

300 waiting for child care in Niagara ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

ST. CATHARINES - Casey Wanser sits at her kitchen table staring down at a thin sheaf of papers. She's been receiving unemployment insurance benefits since she lost her job nearly five months ago because of company cutbacks.

Those papers represent a chance to work again. To help support her three children and pay her family's mounting bills.

The papers contain an offer for full-time employment with benefits.

But Wanser has about 300 reasons why she'll likely have to say no.

That's the number of people in Niagara on a waiting list for child-care subsidies. People who will have to wait four to six months for support.

"I'm hoping for a miracle," says Wanser as her two-year-old stands nearby fiddling with coloured barrettes. "I've been depressed. It's been a struggle trying to figure out what I'm going to do."

The job Wanser has been offered pays minimum wage. But at \$10.25 an hour, she wouldn't be able to afford to pay the full cost of daycare, which ranges from \$35 to \$55 a day per child. So her only choice is to stay home and continue receiving unemployment insurance.

"Something needs to be done," says Wanser, her eyes tearing.

Her husband only has seasonal work at a local winery.

"People complain about people on welfare and abusing the system," she says. "I get it now. I get why people are on welfare so long. There are no job opportunities and the government isn't willing to help people with child care."

While her potential job only pays minimum wage, there's room for promotion and more income in the future, she says. But none of that matters if she can't get help.

Wanser isn't alone in her struggle. Waiting lists for child-care subsidies are common in Ontario.

There are about 1,600 people on the waiting list in Hamilton and more than 600 in Windsor. In June, Windsor saw its first waiting list since the 1990s.

Niagara didn't have a waiting list until mid-January, says Kathryn O'Hagan-Todd, director of children's services for Niagara Region.

"It's a direct result of increased demand for those subsidies. I think it's representative of the economic situation and increased cost of child care as a result of full-day kindergarten," she says. "What we've seen over the past three years is the demand for subsidies to support those who are returning to work, going to school or who are new to the region.... That demand continues to grow and right now the demand exceeds the funding we have available."

The Region receives \$25 million from the provincial government to fund subsidies, she says.

Even with a recent injection of cash from the province, people will still have to wait- including Wanser.

"We'd encourage her to work with her caseworker. To find areas where we would be able to find other ways of maximizing funding," O'Hagan-Todd suggests.

Wanser has spoken with her caseworker, she says, but has been told by more than one person that nothing more can be done.

After all, she's just one of about 300 people waiting for a miracle in Niagara.

-reprinted from St. Catharines Standard

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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