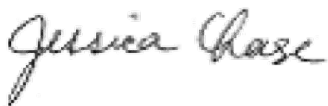




INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Chair and Members Emergency and Community Services Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	October 7, 2021
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Early Years Update (HSC21037) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Brenda Bax (905) 546-2424 Ext. 4120 Dawn Meitz (905) 546-2424 Ext. 3587
SUBMITTED BY:	Jessica Chase Director, Children's Services and Neighbourhood Development Division Healthy and Safe Communities Department
SIGNATURE:	

COUNCIL DIRECTION:

Not applicable

INFORMATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the child care and early years system. All child care programs are open and operating across the City however the majority are operating at a reduced capacity and are experiencing higher than normal vacancy rates. Last September when centres began to reopen, vacancy rates were approximately 17% across the system, and while progress is being made, current vacancy rates are sitting at approximately 11%. As a result, operators are facing reduced revenues from parents and fee subsidies, and some will be impacted by the loss of the Federal wage and rent subsidies. A shortage of Early Childhood Educators across Ontario is causing further pressures on the early years system.

Staff continue to work closely with Public Health to ensure licensed child care and EarlyON Child and Family Centre programs are operating within the COVID-19 operational guidelines including a Ministry of Education immunization disclosure policy for all educators, with rapid antigen testing requirements and participation in an educational program for staff who are not immunized against COVID-19.

OUR Vision: To be the best place to raise a child and age successfully.

OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.

Outdoor EarlyON programming re-opened in July 2021 and staff are working with Public Health to develop a plan for the return to in person programming later in the fall. The EarlyON programs will continue to offer virtual programming which has been well received by families and caregivers.

As the child care and early years system continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, Children's Services & Neighbourhood Development staff have identified the following priorities:

- Recovery and sustainability of the early years system
- Affordability for families
- Equity, diversity and inclusion
- Staff retention, recognition, and well-being

Recovery and sustainability of the early years system:

The focus for the coming months includes supporting child care programs to remain viable. Fee subsidy is financial assistance towards the cost of child care for eligible families. The fee subsidy utilization is down approximately 35% from 2019. This is primarily due to reduced operating capacity, reduced demand for child care due to parents working from home, loss of employment and alternate care arrangements, as well as the closure of all before and after school programs when schools were closed to in-person learning. Underspending in fee subsidy is being redirected to child care operators to support viability, as well as the additional priorities identified below. The Ministry of Education's Service Management and Funding guidelines allows financial flexibility within the core service delivery funding envelopes to redirect funding to meet these local needs. Staff are also implementing a marketing plan that promotes fee subsidy to families.

Affordability for families:

The Child Care Affordability Plan, which reduces the cost of child care by \$10/day, has been extended until December 31, 2021. It is projected that approximately 4,500 children will benefit from the Affordability Plan this year. Families have indicated that the reduction in child care fees has reduced financial stress and debt, allowed them to put their child in additional recreational activities, and invest in their child's education savings.

In July 2021, the City implemented a new base funding model for licensed home child care agencies. This new funding model is focused on improving affordability for families and increasing wages for licensed home child care providers. One-time transition funding has been provided to agencies to support them with the transition to this new model.

Equity, diversity and inclusion:

Throughout the month of September 2021, all child care and EarlyON programs were invited to participate in an Honouring our Children/Every Child Matters Initiative. In partnership with Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg, the City's Indigenous Relations team and Affiliated Services for Children and Youth (ASCY), all child care and EarlyON programs were provided a cultural guide, Indigenous books and orange shirts. The entire early years community wore orange on September 30, 2021 to remember and honour the survivors of residential schools and to show a collective commitment to ensure that every child matters. Cultural safety training and book studies are also planned in the future in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action.

Our Early Years Equity and Engagement Advisory committee is developing a system wide workforce equity, diversity and inclusion survey to help inform future priorities to strengthen the system. A number of child care and EarlyON programs have engaged in equity, diversity and inclusion activities and an environmental scan will be completed to help inform next steps.

Staff retention, recognition and well-being:

Child care and early years operators acknowledge the importance of recognizing the critical role that Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) play in supporting children and families, particularly the role they have played through the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff recognition and health and wellness activities are an important component of addressing the shortage of staff and supporting the retention of high quality RECEs staff. In response to this, staff retention and recognition will be tied into our existing Hamilton Early Years Quality Program. Systems priority funding will be made available to child care and early years operators to promote health, wellness and recognition activities that support staff retention.

To date, we have not received additional information on the National Child Care plan that was announced during the Federal budget. Although very few details are available at this time, the priorities identified by the Early Years Community Plan and the CSND Division align well with those of the National Child Care Plan, specifically increased access to child care, affordability/reduced parental fees, and growing a high-quality early years workforce. Staff will continue to keep Council updated as more information becomes available.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

None