

'Money is not the only solution': Muskoka child-care sector on staffing shortages ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Leesa Horsfield says she has never seen anything like it: there are vacant child-care spaces ready to be filled but not enough staff to manage them.

Horsfield is the executive director of Macaulay Tree House Day Nursery in Bracebridge, which offers daycare to children across Muskoka as well as school-aged programming.

She has 38 employees across her spaces at 50 The Granite Bluff and the before and after school programs at Monck Public School and Muskoka Falls Public School — but is in desperate need of more staff.

"I have 10 toddler spaces right now waiting for a staff member to be able to open them and I have about 24 preschool spaces, minimum, that if I could find staff, I would be able to offer," said Horsfield.

The staffing shortage in the child-care sector can be attributed to many different factors: people continuing to rely on government benefits, people being nervous to work in a child-care setting due to health care concerns, and COVID-19 vaccines becoming mandatory, she said.

"We've lost a lot of staff in the last few months and just trying to get people to apply to the jobs and come in is really difficult. I've had a full-time position on the internet for three weeks and I think I got about four candidates that really aren't what I'm looking for," said Horsfield.

Treehouse daycare The team members at Macaulay Tree House Day Nursery in Bracebridge celebrate their resilience amid staffing challenges. Executive director Leesa Horsfield says staffing has been a challenge but employees are working together to make the best of the situation. — Sarah Law/Metroland

Recent hires have come from outside the region, as far as North Bay, she added.

A huge factor is wages and striking the balance between offering the most affordable child care possible while maintaining the bottom line.

Heather Elliott is the District of Muskoka's manager of children and seniors services. She has been meeting with Muskoka's 25 child-care operators monthly to help share resources and hear their concerns, which she passes on during weekly meetings with the Ministry of Education.

"The district has tried really hard to stabilize the sector within the guidelines that the Ministry of Education sets out for funding," she said. But the sector remains in recovery mode.

"Children need high-quality care and child care also should provide great jobs — but part of a great job is great hours, hours that work for an individual, and pay that reflects the responsibility of being an early childhood educator," said Elliott.

Graphic The District of Muskoka offers many different child-care services across the region. — Sarah Law/Metroland

And with women making up the majority of the child-care workforce, they have been further affected by the implications of COVID-19 on the sector.

"Ninety-nine per cent of my staff are women and I feel like this sector in general is women in the workplace. I really feel like they are not compensated like they should be for the job that they do," said Horsfield.

It all relates back to the she-cession, said Elliott: the disproportionate impact of current economic challenges on women.

But there is hope that with the upcoming federal child-care plan in Ontario will come a mandated wage grid, "which would recognize the value at the early childhood sector and ... hopefully gain traction with getting an increased workforce here in Muskoka and across Ontario," she said.

The problem goes beyond wages, though.

“You can throw money at a problem but sometimes money is not the only solution. It really is about a strategic approach to workforce development, which includes recruitment and retention and training,” said Elliott.

“The foundation of child care needs to be recognized as just as important (as) any other infrastructure.”

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