

Five-year child care plan looking for more investment, spaces ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With a situation highlighting a 'dire need' on the surface, a Child Care and Early Services Plan was presented on Tuesday in the hopes of turning things around.

An ambitious five-year plan was presented to the Hastings County Community and Human Services Committee.

The 2019-2024 Child Care and Early Services Plan asks for greater accessibility and expansion of local childcare services in five communities -- Belleville, Quinte West, Tyendinage, Deseronto and North Hastings.

Beverly Bell-Rowbatham is the Children's Services Data Analysis Co-ordinator and she mentioned two specific numbers that were somewhat alarming regarding childcare in Hastings County.

"Almost forty percent of children in kindergarten are really struggling with at least one area of development.", said Bell-Rowbatham. "The fact that we have only fifteen percent of our children who have access to licensed care is a concern."

The provincial average of children with access to licensed childcare is twenty-two percent.

The near forty percent figure was determined through the Early Development Instrument -- a measurement of early childhood development of children in senior kindergarten done by teachers through a 100-plus question survey.

It is done every three years to determine a child's growth in five different areas: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development and communication skills and general knowledge.

Bell-Rowbatham suggested that more children have the opportunity to attend licensed childcare and EarlyON centres so an affected child can experience enhanced physical and emotional well-being.

She also stressed that a lack of both funding and childcare spaces go hand in hand in Hastings County.

"We have higher than average rates of child poverty -- we do not have enough childcare. Licensed childcare that provides quality early education services for children, so that's another piece of it that we think is very important."

Current daily rates for childcare in Hastings County range from 46 dollars for preschoolers to 70 dollars for infants.

The waitlists are also long: infant spaces have a list of 200 to 300 and the list for before and after school care is 'exploding'.

County Child Care Manager Cathy Utman said one sign of encouragement is a recent growth of six home-based licensed childcare services in Tyendinaga and Deseronto -- two communities highlighted in the report as childcare 'deserts'.

"Our home-based is doing very well. Again, they have exploded -- they have lots of new homes happening. But again, it depends on funding and we need more homes."

Childcare service expansion has also been happening through the Military Family Resource Centre in Batawa and North Hastings Child Services.

One option that was mentioned during Tuesday's presentation was partnering with the private sector -- in the form of new businesses

coming to North Hastings (Aero Pon Leaf Canada) and Belleville (Hexo and Costco) -- to work together in creating new childcare spaces in Hastings County.

In the end, Utman said the plan comes down to two things.

"The needs of our children and the fact that we have so much more employment coming to the area. We already have wait lists for childcare, so how do we support families so that they can go to work? What can we do? We need to expand our childcare across Hastings County."

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