

INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Chair and Members Emergency & Community Services Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	November 21, 2016
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Autism Advocacy Update (CES16063) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Courtney Groves (905) 546-2424 ext. 5015 Jessica Chase (905) 546-2424 ext. 3590
SUBMITTED BY:	Jack Brown Director, Recreation Division Community and Emergency Services Department Grace Mater Director, Children's and Home Management Services Division Community and Emergency Services Department
SIGNATURE:	

Council Direction:

On June 6, 2016 at the Community and Emergency Services Committee meeting the Committee approved the following motion brought forward by community autism advocates:

- (a) That staff identify existing opportunities in recreation programs, individual support resources including access to the innovative sensory room space in order to better serve children with autism and respite services for parents;
- (b) That Children's and Home Management Services Division identify support options for children through children's services as an alternative for families affected by the recent change to the Ontario Autism Program; and,
- (c) That staff be directed to report back to the Community and Emergency Services Committee on how department programs and services are meeting the needs of this demographic.

Information:

At the June 6, 2016 Community and Emergency Services Committee meeting, family advocates presented concerns about the recent Provincial changes which limited

access to Intensive Behaviour Intervention (IBI) for Ontario children with autism aged five or older who no longer qualify for government-funded intensive therapy.

Following their presentation, Council directed staff meet with the advocates to further understand their concerns regarding Autism Services within the City of Hamilton. While the majority of their concern related to the Provincial changes to service, key support areas were identified within the scope of each Division. Families expressed the need for respite services and increased access to resource sharing for families with children with autism. Based on their concerns, the Recreation Division and the Children's and Home Management Services Division partnered to collaboratively maximize services and address concerns related to respite and resource sharing for these and other families with children on the Autism Spectrum.

Overview of Collaborative Initiatives

The Recreation Division currently operates the Sensory Room at Westmount Recreation Centre (35 Lynwood Drive) on a rental basis. The Sensory Room is a barrier-free recreation space where individuals with disabilities or other special needs can explore and develop their senses and skills. It provides a multi-sensory environment that uses Snoezelen equipment to enhance therapy, learning and relaxation. Snoezelen features include textured floors and walls, plush fabrics and toys, pulsating wall-mounts, and music among other items that stimulate the primary senses through various sounds, lighting, gentle vibrations, and tactile sensations. From information shared by the advocates, and understanding the need for respite for families of children with autism, the Recreation Division committed to offer a Drop-In Sensory Room program targeted specifically for children with autism twice a month and provide staff to supervise and support children free of charge. As a pilot program, four dates were set for the beginning of October and November. Program Development committed to operationally cover the cost of the support staff through the Recreation Inclusion and Access Budget in 2016.

On Saturday, October 15th from 3-4pm, Recreation offered the first drop-in Sensory program and was able to engage six unique families with autism and other disabilities. Participants enjoyed different activities including the "sands alive" kit, beads, plastic lacing and other creative activities. Each participant was given an opportunity to use the Snoezelen equipment, and try the different sensory equipment it offers. Recreation scheduled three Inclusion Skilled Instructors, and staff commented it was a fun afternoon and gave families a chance to engage in some of our sensory programming in a successful and engaging hour. Given the success of this initiative and the minimal budget impact, the Recreation Division will continue to offer this program throughout the 2017 calendar year.

The Children's and Home Management Services Division currently offers Check It Out Drop-In's at local Ontario Early Years Centres. Professionals are available as an

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opportunity for families to drop in and speak with clinicians regarding their child's growth and development. They occur at different locations throughout the City every month. All parents with children from birth to six years of age can attend. There are Early Childhood Educators, Early Childhood Resources Teachers, Public Health Nurses, Speech and Language Pathologists, and Mental Health Resources Workers. Dental Hygienists and Infant Parent Therapists are available at some locations.

On October 5, 2016, the Children's and Home Management Services Division offered a Check It Out Drop-In at Westmount Recreation Centre to coincide with the Sensory Room Drop-In program. The drop-in was open to all families and provided the opportunity for families of children with autism to access resources and speak with early years professionals. The Recreation Division provided staffing in the Sensory Room during the Check It Out Drop-In, to ensure children had appropriate programming and supervision. A total of three families attended the drop in. Of the families that attended, one family has a child on the Autism Spectrum.

Children's and Home Management Services in concert with the Recreation Division will evaluate the success of the collaboration of drop- in Sensory Room and Check it Out programming to determine feasibility and need to continue these opportunities.

Overview of Other Services and Supports for Families with Children with Autism

The Children's and Home Management Services Division funds special needs resourcing to the community through funding provided by the Ministry of Education. The purpose of the funding allocation is to support the inclusion of children with special needs in licensed child care settings, including children with autism. Special needs resourcing supports are accessed through the City of Hamilton and are delivered in partnership with community agencies and licensed child care providers. The City receives referrals for special needs resourcing from a variety of partners, including family physicians, paediatricians, and developmental paediatricians.

The Recreation Division is committed to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. In addition to the Sensory Room, the Recreation Division offers the Year Round Support Program for person with disabilities at six recreation centres City Wide. This program provides persons with disabilities a trained staff to facilitate participation in public recreation programs (registered gym/club or aquatics). Support staff are provided at no additional cost to families and assist with increased program participation and meeting individual needs through lower staff ratios. The Support Program is also offered over the summer months for children with disabilities in Camp Kidaca. The Recreation Division also offers Adapted Programs designed specifically for persons with disabilities. Adapted Recreation is offered through the use of program design, activity modification and reduced staff ratios. Program offerings are promoted at the start of each session to over 150 families and community organizations that work with children with autism and other disabilities.

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Collaboratively, both the Children's and Home Management Services Division, and the Recreation Division strive to support children with additional needs, including autism, and their families. After consultation with the family advocates, ongoing communication took place to inform them of new initiatives developed in response to their concerns. Families expressed their appreciation of the Council direction, and both Divisions' commitment to listen to their concerns and offer inclusive services in Hamilton. Each Division will monitor the services currently offered, and work collaboratively to continue to improve services available for families with autism in Hamilton.

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