

Only 29% of essential workers can get emergency child care. What does that tell us? ^[1]

The situation is so desperate that a Friday afternoon memo to regional staff asked for volunteers on Monday morning, even if they didn't have child-care experience, Luisa D'Amato writes.

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EXCERPTS

Only a fraction of the emergency child-care spaces needed by essential workers have actually materialized.

There were 239 school-aged children placed this week in programs in Waterloo Region so that their parents could work. Costs are paid by the province.

But 575 other children are still on the waiting list.

Their parents — who work in health care, long-term-care homes and as first responders, among other essential jobs — will have to find another arrangement, or stay home while their children try to learn online.

"It's heartbreaking," said Barb Cardow, children's services director for Waterloo Region, who is co-ordinating the emergency child-care efforts.

"Some people are not able to get to work," she said.

"I've never seen anything like this, what we're going through."

The problem is a shortage of workers willing and able to look after the children.

The situation has become so desperate that Cardow sent out a memo to regional staff at 4 p.m. on Friday, asking for volunteers on Monday morning, even if they didn't have experience in child care.

"Emergency child care is extremely important to keeping our local health-care system stable," said the memo.

"However, due to staffing shortages and need that exceeds our capacity, we require additional staff to work full time (day time hours) at the emergency child care locations beginning on Monday."

The note continued with an appeal to staff with one of the following qualifications:

- Registered early childhood educators;
- Educators with recreation and leisure credentials;
- Related post-secondary education in human services or education.

For many of us, asking on Friday afternoon for people to step away from their regular jobs and look after children starting Monday morning, seems like desperation planning.

But that's what Omicron is doing to us. It has brought us closer to unravelling as a society than we could have imagined, with too many people getting sick from the virus, too many other people working overtime or doing jobs they aren't trained for, and essential services like ambulances not always being available.

As it turns out, two people stepped up on the weekend as a result of Cardow's memo.

One had qualifications as a teacher and the other had early childhood educator credentials. Between them, they were able to take 30 more children off the waiting list and into programs where they could learn online in a safe and supervised environment.

While Cardow is proud of her colleagues, and those at other organizations who also stepped up, she also recognizes how this has exposed the shoddy way child-care workers are treated.

There's a provincewide shortage of early childhood educators, a profession which has been "underrated, under-noticed and undervalued" for a very long time, she said.

It's hard work. It's poorly paid, even though that work is so important because these workers are with the children at a crucial time in their social, emotional and intellectual development.

"Educators are really tired right now," Cardow said. "They have experienced two really tough years."

They heroically kept working, at personal risk to themselves, even when many others were hunkered down at home.

But for many, Cardow said, "they don't have it left in them right now."

Child-care activist Carolyn Ferns wonders if we would have been better off at this time if regional councillors had not voted, just over a year ago, to close five child-care centres owned by the region.

Cardow said that those five centres, in Kitchener, Cambridge and Elmira, were only for preschoolers. The emergency child care needed now is being provided for school-aged children in settings for before- and after-school programs. It wouldn't have made a difference to this particular situation.

But on a deeper level, Ferns said, the people who argued to keep those region-owned centres open were doing it in part because the workers there were so well paid and well treated, it lifted the whole sector up locally and kept standards higher for all the other workers.

"Was that (closing the centres) the right thing to do?" said Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"We've let the system lurch along to sub-crisis level."

It all reminds me of the way people are talking about health care now. Some are saying that if our hospital system was better staffed and funded, we would be getting through the pandemic much more easily. But because we need to protect the hospitals from being overwhelmed, and they're under-resourced, we have to have harsh restrictions on economic and social activity.

Similarly, child care is the bedrock of our economy. If it isn't robust, other things collapse too.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

emergency child care ^[5]

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