

Children's services seeking public's help

By Tony Pearson

The availability of child care is linked to economic development, according to Jessica Anderson, executive director of North Hastings Children's Services. Yet recent cost increases, including a significant increase in their water and wastewater bill, as well as mounting hydro costs, threaten the ability to provide it. Utilities costs were \$22,000 in 2016, and will be even higher this year. Anderson has sent a letter to parents and to the community at large asking for donations to keep the child care centre open. "Bancroft is seeking to attract new businesses and new families," noted Anderson, "Professional and entrepreneurial couples need child care. If it isn't available, they'll look elsewhere." Pointing out that NHCS is the only licensed day care in all seven municipalities in North Hastings, Anderson further observed that if they have to shut down, all that will be available are unlicensed private homes.

She stated that the rate increases last year are not enough to cover increased costs. She drew attention to the disparity which leaves northern centres receiving \$3 to \$12 less per child per day than those in the south. She also noted that their family resource and early years funding has been frozen since the 1990s, not even allowing cost-of-living increases. "Yet we have very few economies to make. We can't turn the heat down. And we have to obey provincial guidelines which drive up costs" for example, we must install a new toilet. Of course, this in turn will drive up our water and sewer bill."

It's not just the day care centre that worries Anderson.

"We also offer in-school and after-school programs, parenting support, playgroups, and child literacy programs. We believe these are essential because of the special needs in our area. The Canada-wide Early Development Instrument, which measures learning and social skills in kindergarten children, indicates that about 40 per cent of area children "that's two out of five" aren't meeting the development standards for their age.

"A lot of them show a lack of social and communication skills," Anderson continued. "That puts them at risk for a number of undesirable outcomes later in life, including criminal behaviour. That's why we also run violence prevention programs in the schools, in an effort to cut down bullying and school yard fighting. In all, we served over 1,500 children last year.

"So we need to invest in our children's intellectual and social development, not cut it back. We shouldn't add to the financial burden of making it possible "unless we want to endanger our own children's prospects for academic achievement and eventual labour force success.

"As it is, our area has family income levels which are nearly a third below the provincial average. The number of Bancroft children in low-income families is double the national average. A third of our children live in lone-parent households. The instance of family food insecurity is double the Canadian rate. Cutting back child care can only make their situation worse."

"It's incredible what we have to do to find funding to keep our door open and our programs operating." That's why she's now reaching out to the community for contributions, to meet these new costs, and keep day care and child development affordable.

"Please e-mail me at janderson@nhcs.ca if you can help."