

Area child care moving to intergrated system

By Sarah Sobanski

Area child care centres are transitioning to work better together and for the community.

Hastings County is home to two of four provincially-funded child and family programs that run across the province ? Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYC) and Child Care Resource Centres (CCRC). The closest to home is North Hastings Children's Services (NHCS) in Bancroft.

Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres programming such as OEYCs and CCRCs are becoming a part of the Ministry of Education, says Sheleena Forfar, children services planner for the county.

?Under the Ministry of Children and Youth Services the approach was really seeing children's services as a social service and under the Ministry of Education it's really seen as a continuum of care, a continuum of education and a huge focus on early childhood development,? said Forfar during her presentation to Hastings Highlands council.

NHCS is a part of the county's Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centre Advisory Council. Executive director for NHCS Jessica Anderson said she's encouraged by the province's goal to transform the early years and child care system.

?As the only current Ontario Early Years Centre, and licensed child care provider in North Hastings, we are confident the process will result in strengthening our capacity to deliver quality services,? said Anderson. ?We serve on the [county's council] and are very involved in the planning. NHCS plays a major role in advocating for equitable services in the north. The county is aware of the broad range of services we currently provide.?

According to Forfar, the transition is happening after the province researched what opportunities Early Years had and which would best benefit children and their families.

More than 1,050 county community members participated in consultations. This included surveying 717 parents and 141 service providers including educators. More than 200 focus groups were also conducted.

?What they discovered is that even despite the fact that there are four programs and service available, parent awareness was still really limited. Parents and families still weren't coming to these programs even though there was all these free programs available to them,? said Forfar.

These programs were implemented more than a decade ago. They're constantly changing, as are the communities they're meant to serve.

?Communities look different,? Forfar added. ?Towns, cities [and] rural ? they all look very different than they did 15 years ago. The geographies have changed as well.?

Some communities were found to have fewer services available than others as time progressed. The transition focuses on integrating the programs to be more accessible, well-balanced and better designed for the children and communities they serve.

?For example you might have one community that has six Ontario Early Years Centres, and none of the other three or, for example, they might have an early years centre and literally, across the road, a parent and new family literacy centre in a school and they weren't working together integrating services,? said Forfar.

Forfar also noted that research into child development has greatly improved, strengthening the need to update and integrate provincial programs.

?The decisions that had been made 15 years ago really weren't rooted in that evidence based research. There's been so much that has happened in the 15 years that they're reevaluating that in order to make decisions.?

Reports detailing localized figures from the county's community consultations are set to come out later this year.