



## REPORT FOR ACTION

### **Expanding Indigenous-led Early Years Programs and Services**

**Date:** August 18, 2017

**To:** Community Development and Recreation Committee

**From:** General Manager, Children's Services

**Wards:** All

#### **SUMMARY**

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This report seeks to inform the Community Development and Recreation Committee of a community planning process intended to lead to an increase in the number of culturally relevant child care spaces and expand access to child and family programs for Indigenous children and families in Toronto.

Children's Services is working in partnership with the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) to complete a community needs assessment that will inform project proposals to be submitted to the Ministry of Education (MEDU) for consideration under the 'Journey Together' initiative. Children's Services will report back to the Community Development and Recreation Committee on what proposals have been approved and funded by MEDU once the division is informed of any outcomes.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The General Manager, Children's Services recommends that:

1. The Community Development and Recreation Committee receive this report for information.

#### **Equity Statement**

The expansion of Indigenous early years programs provides an opportunity for Children's Services and the City of Toronto to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Actions #5 and #12 that address the need for the

development of culturally appropriate parenting programs and early childhood education for Indigenous families

Indigenous families in Toronto have echoed the need for expanded Indigenous early years programs and services in many community consultations. Toronto Children's Services recognizes the demand for expansion of culturally-specific child care in the 2015-2019 Service Plan through Strategic Direction #11: Work with the Aboriginal community to increase the number of culturally-specific spaces for Aboriginal children through a variety of approaches including supporting the viability of new and existing Aboriginal child care centres

The expansion of Indigenous-led early years programs and services through the Journey Together initiative will increase access to culturally relevant child care and child and family supports, leading to enhanced well-being for Indigenous children and families in Toronto.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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This report has no financial impact. The General Manager of Children's Services will report back when further information is available on approved projects.

The Deputy City Manager & Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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On May 5th, 2015, City Council adopted the Children's Services' Service Plan for 2015-2019. The Service Plan is a vital document that guides the division in the planning and delivery of services for children and families in Toronto. Over 3000 families, service providers and other community partners contributed to the development of this plan. Indigenous communities were specifically consulted as part of the development process. This engagement led to strategic actions focused on increasing access for Indigenous children and families, including the expansion of Indigenous early years programs and services.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.CD3.3>

## **COMMENTS**

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### **Background**

On May 30, 2016 the Province of Ontario announced The Journey Together: Ontario's

Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. The Province of Ontario will invest \$250 million provincially over the next three years to "address the legacy of residential schools, close gaps and remove barriers, support Indigenous culture, and reconcile relationships with Indigenous peoples".

The Ministry of Education's initiative under Journey Together will provide up to \$93.5 million in new funding over the next two years to expand Indigenous early years programs and services across the province. Urban Indigenous communities (formerly termed 'off-reserve' communities) will see up to \$70 million over the next two years (including capital investments) for child care and child and family programs delivered by Indigenous organizations. Ongoing annual operating funding of up to \$30 million will be distributed starting in 2018-2019.

Children's Services was informed of this mandate to work with Indigenous partners as the service system manager to plan locally for expanded Indigenous early years services on November 3rd, 2016. Planning funding was available from MEDU to assist with a local needs assessment process. Children's Services submitted an application for planning funds on Nov 30 2016, and received approval for a total of \$109,000. Using these resources, Children's Services formally contracted with TASSC to lead the needs assessment towards developing project proposals to expand Indigenous child care and child and family centres.

## **Comments**

'Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples' is a provincial initiative to address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. The Ministry of Education, through its initiative under 'Journey Together' aims to increase the number of culturally relevant child care spaces and expand access to child and family programs for Indigenous children and families who live outside a First Nation community.

Ministry of Education (MEDU) will fund select proposals from those jointly submitted to MEDU by Toronto Children's Services and local Indigenous planning partners under the Journey Together Initiative. Project proposals are due to the province by September 29, 2017. The Province has not provided a timeline for approval of submissions.

Children's Services is working in partnership with TASSC to complete a community needs assessment that will inform project proposals. Indigenous families, children, elders, Indigenous service providers and other relevant community stakeholders (including Toronto Public Library and Toronto Public Health) have been consulted about the needs of Indigenous children and families. The needs assessment also includes data from service providers and Well Living House (an Indigenous research unit at St. Michael's Hospital), as well as recommendations from local and Canadian-specific Indigenous early learning and care research and reports.

Key themes that emerged from consultations with the diverse stakeholders include the need for increased access to Indigenous cultural programming for families and children including accessible ways to learn Indigenous languages and opportunities for families

and children to engage around Indigenous cultural knowledge on the land within the city. Other needs that surfaced through the assessment process include culturally safe parenting programs for fathers as well as intensive prenatal and postnatal supports for Indigenous families and infants.

TASSC and Children's Services are developing project proposals based on findings of the needs assessment. Proposals will include specialized support and cultural programs for children and families, as well as enhancements to existing Indigenous child and family programs already offered by Indigenous organizations.

Proposals will also include the development of 'Indigenous early years centres' in specific neighbourhoods across Toronto where new Indigenous child care centres and child and family centres will be co-located, where possible or appropriate. Co-locating child care with a child and family centre provides opportunities for programs to share equipment and space (for example, children attending the child care program could have access to a gross motor room in the child and family centre). Co-location of child and family programs with child care is also recommended in Indigenous research studies; child and family centres can act as a 'hook' for families in connecting caregivers with services, including child care. These centres are envisioned as gathering places where children and families can receive holistic support, make connections and participate in Indigenous cultural programming.

To ensure further wrap-around supports, child care staff complements will be enhanced through the addition of a family support/outreach worker to facilitate connections between families and other support services as well as link Indigenous families in the community to the child care program. The staff complement will also be enhanced by an elder-in-residence who will support early childhood educators in providing culturally relevant programming and a culturally safe space for Indigenous children and families. Overall, this proposed expansion will create approximately 150 culturally relevant child care spaces for Indigenous children.

Indigenous early years centres are proposed for the Mount Dennis, West Don Lands, and East York neighbourhoods. An Indigenous early years centre focused on serving two-spirit children and families is proposed for the downtown core. A standalone child and family centre in Eglinton East-Kennedy Park is also proposed to better serve Indigenous families in Scarborough (a standalone centre is recommended because Indigenous child care is already available to families in Scarborough at the Scarborough Child and Family Life Centre, operated by Native Child and Family Services of Toronto).

Program proposals also include funding for mobile child and family programs to be provided across the city. If funded, these proposals will weave a blanket of services across Toronto for Indigenous children and families, led by Indigenous agencies.

Planning to increase access for Indigenous families in mainstream Ontario Early Years Child & Family Centres (OEYCFC) has also been ongoing and will be detailed in the OEYCFC Initial Plan.

## **Conclusion**

Children's Services and TASSC will submit project proposals to MEDU on September 29th, 2017. Children's Services will report back to the Community Development and Recreation Committee on what proposals have been approved and funded by MEDU once Children's Services is informed of any outcomes.

Going forward, Children's Services will continue to partner with Indigenous communities as well as apply the knowledge gathered through the Journey Together needs assessment to inform the creation of a fulsome Indigenous early years system service plan that will align with Children's Services' 2020-2024 service plan.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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## **ATTACHMENTS**

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