

April 13, 2021

Re. Report COM 6-2021- Managing the licensed child care system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dear Councillors,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this report on child care, which is critical to the social and economic recovery from the pandemic and to the future development of our communities. The YWCA Niagara Region appreciates our working relationship with Regional staff and many community partners who we work with to provide essential services across Niagara.

As part of a network of YWCA's across Canada and around the world, our organization serves women and children and families by providing emergency shelter, supported housing, life skills and support for families. Access to safe, affordable, quality child care is critical to our work and our vision of an equitable future where women and families thrive.

This report highlights how the pandemic has exacerbated decades of pressures and challenges in the child care system: a shortage of qualified staff, fewer child care spaces available, expensive health and safety requirements, and not enough subsidies to support the financial needs of local families. Of course these are not new challenges; the child care system has been under strain for decades. The pandemic has exacerbated the systemic issues but it has also highlighted how critical child care is to the social and economic health of all communities and for women to participate in the economy.

In Niagara the child care needs and pressures are well-known. For years we have read reports about waitlists, increasing costs, shortages of staff, and poor wages for workers. And as the report shows, the pandemic has created an even bigger problem with the loss of more than 6,660 licensed child care spaces - a massive loss which is likely only the tip of the iceberg, with many unlicensed, unregulated child care spaces not officially counted.

Now what are we going to do about it?

Over the last year, we have read research articles, op eds, policy discussions, politicians at all levels of government, from all political parties talk about child care policy. We have heard from [Dr. Kate Bezanson](#) a national expert on social policy speaking across the country about how child care is the critical social infrastructure that is necessary for social and economic recovery.

Locally, the [Niagara Workforce Planning Board and Niagara Community Observatory](#) have also analyzed the data to confirm that “women have overwhelmingly borne the brunt of employment losses in Niagara since the pandemic shutdown in March and continue to do so” and that child care will be critical to getting women back to work, contributing to the economy.

The [Ontario Chamber of Commerce](#) has reported on this in the She-covey report, as well as the [Canadian Chamber of Commerce](#), YWCA Canada, industry associations, banks and economic organizations across the country. Everyone is paying attention to the child care crisis and what further challenges are coming.

We have even heard this Regional Council pass a motion in Aug. 2020 affirming that “the economic recovery of the Niagara Region and Ontario is dependent on families having access to safe, reliable and affordable child care” and directing Niagara Region to advocate for child care as part of the pandemic recovery plan to the province and to work with the federal government to develop a national child care strategy.

Regardless of what the upper levels of government are willing to do, we need to find solutions for the economic and social recovery of our communities. As Dr. Robin Williams, Niagara’s former Medical Officer of Health said on International Women’s Day, “Everything is broken - what a time to fix it.”

In light of this report being presented for information, we are suggesting the following next steps for Council’s consideration:

- That the report be referred to the Planning and Economic Development committee for consideration. Child care is not just a social issue - it is an economic imperative.
- That the Region’s Economic Development department get involved and work collaboratively with local area municipalities and economic development experts to get involved in the child care recovery plan.
- That the Region works together with the Women’s Advisory Committee, business groups and chambers of commerce to develop a plan to advocate for Niagara’s needs, further affirming Council’s motion in Aug. 2020.
- Develop a child care plan for Niagara. While the Region’s Children’s Services department is responsible for the legislative responsibilities to license, monitor, enforce

and ensure compliance, it can also play a role in planning for the future that includes the three pillars of accessible, affordable and quality child care.

- Address the wage equity issue. In the development of a child care plan there must also be a focus on filling positions with qualified staff that are paid a fair living wage that reflects the value of their work as an essential pillar of our community. Wage inequity in the care sector has been a long-standing issue. For any child care plan to be stable and sustainable it must address this issue.
- Child care is the foundation of recovery planning and the future prosperity and equity of the entire region of Niagara. This is not only an issue for Public Health and Social Services Committee to receive information - it must be a full team Niagara effort to develop a targeted plan, actions and investment of time, focus and creativity.

Child care is a critical ingredient in all of the Region's economic objectives and strategic plans. It is an economic issue, a social issue, an equity issue, a business issue, and a future building opportunity. Child care is critical to Niagara's economic recovery, to get women back to work, to re-open businesses, to increase our output and opportunity and to achieve the bold future visions this council has set for itself: to achieve a prosperous, safe and inclusive community.

As always, the YWCA is here to work with you, as are many service providers, women's groups, business organizations and policy experts to address this pressing issue. As a YWCA and part of a national network that is actively advocating to address the issues of child care, we can help amplify the messages at a provincial and national level as well as support the development of local strategies.

If we want the community to recover from the devastating impacts the pandemic has had and for women to thrive, as has been stated, this is an essential component for success.

Thank you,

Elisabeth Zimmermann
Executive Director

And

Julie Rorison
Board President