

Native care centres beneficial to culture [CA-ON] ^[1]

City and Region

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EXCERPTS

Krystal Lascelles and others feel they have the numbers to back aboriginal day care.

Growing up, she was the only aboriginal child in her class.

Yet Londoner Krystal Lascelles was ashamed to say she knew nothing about her own culture.

Lascelles is determined her own daughter will always know what it means to have First Nations heritage.

"At night we play hand drums and we sing traditional songs," said Lascelles, who works while her 15-month old daughter attends day care.

"I teach her what I can, but would love to have her in a native child-care centre, where they get the foundation to know who they are. As a culture, we lost so much (to assimilation). We need to regain it."

The dire need for aboriginal child care has long been felt by London natives like Lascelles and now they have the numbers to prove it.

Armed with new census results that say more than 600 pre-school age children live in London, the head of the N'Amerind Friendship Centre wants the province to reconsider the organization's request for child-care funding.

"I'm pushing for this to be revisited right now," said Chester Langille, holding the proposal for Best Start Child Care funding, which was turned down.

"It's obvious a mistake was made. We need a day care."

While the Ontario government never officially replied to the N'Amerind request for 77 spaces, the centre was in effect denied, Langille said.

"If he's saying there is a need, I'm not going to disagree, but we live in a world of limited resources and did the best with what we could do," said Deb Matthews, a London MPP and Ontario's Children and Youth Services Minister.

Matthews said she would meet with Langille to discuss the situation and that things could change in the future.

N'Amerind's request came after the province announced last March it would fund 7,000 new child-care spaces -- 300 of them geared toward aboriginal child care.

A centre would have mainstream activities, but cultural components such as drumming, traditional story telling and introduction to rapidly dying aboriginal languages.

Langille said the statistics that count more than 6,000 aboriginals living in London and a growth rate double that of the general population prove the city needs an aboriginal child-care centre.

"Look at our population. It is over-represented in jails, unemployment, health and poverty. You name it and if it's a social problem, we are overrepresented there," he said.

"We address the root causes of those things here."

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Though he didn't hear back from the province about his request for child-care spaces, Langille has a letter from Lynn Livingstone, London's director of neighbourhood and children's services, who expresses "dismay" that N'Amerind was not approved.

"We know that the City of London is among the largest aboriginal centres in Ontario and is underserved in culturally specific child-care space," it says.

The census showed only about two per cent of London aboriginals have kept their language.

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/aboriginal> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/diversity>