

Urgent need for more child care spaces across city: Data shows 12 wards where demand is highest ^[1]

Author: Pearson, Matthew

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EXCERPTS:

OTTAWA - The number of children waiting to get into a licensed child care centre exceeds the number of spaces available by more than 70 per cent in a dozen Ottawa wards.

The problem affects huge swaths of the suburban and rural areas that hug the urban core, as well as several wards inside the Greenbelt where more and more young families are choosing to live.

"It's worrisome," said Kim Hiscott, the executive director of Andrew Fleck Child Care Services, which manages the city's centralized waiting list.

"We have a demand for child care that the current system can't meet," she said.

According to data collected in December, child care centres in River ward offer 246 spaces, all filled; an additional 298 children are waiting for a spot, meaning demand for child care exceeds the number of spaces on offer by more than 120 per cent.

The situation was even more dire in the Gloucester-South Nepean ward, where 295 children were waiting for one of the 195 licensed spots to open up.

The data does not include families who are seeking a licensed spot in a home-based child care centre, nor does it mean that some families haven't made alternate child care arrangements in the interim.

But it clearly shows that the need far outstrips the current capacity in West-Carleton March, Alta Vista, Rideau-Goulbourn, Osgoode and Cumberland wards, among others.

"For every 20 children that are lucky enough to get a licensed, regulated space, there are 80 kids who don't," said Shellie Bird, a Canadian Union of Public Employees representative for more than 300 unionized child care workers in the city.

Hiscott said the problem is not a new one and noted some families may wait up to a year and a half to secure a space in a licensed child care centre. That leaves hundreds of children and families in limbo.

"Children don't just sit there in suspended animation. They continue to grow and develop so that is a significant consequence for both the child and the parent, especially if the parent has had to make a choice that they're not completely comfortable with," Hiscott said.

"That would not be tolerated in other settings, like schools."

Such delays often force parents to rely on family members or turn to unlicensed providers for care - or, alternatively, make difficult career choices or move to another part of the city where child care is more readily available, all of which can put added stress on families.

Part of the problem, according to Hiscott, is that there is no community planning process for child care. It has always been market driven, which means spaces aren't always available where they are desperately needed. "Right now there's some ambiguity about who is truly responsible for planning for child care," Hiscott said.

Mark Taylor, the city councillor who chairs the Community and Protective Services Committee, which oversees child care, said that at one time municipalities were a major player in the provision of child care. But the city's primary role now is to manage fee subsidies using funds from province.

"The province has assumed the responsibility for this. When they rolled out (full-day kindergarten), they said, 'This is an area of concern that we want to really direct,' so in my view, they've taken the ball and it's up to them to run with it and it's up to us to support however we can," Taylor said.

He said he sympathizes with families on the waiting list. "The longer parents wait for licensed spaces, the longer their children will stay in what that particular family considers a less-than-ideal situation," he said.

Hiscott said the province needs to modernize the system, help municipalities increase capacity in licensed settings and update the Day Nurseries Act to change the rules around providing unlicensed, home-based child care, which she said many parents mistakenly believe is regulated by the province.

The Ministry of Education has released a discussion paper on the future of the province's child care sector and is currently collecting input from parents, child care workers and other stakeholders.

-reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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