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REPORT

Meeting Date: April 18, 2013

Early Learning and Child Care Task Force

DATE:

March 21, 2013

REPORT TITLE: LEARNING IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD: REVIEW AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

FROM:

Janet Menard, Commissioner of Human Services

# RECOMMENDATION

That the Early Learning and Child Care budget provide \$450,000 to fund the Learning In Our Neighbourhood (LION) program.

#### REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- Learning in Our Neighbourhood (LION) is a well established, mobile program that provides a variety of workshops, early learning programs and services to families in the Region of Peel who may otherwise not have access to these resources.
- In 2012, the LION program received well over 17,000 visits by almost 2,000 children, parents and caregivers, of which 500 were recent immigrants.
- An independent review of the LION program concluded that it is a valuable family resource with potential to strengthen community capacity and support children's early
- The LION program 2013 budget is \$450,000.
- A recent increase in Provincial funding for Early Learning and Child Care allows the Region to redirect the necessary funding within the Early Learning and Child Care budget.

#### DISCUSSION

# 1. Background

# a) The Learning In Our Neighbourhood (LION) Program

The Learning in Our Neighbourhood (LION) program is an innovative and collaborative program that has been providing parent-child interactive play-based programs with a language, literacy and numeracy focus. Since its inception in 2009, LION programming has been delivered primarily on retrofitted recreational vehicles (RVs) in isolated and vulnerable communities in Peel. In 2012, the LION program received well over 17,000 visits by almost 2,000 children, parents and caregivers including 500 recent immigrants.

The LION program is delivered in a partnership between the Region of Peel, Child Development Resource Connection Peel, Malton Neighbourhood Services, Mississauga Parent-Child Resource Centres, Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, Peel

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District School Board, Brampton Library, Mississauga Library System and Peel Children and Youth Initiative/Success by Six.

# b) Current Funding Status

The LION program was originally funded through Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). CIC funding ceased in June 2012 as a result of a narrowing of their mandate due to decreased federal immigration funding to Ontario and Peel. In April 2012, Regional Council approved a one-time withdrawal of \$270,000 from Best Start Reserves (R1258) to fund the LION program from July 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012.

As part of the 2013 budget process, Council approved a \$200,000 annual contribution in Regional funding to the LION program contingent upon additional external funding. The LION Steering Committee has made formal requests for financial support to the Brampton Rotary Club, Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, Peel District School Board, and Scotiabank. Requests for external ongoing project and core funding have been unsuccessful to date. The LION Steering Committee will continue to seek community financial support and any funding received will be deducted from the Region's annual contributions.

# c) Current Service Delivery Model

LION programming is delivered at 15 locations in Peel. Three retrofitted recreational vehicles (RVs) are used at 10 of the locations. Two staff are required to operate each of the large RVs to safely drive, park and set up the vehicles. Maximum participation on the RVs is 15 children, parents and caregivers. Due to the limited physical space on the RVs, LION programming is also delivered at five land spaces in the community, allowing for more participants to attend the sessions.

### 2. Review of the LION Program

A consultant was retained to perform an independent review of the program. The scope of the consultation included analyzing the program model, assessing the mobility aspect of service delivery, reviewing program operations and outcomes and funding.

The review concluded that the LION program has much to offer Peel families and has an important role in establishing contacts between families by reducing isolation and building adult relationships while supporting children's early learning. The consultant outlined the value in increasing LION access to Peel's diverse families through three key recommendations:

- 1) Build on the unique mobility component of the LION;
- 2) Increase program focus on strengthening parent capacity; and
- 3) Reduce the use of the RV for program delivery by securing more land/community space.

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## 3. Future LION Program Model

If the LION program is able to continue operations, the following enhancements would be implemented:

# a) Build on the unique mobility component of the LION

Mobility is one of the most important elements of the program and is what separates it from other family resource programs, such as an Ontario Early Years Centre. For parents and caregivers, the LION program is a temporary conduit to supports and services in their broader community, and it also provides them an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills related to caring for their children.

Refocusing the mobility aspect of the program would involve reducing the length of stay of the LION in each neighbourhood to nine months before moving on to another community. This shorter timeframe broadens the impact of the program as it will allow services to be provided to a wider range of the Region's neighbourhoods.

