

Staff shortage temporarily closes Sarnia child care centre ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A Sarnia child care centre temporarily closed its doors last week because it hasn't been able to hire enough qualified staff.

Garderie Petit Pas, a bilingual child care centre operated by Tilbury Tots Early Learning Centre at a French language Catholic high school building on Rapids Parkway, shutdown last Thursday.

The operator said some staff left recently, including two workers who took jobs with a local French language school board. The centre was caring for about 17 children.

"We've been in operation for 27 years and this is the first time we've ever had to do this," said Jody Bernier, director with Tilbury Tots, a non-profit agency which also has locations in Chatham-Kent.

"We're hoping it's just for a couple of weeks," she said. "We are diligently trying to recruit new staff so we can open the rooms back up."

But early childhood education workers are in high demand, Bernier said.

Local child care facilities held a job fair in May in an attempt to fill 120 full and part-time vacancies in the Sarnia area.

"It's a struggle right now in every community for childcare workers," Bernier said.

Melissa Roushorne scrambled to find alternative care for her seven-month-old son and two-year-old daughter after the centre closed. She added, "There are parents I see on Facebook who are struggling to find day care."

Roushorne said she received an email Sept. 6 from Tilbury Tots warning the infant room would close Sept. 16 because of a lack of staff, and then a second email Sept. 14 saying the entire centre would close for "an undetermined amount of time."

"I just think it was handled in a way that was appalling," Roushorne said.

She said she questions how local waitlists operate since they didn't appear to make allowances for families suddenly losing childcare when a facility closes.

"It was just a frustrating situation," Roushorne said.

Melissa Fitzpatrick, Lambton County's manager of children's services, said county officials spoke Friday with the operator.

"Sadly, they're in a position where they just don't have staff to be able to remain open," she said.

The county is designated by the province to manage child care and early years' services across Lambton.

Licensed day care operators are required to have a certain percentage of early childhood education staff to operate, Fitzpatrick said.

"We're trying to help them with spreading the word for recruiting," she said. "They do want to reopen as soon as they can hire."

She said her office has heard of centres that temporarily closed rooms at their facilities because of staff shortages, "but this is the first time we've had an entire site have to close doors because they don't have enough staff."

A shortage of qualified early childhood educators has been an issue for several years but has become more severe recently, Fitzpatrick said.

At the same time, waitlists for licensed child care spots in Lambton County are long with about 700 infants, 800 toddlers and 1,800 preschoolers waiting for spots, Fitzpatrick said.

"So, clearly, we need more licensed child care spaces in Lambton County," she said.

Lambton has historically had long waitlists but Ontario's recent move to join a national affordable child care initiative may a reason they've become even longer recently, she said.

“We’ve definitely seen families put their children on waitlists in anticipation of the reduced fees that are coming,” Fitzpatrick said.

That’s happening at the same time as child care providers face a shortage of qualified early childhood educators.

“We need individuals who want to get into the field and become qualified so we can run these spaces,” Fitzpatrick said.

Bernier said they need approximately three additional workers to be able to reopen the Sarnia location.

While it’s temporarily closed, remaining workers are doing some “deep cleaning and some training,” she said.

Bernier said the last year has been “by far the most challenging” for finding and keeping staff, particularly since the Sarnia site is a bilingual location.

“We’re finding it especially challenging trying to recruit French-speaking” workers, she said.

“At this time, we’re just looking for early childhood educators, whether they’re English or French, just to ensure that we can get the program back up and running for the families,” she said.

Bernier said they will attend an upcoming job fair, plus they posted the opening to online job sites and social media, and approached local workforce agencies and municipalities to help spread the word.

“We’re just trying our hardest,” she said.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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