

New mom from Niagara-on-the-Lake faces frustration dealing with region's ongoing child care shortage ^[1]

Shortage of early childhood educators, made worse by the pandemic, means less daycare spots available

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EXCERPTS

For the past eight months, Ashlea Carter has been on one of the most challenging — and rewarding — journeys of a person's life: she's been raising her first child, Milo, who was born in October.

"It's exhaustingly wonderful," she said. "I never thought the minutiae of being able to roll over or put his own soother in his mouth would be exciting, but it is."

The next step of parenthood, however, is proving to be a challenge: finding a daycare for Milo to enroll in once he turns 12 months old and Carter's maternity leave ends.

Carter, who is from Niagara-on-the-Lake, is dealing with what many other parents in Niagara are experiencing today: the shortage of child care services in Niagara.

When Carter was pregnant, a friend told her to start applying for daycares immediately, which she did. She applied to 10 daycares through the Niagara Region, which oversees the region's 175 licensed child care centres.

"Right now, I haven't heard back from any daycares I've applied to," Carter said.

Darlene Edgar, director of children's services for the Niagara Region, says child care centres in Niagara, on the whole, are running at 60 per cent of what their actual capacity is, but more than 7,000 children are currently on a waiting list.

The problem, she said, is staffing shortages: the region has seen a shortage of registered early childhood educators, or ECEs, for the past five years. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, as ECEs were laid off and some left the profession altogether.

One big reason people aren't entering, or staying in, the profession is low pay. The average wage for a registered ECE at a licensed daycare in Niagara is \$22.50 an hour, which, depending on the daycare, doesn't always include benefits or sick days.

"This sector has been undervalued for years and years," Edgar said.

Carol Phillips, associate dean of Niagara College's community services program, said the school is beginning an accelerated and online ECE diploma program to help current child care employees, like supply staff and before-and-after school employees, receive their certification in 11 months, which is faster than their regular two-year program.

Currently, they have 90 students registered to complete the program by 2023.

"They're hugely important," Phillips said of ECEs. "They're working with some of the most vulnerable people: children."

While opening up spots is the greatest concern, affordability is, too: the average cost per day for child care in Niagara ranges from \$24.24 for before-and-after school care to \$54.48 for infant care.

"I haven't even thought about how much it's going to cost," Carter said. "You have to pay it: there's no choice."

In late March, the Ontario government made a \$13.2-billion deal with the federal government to secure \$10-a-day child care by September 2025.

Edgar said while this is good news, they should also focus on raising wages for daycare workers and attracting ECEs who've left the system back with incentives, as they did for nurses and personal support workers during the pandemic.

"I'd like to see a provincial plan that comes out from the province about recruitment and retention," she said.

If Carter isn't able to enroll Milo at an infant daycare by the time fall rolls around, she's asked her parents-in-law to help out. As months continue to go by with no answer, she says she doesn't have much hope he'll get a spot.

“I’m a planner: my personality is to plan and schedule and time things out,” she said. “Becoming a mother has taught me that I can’t do all those things, and this is another one of those elements.”

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