

Child-care closure leaves parents scrambling ^[1]

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Source: Winnipeg Free Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 21 Jul 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Since Candice Rantanen's five-year-old autistic daughter began attending the Salvation Army's child-care centre in Weston two and a half years ago, she's learned to talk and develop her social skills.

"My daughter used to be very behind on a lot because of her disability," Rantanen said. "She just learns a lot different than a child who isn't autistic."

At a previous child-care centre, Rantanen said, her daughter experienced neglect, which contributed to aggressive behaviour. But once she enrolled at the Salvation Army's Weston centre, that all changed.

"This daycare works very, very well with children with disabilities," Rantanen said.

Her daughter is among the 14 per cent of children at the Weston centre who rely on inclusion support, a government-funded program that aims to help children with unique needs meaningfully participate activities.

Rantanen fears the progress her daughter has made will be lost once the Salvation Army shuts the centre Aug. 31.

"Losing this daycare is a big disappointment because it's like losing family for my daughter."

On June 30, the Salvation Army informed staff of the closure, according to supervisor Diamond Bernier. She said the reason given is that the centre is no longer "financially feasible."

"Before, it used to be the daycare helps support the church. But now the church is supporting the daycare," Bernier said.

The centre has been around since the 1980s. It has 59 spots and a waiting list of over 220. Infants to school-age children attend the centre, which escorts students to local schools Cecil Rhodes and Weston.

Bernier, a mother of four herself, is leading a group of parents who are campaigning to open a new parent-run, non-profit child-care centre, as soon as possible.

Bernier is working with area MLA Malaya Marcelino (Notre Dame) to locate a new space — perhaps in one of the local schools — and to obtain a licence. Realistically, the new centre would only open in October, she added.

"I have had some parents come up to me, and they're very concerned about what they're going to do.

"It's really important for us to get the program back up and running to support these families that need it."

When Joey Walker, whose daughter and two foster sons attend the Weston child-care centre, heard about the closure, he jumped to find care elsewhere. He called the nearby Explorer's Children's Centre, which has a capacity of 66.

"The wait list is already astronomical," he said. "They told me 'Don't hold your breath.'"

Explorer's director Colleen Barnett said spaces for school-age children, infants, and inclusion support are all full. She added that many families come from outside the immediate community because they can't find child care close to home.

Walker said if his family can't find alternate care, he and his wife may be forced to quit their jobs.

April Roller — a single mother of two neurodiverse children, aged five and 11 — said she's in a similar position; either she has to move her kids to a new school that's connected to child care, or quit her job.

"I have no idea what I'm going to do come fall, because my whole summer is just trying to figure out if I can get (my son) into a center for the fall," Roller said.

Bernier said if a new child-care centre does open, it needs to be located near Cecil Rhodes and Weston schools, where most of the school-age children attend.

"Firstly, we need something that's in the area so we can continue to walk these children. There is only one other daycare (Explorer's) in this residential space and they only walk to Cecil Rhodes, so they won't walk the Weston children," Bernier said.

Barnett explained that Explorer's doesn't have enough staff to walk students to both schools.

"The other problem is a building. So we need to find a building that accommodates all the rules," Bernier said. "And in this community, any building or church we're finding that we might be able to go to doesn't accommodate these needs."

Another question is funding. The new program would be based on parent fees and the child-care subsidy. Bernier said she is also looking into securing an operating grant from the Manitoba government.

The Salvation Army declined a request for an interview but a spokesperson wrote in an email that "many details are still being finalized and discussed."

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

Tags: closure ^[4]

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