

Penticton, B.C., parents scramble to find child care as city develops action plan ^[1]

Author: Thom, Shelby

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EXCERPTS

Erin Kugi is hanging on to hope a child care space will become available in Penticton, B.C., for her 14-month-old son Miles by the time she goes back to work in mid-September.

"We've been told it's a two year-plus wait list or even the wait lists are closed," Kugi told Global News on Tuesday.

As a backup plan, her husband will reduce his hours and work evenings to stay home with the toddler during the day as well as care for their six-year-old daughter Scarlett after school.

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"It will help with what the demand and what the challenges are specifically in the community and then we will use those to also identify some solutions and an action plan," said Adam Goodwin, the City of Penticton's social development specialist.

"All of the spaces in Penticton right now are full and so for families looking for new child care there is just not the availability for them," he said.

Child care operators say the root of the problem is a lack of qualified staff to fill all the licensed spaces available.

"The challenge is largely with the labour market," said Tanya Behardien, the executive director of OneSky Community Resources, which operates eight child care centres in the region.

"There are not enough early years professionals with the required credentials or degrees to meet licensing standards."

Behardien said the biggest challenge she hears from parents is access to licensed childcare for infants and toddlers ages 0-3.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, One Sky's waiting list for the infant and toddler program was 132 children, but staff recently did calls for fall and it has dropped to 72 children.

"This is largely people choosing a family member or balancing work and child care at home during the pandemic," she said.

Another need is after-school care, Behardien said, with a waitlist of 32 families.

The City of Penticton has partnered with One Sky and submitted a proposal to the province to open a new child care facility in Kiwanis Park, but the funding request hasn't yet been approved.

At the city's newest licensed child care facility, Queens Park, the YMCA says it's also struggling with a labour shortage.

"This is a very challenging situation in the South Okanagan compared to the central Okanagan due to the lack of post-secondary certification options," said Danielle Miranda, the general manager of child care at the YMCA's Okanagan branch.

"This lack of options makes it difficult to open more or new licensed, affordable and safe child care locations."

Miranda said the YMCA would be able to open eight more spaces for 3-5 child care and 10 more spaces for extended day preschool if staff were available.

Sprott Shaw College in Penticton, which offers the Early Childhood Education (ECE) program, says high tuition costs often create a barrier for prospective students, but grants and bursaries are available for those who need assistance covering the costs of their education.

The College's 45 week ECE program costs \$15,847.51.

"One of the misconceptions of early childhood education is that the wages just aren't feasible to have a good income coming in, but you're looking at an average wage of \$18 to \$22 an hour to start," said Candace Lippert, admissions advisor at Sprott Shaw College.

The City of Penticton says staff will compile data on the child care shortage and present the findings and an action plan to city council in December.

For families like the Kugis, action can't come soon enough.

"How can this be a family city if we can't look after the children while the parents work and be a part of the economy," she said.

If you'd like to fill out the survey, visit shapeyourcitypenticton.ca

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