

# COVID-19 nearly killed a daycare dream in Gros Morne. This non-profit is reviving it <sup>[1]</sup>

Grassroots group spent 4 years trying to create Norris Point daycare

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## EXCERPTS

After a group of volunteers spent four years trying to make a child-care centre in Norris Point a reality, it appeared the pandemic had thrown a final — and fatal — wrench into their plans.

But now, a community organization has taken over the project to push it ahead, and hopes to become a potential model for how registered daycare can be delivered in rural Newfoundland, where such services are scarce.

The saga began in 2016, when a group of five women with young children banded together to become the board of Gros Morne Daycare Inc. Their goal of creating a registered child-care facility on the northern side of Bonne Bay was modest, yet essential to the lives of working parents and their small kids in a vibrant area of the province that has seen new businesses pop up and new families move in.

"For myself, moving into the community and not having a family member like a mother or grandmother around, you know, the need for reliable daycare is a big one," said Natalie Thomas, a mother of two in Norris Point.

Thomas isn't the only parent looking for increased access to child care: there are only 8,100 registered spaces in Newfoundland and Labrador, with 20,000 children under kindergarten age in the province.

The provincial government has announced \$25-a-day daycare will be rolled out in January, but that doesn't affect areas of the province, like Thomas's, that don't have a registered facility at all.

Thomas joined the daycare board after settling into Norris Point, and then waded into a complicated web of government regulations, project applications and fundraising initiatives as the group worked to get the centre built.

A new build proved too costly, so the board settled on renovating a space in the Old Cottage Hospital in Norris Point. The former hospital, which has found a second life as a non-profit community centre, is a focal point of the town, housing a hostel, the local library, volunteer radio station and community kitchen, among myriad other initiatives.

The daycare group had design plans in hand, but renovations meant coming up with cash for asbestos removal, a fire suppression system and other big-ticket items. While the group could avail of government grants, those covered only half the total bill, since those grants are based on how many children the centre will care for, as opposed to the actual construction costs.

"When you look at how the structure of how the government's funding is, it does require a lot of fundraising and support and buy-in from the community to go forward, right? Because it doesn't meet all of your needs," said Thomas.

## When grassroots isn't enough

The community buy-in was there, as was support from the Old Cottage Hospital, said Thomas, but so too was a hard reality. Trying to raise money in a community of fewer than 700 people, with no large corporations or businesses to tap into, was a huge hurdle.

"There's limitations of what can be done in an outport community versus, a larger municipality like St. John's," said Thomas.

Another limitation was the group itself: as a grassroots movement, the women didn't have any assets or infrastructure to their name. The only way to access more cash, Thomas said, was applying for grants and funding for community projects.

We really are a growth community. And so we need to look after those families, so that they can stay here.

- Joan Cranston

They did just that, but Thomas said it was a stressful and lengthy process, and some board members left the group as their own children aged out of the need for daycare as time passed. They pressed on, but as the pandemic rippled across the country, some promised grants were redirected to different projects, and the daycare plan fell apart.

"That really left us back at Square 1. And that's really one of the reasons that we as a group stepped away," said Thomas.

### **Old hospital, new hope**

Amid that disappointment, there came new possibility.

During the years of fundraising, Thomas and the board had worked alongside the volunteers who run the Old Cottage Hospital, and along the way, those volunteers saw the value of adding a daycare within the building.

"Child care is so important for our economy and for our communities, for mothers being able to work, knowing their kids are cared for safely, and we just felt that with a centre like that in our building, it would really anchor us in the community, said Joan Cranston, the co-ordinator of the Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital Heritage Corporation.

Wading into the world of child care caught Cranston, a seasoned grant-writer and community volunteer, by surprise.

"It's a really long process of applying for daycare licensing. I'm just amazed at the paperwork. It should be something that's seamless and easy, anything that's going to facilitate good care for children," she said.

The hospital has 20 years of form-filling and bureaucracy-navigating experience, said Cranston, who says her team can see it through.

"We know about long processes, and we know about paperwork, and we know about running against brick walls and then having to regroup and come back," she said.

### **A secret weapon: social enterprise**

The Old Cottage Hospital also has a not-so-secret weapon up its sleeve: it's a social enterprise — in this case, a non-profit organization using small business as a way to reinvest in the community. The Shorefast Foundation, on Fogo Island, is one well-established such organization in Newfoundland.

Cranston said social enterprises are catching on, and so are the people looking at those grants she fills out: the federal government now has an entire social finance fund of \$755 million for such projects, and Cranston said the provincial government is also giving them priority.

"Funders are shifting more and more to looking favourably upon social enterprise because they see the value of the model," said Cranston, adding there's been research done that shows the value of the model, particularly where profits aren't the motive.

"Social enterprise has filled gaps in health care and child care and long-term care in all these kind of areas that are more social, but they also have enterprise business side to them."

The Liberals are looking to speed up spending its social finance fund as a way to help Canadians recover from the pandemic.

"The blended model is the answer to so many of our problems right now, especially I think, in a post-COVID recovery world," said Cranston.

Having just been handed the daycare project in mid-October, Cranston has already received federal funding to hone its business plan alongside a social enterprise expert, which she hopes can springboard toward securing what else is needed for the project — and Norris Point's future.

"We really are a growth community. And so we need to look after those families, so that they can stay here and they can grow our community. So it's vital for our community and it's really, I think, important for our organization as well to anchor us as a community centre," she said.

Cranston hopes renovations could start mid-spring, with the hospital's child-care centre open by the summer.

**Region:** Newfoundland <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** non-profit <sup>[4]</sup>

funding <sup>[5]</sup>

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