such as Vernon and Kamloops, are making individual applications.

While it may seem that Hunt has all the answers to any child care questions that could be asked in the Central Okanagan, her data is based more on anecdotal information from parents and day care providers.

"We would really like a more in-depth assessment of child care, specifically what types of care is needed," Hunt said. "We have an informal view that it's definitely infant-toddler spaces that are needed, just from parents phoning us, but that's the only way we're able to gauge it. I don't think it's an accurate assessment of the need."

Hunt knows there are about 18,000 children up to the age of nine in the Central Okanagan and that, nationally, about 60 per cent of these children are in some kind of day care arrangement.

That would mean there needs to be almost 11,000 licenced spaces in the Central Okanagan. There are only 4,630.

"We know that, just from supporting families, there are just not enough child care spaces in Peachland and Lake Country for sure," Hunt said.

But, what she doesn't know is how many parents prefer daycare near where they live or would rather have it closer to work.

Because so many parents live in one Central Okanagan city and work in another – or work and live in different areas of Kelowna – the four municipalities joined forces in applying for the grant.

Each municipality (Peachland, West Kelowna, Kelowna and Lake Country) was eligible for a \$25,000 grant. By combining forces, they are applying for \$100,000 in order to hire a consultant to conduct the study.

Westbank First Nation and the unincorporated areas chose not to participate.

The Community Child Care Planning and Needs Assessment Grants are being offered to communities throughout B.C. and intended to not only do an inventory of needs and what spaces are available but to also serve as a catalyst for increasing the number of daycare spaces.

Since this work is being coordinated by the City of Kelowna, that got some local politicians concerned that this is just the start of an effort to download responsibility for daycare from the province to the municipalities.

"The knowledge and the data we're going to get from this collaborative work is absolutely essential and so important," Kelowna Mayor Colin Basran said last week as his council agreed to make the grant application. "But, like those of us who have been around this table for awhile know, there may be decisions made by other levels of government that people will come to us expecting us to fix. I think this is a

great example of one of those issues. And, so, I do have some hesitancy if this means that the City of Kelowna is going to be, potentially, constructing and operating child care facilities.”

Hunt agrees that’s a possibility as the province is offering a variety of programs to fund daycare spaces, including ones that are city-run or where cities partner with the private or non-profit sectors.

“I think the provincial government wants municipalities to get more engaged in child care,” she said. As an example, the City of Vancouver is levying Development Cost Charges on developers for daycare funding.

“If this is heading down the path where, suddenly, the City of Kelowna is a child care operator in a capacity above and beyond what we’re already doing, then we’re going to have to have a further conversation,” Basran said.

The city currently works with the school district on two day care programs at Watson Road and Bankhead elementary schools.

The other thing the study will look at, if funded, is the staffing of day care facilities.

Right now, there is a shortage of Early Childhood Educators so that some facilities, especially those providing spaces for infants and toddlers, can’t operate, Hunt said.

Part of the staffing shortage is due to low wages and high stress, she said.

Day care wages are about \$18 per hour and the government has funded some increases but, after going to school for two years to get a diploma, that kind of wage makes it hard to pay off student loans while facing the high cost of living in the Central Okanagan, she said.

The studies of child care needs are just part of the provincial government’s 10-year plan to provide affordable child care to B.C. families.

Part of the program started in September with subsidies that bring down the cost of day care. For families earning less than \$45,000 per year it can be free. Families earning \$60,000 to \$80,000 should average \$10 per day, the province says.

Daycares have to apply to the province in order to qualify for the subsidies and, Hunt said, most in the Central Okanagan have done so. There is a list of participating facilities on the province's website.

The 2018 provincial budget included \$1 billion over the first three years of the program.

A decision on what cities will get grants will be made within 90 days. Mariko Siggers, the city’s Community and Neighbourhood Services Manager who is overseeing the grant application, expects the study to take about a year to complete.

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**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[3]</sup>

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