

Northern Alberta hamlet's only licensed child-care facility set to open ^[1]

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Parents who live in the northern Alberta hamlet of Anzac will no longer have to send their kids 50 kilometres away for child care in Fort McMurray now that the community has a licensed child-care centre.

The Boys and Girls Club Fort McMurray held a grand opening for the facility on Saturday, to show off BGC Aurora child care and give parents a chance to see the space.

Anzac mother Danielle Dessario sends her three-year-old daughter to daycare in Fort McMurray. She gets picked up by a friend at 6:30 a.m. and gets home around 5 p.m.

She said having a local daycare means her daughter will be able to spend more time at home.

"We don't have any child care out here and I work full time in Anzac," Dessario said. "I've reached out multiple times in the spring last year to see who would take in a child and nobody was willing or had the space."

She said she knows people who are waiting for the daycare to open so that they can go back to work.

Jennifer Kennett said that when she became the executive director of the Boys and Girls Club Fort McMurray, she quickly heard that child care in Anzac was needed.

"We're hearing that consistency was needed. Affordability was huge," Kennett said.

Fort McMurray 468 First Nation offers daycare services but spaces are prioritized for members.

There are 34 spaces available for kids between one and 12 years old.

The BGC started looking into opening a child-care centre over a year ago.

The "game-changing moment" for the non-profit was when the provincial government announced child-care funding.

"It looked like it could be a reality," Kennett said.

So far, there are eight kids registered, but Kennett expects more to sign up this week.

The region has struggled to retain child care workers, especially since the northern allowance was defunded in 2020.

Dessario used to help run Willow Lake Tiny Tots Daycare in Anzac before it closed in 2020 and said she knows firsthand how hard it can be to attract and retain staff.

"I'm really hoping that the Boys and Girls Club, because of their name and with the grants and everything coming, that hopefully they'll be able to stay open."

Kennett said BGC is offering competitive, livable wages.

"It's really important to me that we are ensuring that we have quality educators supporting these children and that they are compensated appropriately."

Some of the staff are from Anzac and some commute from Fort McMurray.

Early childhood educator Lauren Lamoureux will be driving from Fort McMurray to Anzac for work. She said she jumped at the opportunity to work for a child care centre with the Boys and Girls Club.

"I figured it would be worth it," Lamoureux said. "A good child-care centre can be out here and I'd like to be a part to make that happen."

Jane Stroud, a councillor with the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, said the centre is needed in the community. She said the industry faces a big problem in getting child care workers in the region.

She said that the northern living allowance made the job livable for many child-care workers and she's advocating for the return of the funding.

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