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**Subject:** ProKids Program – Providing Recreational/Cultural Opportunities for Children/Youth 2019 Year End Report and COVID-19 Impact

**Report to:** Public Health and Social Services Committee

**Report date:** Tuesday, September 8, 2020

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## **Recommendations**

That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

## **Key Facts**

## **Financial Considerations**

- In 2019, 2,244 children and youth from low-income families participated in a sports, recreation or arts program of their choice supported through the ProKids program.
- Every year since the program's inception, Niagara Region has invested \$250,000 to support the healthy development of disadvantaged children.
- The YMCA of Niagara, the program placement coordinating agency for ProKids, also seeks additional donations, funds and in-kind contributions. In 2019, the YMCA reported that it garnered additional resources of an approximate value of nearly \$404,469 to support the program.
- On March 17, 2020, the registration portal for the ProKids program was closed to new applications due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.
- Due to concern for vulnerable children from high needs families during this time, a new program, 'Adventure Camp', a five week summer program for children ages 6 to 12 years, provided by the YMCA of Niagara, was developed.
- The new program supported 360 children, at no cost to families, with financial support from the Government of Canada through the Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Funding, Emergency Community Support Fund through United Way Niagara, Canada Summer Jobs, Family and Children's Services Niagara, and 2020 ProKids funding.

## **Financial Considerations**

The Niagara Region investment of \$250,000 to support the ProKids program was made available through the approved 2019 Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities

(SAEO) budget (100% levy). Part of the \$250,000 in funding is used to support program delivery costs (20%), and the rest for purchasing registration fees.

The YMCA of Niagara is the program placement-coordinating agency. In this role, the YMCA works to maximize funding by seeking in-kind contributions (waived or reduced registration fees) from participating sports clubs and programs, as well as donations from the private sector and funds from social service agencies. In 2019, additional contributions valued at \$404,469 were received and combined with the annual investment from Niagara Region. Total funding provided to this program was \$654,469, allowing 2,244 children and youth from across Niagara to participate in a sport, recreation or arts program.

## **Analysis**

ProKids was implemented in Niagara as a pilot project in January 2000, after the release of research from McMaster University, which concluded that investing dollars to support the involvement of children and youth in sport and recreation activities was a sound investment in the healthy development of children, benefitting their families and the community.

The ProKids program supports the participation of financially disadvantaged children and youth (0 to 17 years) in the sport, recreation or arts program of their choice. The program operates across all 12 municipalities within Niagara. This program helps to cover some or all of the registration costs for families with an annual taxable income below \$40,000.

Each child or youth receives an allocation up to \$100 annually to participate. The ProKids Coordinator works to ensure each \$100 allocation is maximized by leveraging in-kind contributions from sports clubs and recreation programs (through reduced or waived registration fees), donations made by private business and/or fundraising events, and community foundation funds.

In addition to covering the cost of registration fees, the ProKids Coordinator has developed partnerships with organizations to provide free equipment to those families who need added support, thus removing any additional barriers to participation.

ProKids works in partnership with other programs, such as Canadian Tire Jumpstart to support as many families as possible. Families can apply to ProKids at any time throughout the year, and can reapply each year. Because of this, families can turn to

the ProKids program if their application to another program is declined. This can occur for a number of reasons such as: program funds have been depleted; the timing between the funding and the activity starting do not coincide; or the family has already received financial support through another program.

In addition to Regional funding, community and individual donations are crucial to program success and viability. Since the launch of the pilot project in January 2000, donations, and in-kind contributions have a total value of over \$3 million dollars, and have benefited just over 41,000 children and youth. Over the years, the ProKids program has grown to include approximately 152 sports clubs, recreation and arts organizations offering children and youth activities such as swimming, rowing, hockey, soccer, dance, acting/drama, arts, Scouts, Brownies, etc.

The following table provides a breakdown of the type of activity for the 2,244 children who participated in the ProKids program during 2019

Type of Activity	Number of Children
Arts (dance, drama and visual art)	235
Sports	684
Memberships	1325
Total	2244

### **Shift in service due to COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the provincial government to mandate the closure of many different recreational programs and facilities in March 2020, and as a result, the decision was made to temporarily cease accepting new applications for the ProKids program. Due to the growing concern of the negative impacts of pandemic related isolation on the social and emotional development of at risk children, a number of community agencies (YMCA of Niagara, Family and Children's Services of Niagara and Niagara Region Community Services) came together to discuss the opportunity to develop a new model for a modified camp program specifically for vulnerable school age children aged 6 to 12 years.

The Adventure Club was a five week summer program for children ages 6 to 12 years, provided by the YMCA of Niagara. Adventure Club was offered to families at no cost, with financial support from the Government of Canada through the Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Funding, Emergency Community Support Fund through United Way Niagara, Canada Summer Jobs, Family and Children's Services Niagara, and 2020 ProKids funding.

Referrals to the program were made by 11 agencies, including the Boys and Girls Clubs, YWCA, Niagara Falls Community Health Centre, Niagara Region Community Services, Niagara Regional Native Centre, among others. These referrals have supported 360 children, who participated in the Adventure Club located in St. Catharines or Niagara Falls.

### **Considerations for 2021 budget**

On August 14, 2020, the provincial government announced \$8 million in funding to support sport organizations for children across Ontario, with additional costs to ensure health and safety measures. While this is certainly good news for service providers involved with the ProKids program, at this time Children's Services is unsure what the provision of recreation will look like for 2021, as operations during the global pandemic will be the decision of individual service providers and also impacted by any surge in case numbers or new public health directives.

The ProKids program has operated in the same manner since its inception in 2000. The pandemic's impact on the ProKids program this year and the uncertainty for the year ahead is prompting the team to review the current service delivery model, and confirm if it will meet the needs of the community in the year ahead.

Children's Services will complete a review to determine the feasibility of an alternate service delivery model, based on the experiences of the children and referral agencies this year. It will be important to also verify the viability of service providers in the months ahead, to understand the full scope of services and programs that will be available moving forward. Included in the review will be a look at the costs associated with program delivery, all within the objective of supporting healthy development of disadvantaged children/those living in poverty, benefitting their families and the community.

## **Alternatives Reviewed**

If warranted, any alternate service delivery model for the delivery of the ProKids or similar program in 2021 will be brought forward to Regional Council through the 2021 budget approval process.

## **Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities**

The provision of recreation and cultural activities for children and youth supports their healthy development, and is an investment in our future workforce. This investment supports Council's commitment to Healthy and Vibrant Community.

## **Other Pertinent Reports**

- COM 28-2019 ProKids Program – Providing Recreational/Cultural Opportunities for Children/Youth 2018 Year End Report.

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### **Recommended by:**

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*This report was prepared in consultation with Lori Bell, Manager, and reviewed by Darlene Edgar, Director.*

## **Appendices**

None