

Child-care staff and spaces must be increased to meet demand, providers say ^[1]

As the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care program rolls out, more must be done to meet demand

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Excerpts

As the federal government launches the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program, aiming to make child care more affordable, child-care professionals say that there need to be more spaces and staff in order to meet rising demand.

West Lincoln Coun. Shelley Bradaric, whose 'day job' is as the executive director of a child-care corporation, says that with the changing demographics and the introduction of CWELCC, demand is rising.

"There's definitely a larger amount of need," she said. "The community has grown ... and now with the instituting of the (CWELCC) subsidies for families, that drastically lowers fees, which may make a lot more people contemplate working outside of the home and having their children attend child care because it becomes more sense."

However, she said, the next step is to address the staffing and retention issues and expand services into places like West Lincoln.

At a governmental level, the province and Niagara Region are working to identify areas where child-care needs are, and to expand services in those target neighbourhoods.

Those targets include neighbourhoods with low-income families, vulnerable communities, diverse communities, francophone families, Indigenous families and families needing more flexible care models.

The province released its guidance documents at the end of 2022 and asked the region to provide 1,951 spaces by 2026, according to Satinder Klair, director of children's services.

And one of the first steps is identifying priority neighbourhoods, which is a task the region is currently undertaking. Klair said it was too early to say whether west Niagara areas, such as West Lincoln, will be included.

The biggest issue with child-care provision, said Klair, is with operating capacity, which is currently operating at 65 per cent capacity. West Lincoln, said Klair, is at 61 per cent capacity.

"So that really does impact our ability to operate the system with staffing being a huge challenge," said Klair.

Melissa McLauchlan, executive director of Grimsby Community Preschool, knows the operating challenges all too well, as Grimsby's population has rapidly expanded.

"Grimsby has grown so much," she said. "During COVID ... we've seen such huge growth."

Census data from Statistics Canada shows that the population grew by 1,569 between 2016 and 2021. In 2021, there were 1,310 children under four living in Grimsby.

That means that demand for the preschool has increased. McLauchlan said that usually they have a wait-list of a dozen families. This year, they have 100. She said that she knew of parents that were still pregnant and putting their children on the wait-list.

"We are limited, just like every other centre," she said. "We have so many spaces ... (we) can feel the panic in some of the parents.

"I know too, not only because Grimsby is growing, but because now with the offer of the CWELCC ... that has definitely increased interest in child care for families because of getting it more affordable."

Staffing, she said, was a big issue across the sector, as everyone competes for staff.

The job, although rewarding and a great field to be in, she said, isn't for the faint-hearted, and there's a sense that it isn't as valued as other vital services.

"If you have the spaces and you need to fill them, you're going to need to value the educators," she said. She pointed to a sense among early

childhood educators that they weren't as valued during the pandemic for the important role they played looking after front-line workers' children.

If the province wants to increase child-care spots, she said, there must be a focus on filling the staffing shortages to keep those spots open.

"If you don't have the educators, if you can't hire them and you can't keep them, then you're not going to have those spaces," she said.

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