

Peel gets larger piece of child care funding ^[1]

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Source: Mississauga.com

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Dec 2012

EXCERPTS:

After decades of lagging behind in social and health services funding, Peel Region is set to benefit from a reformation of how Queen's Park distributes money for child care.

And while some community groups are hailing the announcement as a "major success for Peel", others are urging Regional Council to revisit its earlier decision to close 12 child care centres.

"This is absolutely an opportunity for Peel to revisit its decision to close its regional child care centres," said Andrea Calver, spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "This is big news for Peel. But Peel has a huge lack of child care compared to its population and the needs of its population."

Queen's Park announced this week that new child care funding will be distributed to municipalities taking into account factors such as child population, child poverty levels, cost of living, welfare caseloads and education levels.

Doing it that way ensures the allocation of funds is based more closely on need than on demographic data that is at least 20 years old.

Some \$242 million in new child care funds - announced in last year's budget deal - will be spent over the next three-and-a-half years.

About \$90 million was allocated this year with another \$68 million being set aside for 2013.

Peel, which has seen enormous population growth over the past two decades, will get \$26 million next year on top of the \$56 million it currently receives.

"What this means is that (the provincial government) recognizes Peel also has been underfunded historically and they recognize the growing need that has resulted from economic factors and significant population growth," said Janet Menard, the Region of Peel's human services commissioner.

Earlier this year, Peel controversially voted to close 12 daycares by 2014 and use the savings to subsidize more children in less-costly commercial centres.

The decision saves the Region \$12.7 million, money that will be redirected to help more families pay for spots in non-profit and private centres. That would allow more children to receive a daycare subsidy and increase support for youngsters with special needs.

The biggest change brought on by this new funding scheme is that municipalities will have more control over how they spend the funding.

Menard said the new plan provides municipalities with a "flexible funding framework" that allows local governments to make decisions "that reflect local need."

In Peel, where 88 per cent of licensed child care spots serve four- and five-year-olds who will be moving to all-day kindergarten in the next two years, the new money is needed to create programs for infants and toddlers.

"The potential of having no children going into those spaces exists," said Menard, noting facilities need to be revamped for children aged 0 to 3.8 years. "What we need to support is the repurposing of the space that has been designed for four- and five-year-olds. You're into a different business with infants and toddlers and that is a huge need in our community."

For more than two decades, Fair Share for Peel, a coalition of numerous community agencies, has been fighting for a more equitable provincial funding formula for Peel, one that takes into account the significant population growth occurring here.

Chronic underfunding, the group says, means Peel residents don't have the same level of access to social and health services that other Ontarians do.

Task force members praised this week's announcement.

"This is a huge, huge step," said Humphrey Mitchell, executive director of Peel Children's Centre. "For children and youth and parents in this community, it's nothing but good news."

Meanwhile, other groups are calling on the Region to rethink its decision to close child care centres.

The Ontario Coalition of Better Child Care, as well as the Canadian Union of Public Employees and a list of others, sent an open letter Thursday urging local politicians to reconsider closing facilities now that more money is headed Peel's way.

Calver said the provincial government's shift to a new funding formula improves Peel's child care funding situation "dramatically" and reversing the decision is "the only sensible response to make on behalf of Peel's families now and in the future."

-reprinted from Mississauga.com

Related link: OPEN LETTER: To members of Peel Regional Council regarding closure of regional child care centres^[2]

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