

HS-83-1

For Information

DATE: October 19, 2009

REPORT TITLE: **THE EXPANDED EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM WITHIN PEEL SHELTERS**

FROM: Janet Menard, Commissioner of Human Services

OBJECTIVE

To inform Council of the substantially increased service levels provided at the shelter-based Children's Early Learning Drop-In Program.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- As part of the Human Services 2009 budget, Regional Council approved the hiring of a third complement staff member for the Children's Early Learning Drop-In Program within Peel Shelters.
- As a result of the additional staffing, the program has substantially expanded to provide six hours of daily program time at each of the three shelter locations.
- The additional staffing translates into the provision of 40 additional hours of direct programming per week.
- Research shows that early and consistent intervention strategies can help children learn to overcome many of the detrimental effects of their homelessness experiences. This program is one such strategy.

DISCUSSION

1. Shelter Program Overview

Becoming homeless is an extremely traumatic and stressful event for families. Research shows that impacted children are susceptible to developmental and language delays, withdrawal, aggression, sleep disorders and mental health problems. While research paints an overwhelmingly bleak picture, there is hope that with early and consistent intervention strategies children can learn to overcome many of the detrimental effects of their experiences. The drop-in early learning program is one such strategy.

Children's Services offers a drop-in early learning program that provides intervention supports for children zero to six years of age at three shelter locations throughout Peel: Interim Place North, Interim Place South and Peel Family Shelter.

In an effort to mitigate some of the effects of homelessness, outreach workers provide practical supports which meet the children's unique social and emotional needs. Programming allows children the opportunity to play in a safe environment for an extended period of time, develop high-quality trusting relationships with staff, experience the benefits

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of a predictable routine, and work towards meeting their developmental milestones. The learning environment offers practical interventions that build children’s resiliency and confidence, and provides the children with a safe place to express their emotions and anxieties in an appropriate manner. In the words of one appreciative parent *“My son is interacting with children better. He is happy and talks about things he’s done in the program. Nikki (the staff Early Childhood Educator) listens to him and he’s opening up more. He’s able to discuss his feelings better instead of acting out. My son is happy and I know he is safe in there.”*

While children participate in the program, parents are provided with personal time to secure housing or access counselling services. The program also provides important respite time to complete chores or spend a few minutes alone assessing their feelings and situation knowing their child is in a safe, nurturing environment. Although programming is directed primarily towards the children, parents are encouraged to participate when possible, as outreach workers seize the opportunity to further develop positive parenting skills and model supportive parenting strategies.

2. Staffing

Due to staffing constraints, the Children’s Drop In Program was previously offered for two and half hours per day at the Interim Place locations and five hours per day at the Peel Family Shelter location. As part of the Human Services 2009 budget, Regional Council approved the hiring of a third complement staff member. As a direct result of the additional staffing, the program has been expanded to provide six hours of daily programming (three hours in the am and three hours in the pm) at each of the three shelter locations.

Increased staffing has meant that staff members are no longer required to travel between programs allowing for extended program times. One specific staff member is now assigned to each individual location. This has allowed staff the opportunity to develop stronger relationships with shelter staff, children and families; and has afforded the time to participate in case conferences. This participation is vital as drop-in staff can provide unique insights regarding observed behaviours and parent/child relationships.

3. Program Statistics

The number of children supported within the three locations is as follows:

Time Frame	Number of Children Served
January 2008 - December 2008	193
January 2009 to August 2009	218
Projected number of children that will be served January 2009 to December 2009	280 (This represents an anticipated year over year increase of 90 children)

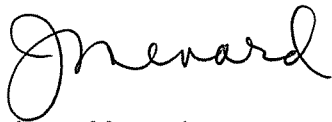
Interestingly, recently lengthened program hours have resulted in an unanticipated increase in demand for service by families that are experiencing homelessness. This may be due to the fact that the newly available extended programming is even more beneficial as it provides a more practical amount of time for parents to conduct independent activities while the children are fully supervised by competent trained professionals.

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CONCLUSION

The Children's Drop-In Program staffing increase has had a significant effect on the quality and amount of direct programming the Region is able to provide to the vulnerable children who find themselves in our shelters. The children and families that access this program have benefitted from the increased accessibility and duration of service available to them. This valuable Regional program also fully supports the objectives of the Human Services Plan which include accessible, high quality, client centered services that are reflective of community need.



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Commissioner of Human Services

Approved for Submission:



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