

Child care desert persists in the northwest ^[1]

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EXCERPT

A recent report highlights a lack of access to child care that continues to persist in northwest Winnipeg, especially in low-income communities.

2020 Our City: A Peg Report on COVID-19 and Well-Being Indicators to Watch shows that there are 11 to 16 licensed spaces per 100 children in Point Douglas, Inkster and Seven Oaks, compared to the most child care-rich areas of Winnipeg, where there are between 29 and 38 licensed spaces per 100 kids.

Although the data is from 2014, family well-being and child care experts note that northwest Winnipeg communities still struggle to access child care six years later. And not only are there few spaces available, but the nature of child care fails to accommodate many families' needs.

"There's very little child care that's suitable or that can accommodate evenings. There's very little child care that can accommodate weekends. A lot of our families work those kinds of hours ... So, (they) always have to sort of go outside of those licensed daycare spots to look after (their) children," said Diane Roussin, director of The Winnipeg Boldness Project, a social organization that studies the well-being of families and children in Point Douglas.

When families cannot find formal child care, they are left to rely on family members, friends or neighbours to watch over their children, Roussin said. However, this turned difficult with the arrival of COVID-19 health risks and guidelines which often discourage or prohibit inter-household mingling.

"I think those families that have the least amount of economics are being asked to comply with all the COVID regulations, just like every single one of us is being asked to comply with the COVID restrictions and safety measures. And yet, they're the least resourced, because a lot of the time our families will have less physical space, there's more people living in a household, there's less physical space — physically distancing is difficult," Roussin said.

Creating new child care spaces is one thing, but they need to be strategically placed based on geographic demand, said Jodie Kehl, the executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association.

"We need to be reflective and intentional about where the spaces are being developed," Kehl said. "We know that the benefits of early childhood education far outweigh the cost: lifelong improved health and learning, improved school readiness, performance, improved family outcomes. I can go on and on about all the benefits of it.

"So, it would be wise for any policymakers to start looking (at) where are the gaps within our own regions to support children and families more successfully."

Kehl noted two top factors she believes are responsible for holding back the development of child care in the province; operating grants for licensed not-for-profit child care facilities have not been increased since 2016 and parent fees have remained stagnant since 2013.

"In terms of opening up new spaces, I think that it's probably challenging for some facilities to do so because of financial constraints, quite honestly," she said.

In The Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba, the Manitoba office for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives noted that the gap between rich and poor neighbourhoods continues to grow in terms of child care access: "More affluent neighbourhoods have more services, while poorer neighbourhoods have worse access."

In the provincial cabinet shuffle announced on Jan. 5, Rochelle Squires (Riel) was selected to replace Heather Stefanson (Tuxedo) as the minister of families, which overlooks child care. Kehl said the MCCA looks forward to opening dialogue with the new minister to discuss the role of child care in Manitoba.

"Obviously, the last 10, 11 months have been like no others for all of us, and child care is the same. And I think that what we've learned ... is that never before has early learning and child care been regarded as such an essential service. You know, without child care, families

cannot go to school, families cannot go to work. And it is certainly the stabilizer of the economy in our province," Kehl said.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

Tags: access ^[4]

demand ^[5]

spaces ^[6]

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