## b) Increase program focus on strengthening parent capacity

Program staff will provide a more focused approach on building stronger relationships between adult participants. Building parent capacity and strengthening social connectivity are recognized as being important to the continued well being of children and families. In essence, building parent capacity is a key component of raising healthy children. This would support findings from the latest research report released by the Peel Children and Youth Initiative, *Building Healthy Child Development* (2011), which indicates that it is important to "develop more informal opportunities to engage parents in 'popular' sites, such as local parks, in activities that help to build and foster informal social supports among parents". Program staff will develop relationships with community members and work with them to create an exit strategy to shape their own program prior to the LION moving on to a new community.

### c) Reduce the use of RVs for program delivery

The LION RVs are aging and beginning to require more repairs. In addition, securing sites large enough to park the RVs is a challenge as they need to have access to specialized electrical outlets for heating and air conditioning. Reducing the use of the RVs also reduces maintenance and fuel costs. The possibility of using a smaller vehicle to transport staff and materials between sites is being investigated.

The reduced use of the RV will not impact the unique mobility component of the LION program as the program will rotate through different neighbourhoods (every nine months). Program staff will secure short term land/community space in locations such as recreation centres, local schools and places of worship. This will allow more children, parents and caregivers to participate in each session. It also requires less staff hours as programming can be facilitated by one person, as opposed to two people for the RV.

Increasing the use of land/community space in Brampton and Mississauga would provide an opportunity for an RV to support the Caledon area, where rural outreach is required, as well as support other isolated and underserved neighbourhoods where land space is not yet available due to new community development/construction.

The future program model has an estimated operating cost of \$450,000.

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## 4. Benefits of LION Program

The LION program provides two key program components. The first component is providing early learning experiences and socialization for infants, toddlers and preschoolers that will help prepare them for entry into the school system. Participants of the LION program were surveyed in the fall of 2011 as part of the Family Resource Program Survey, which is distributed to all Family Resource Programs (FRP) across Canada. The FRP Survey includes 35 questions covering information about the participating families and the resources, knowledge and support given to the families by the family resource programs. LION parents reported several benefits from attending the program, such as an overall understanding of their child's development and learning needs.

The second component is helping immigrants integrate with the community by supporting isolated and vulnerable families to make connections with each other and local services (settlement, employment and language support programs). The LION provides added value as Peel has one of the highest volumes of recent immigrants with 22,000 arriving annually (2011 Portraits of Peel: A Community Left Behind).

A survey recently conducted by the Peel Children and Youth Initiative demonstrates why a program, such as LION, which offers support to parents in a casual setting that fosters the building of relationships, is so important. The survey revealed that 73 per cent of parents polled said they were likely to use a program with a significant amount of parent support. The results of the survey also showed that parents who access informal supports were more likely to access other programs and services available in the broader community. If families are able to access local services, they will be less likely to feel disconnected from their community and will be better able to achieve their goals. One of the stakeholders interviewed as part of the LION review emphasized this concept when she said that the LION program is important as a "catalyst for starting a community conversation" and "building cohesion".

### FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no overall net impact to the Region's 2013 budget. The 2013 Regional budget for Early Learning and Child Care (\$112 million) can provide the estimated \$450,000 in expenditures for the LION program.

With the increase in Provincial funding for Early Learning and Child Care, as referenced in the report of the Commissioner of Human services, dated April 18, 2013, titled "2013 Early Learning and Child Care Funding Distribution and Early Learning System Planning", there is sufficient flexibility in the budget to fund the LION program.

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#### CONCLUSION

The LION program is an important component in a range of programs and services that support children and families throughout Peel Region. By moving towards a land/community space delivery model, the program will reach out to more families that are not able to access mainstream programs. By refocusing on developing parent-to-parent relationships and early learning for young children, the LION program will continue to play a key role in the development of healthy communities and high functioning families, building on its successes to date and meeting the continuing high demand for the program.

Janet Menard

Commissioner of Human Services

**Approved for Submission:** 

D. Szwarc, Chief Administrative Officer

For further information regarding this report, please contact Sonia Pace at extension 3807 or via email at sonia.pace@peelregion.ca

Authored By: Jeffrey Barillas, Sharon Casey, and Anisa Chernecki

c. Legislative Services
Manager, Financial Support Unit (FSU)