

First-of-its-kind Indigenous-led child-care centre opens in London ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stroll through London's SoHo neighbourhood, and you may notice something new, a building designed in the shape of a turtle.

Mirroring what many Indigenous people call Turtle Island, meaning North America, the nearly \$6-million facility is home to London's first Indigenous-led family centre and one of the first Indigenous-led child care centres.

Led by the Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC), Nshwaasngong Child Care and Family Centre opened its doors at 449 Hill St. on Thursday.

"Together, our community envisioned creation of a beautiful, bright and joyful place to honour and express our diverse identities as Indigenous people," Jan Martin, director of Indigenous relations at SOAHAC, said of the facility.

"We saw a place to rekindle our language, honour the teachings of our ancestors and live in a balance with Mother Earth," she said. "We envision a place with our young ones and future generations will thrive. And here we are today; this place is the reality,"

The centre will provide early childhood services and cultural and language programming, such as land-based learning, ceremonies, and community support, to children and families in London and across Southwestern Ontario.

The name, Nshwaanangong, means "place of the eighth star," referring to one of the eight stars in the big dipper which fell to Earth, Martin said.

The building's design includes a curved roof, low in some spaces to make sure children feel protected, and a ring of windows near the ceiling to allow sunlight to stream through, she said.

Thursday, members of SOAHAC joined the City of London, Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, Indigenous organizations and members of the London-area community to celebrate its official opening. The event featured an opening prayer, drumming ceremonies, ribbon-cutting, and the unveiling of artwork inside its main doors.

"I think this (centre) will inspire the next generation of Indigenous children to be able to access services in their language, and that's a very special thing," Lecce said to a group of about 50 people.

The centre provides space for 88 infants and children up to the age of six. With plans to launch in mid-October, registration already has reached nearly 60 per cent capacity.

Stalled by the pandemic, Nshwaanangong is the result of nearly five years of planning and development, said London city Coun. Elizabeth Pelosa, who also was in attendance Thursday. City hall secured \$5.86 million in funding from the provincial government to buy and later transfer the land to SOAHAC, Pelosa said.

It was created in collaboration with an Indigenous planning committee, known as the Journey Together group, which includes members from city hall, Indigenous-led organizations and community members.

"Within a couple of weeks, these halls will be filled with up to 88 laughing children and their families and parents who are in the family centre," Pelosa said.

"It's not just another early-on centre," she added. "This is one-of-a-kind, and hopefully, will be a model for other communities."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: indigenous child care ^[4]
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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9100>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9169>