



Special Needs Resourcing Funding and Support

 **MSSA**
ONTARIO MUNICIPAL SOCIAL
SERVICES ASSOCIATION

An aerial photograph of a vast, lush green forest landscape. In the foreground, a wide, calm river flows through the forest, its surface reflecting the surrounding trees and the soft light of the sky. The forest extends to the horizon, with rolling hills and valleys visible. The sky is filled with soft, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset, with wispy clouds catching the light. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The land on which OMSSA operates is the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Ojibwe, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and it is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. We also acknowledge that our Members span an area known as the Province of Ontario which is covered by 46 treaties and agreements.

Executive Summary



The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system has resulted in a historic investment to Canada's child care sector.¹

CWELCC also communicates clear national priorities around ensuring all children have quality early years and child care experiences.

Ontario's action plan for CWELCC focuses on the five following pillars:

1. **Affordability:** Lowering child care fees for families to make child care more affordable, with a goal of achieving an average cost of \$10-per-day for families by March 2026.
2. **Access:** Addressing increasing demand for child care by creating 86,000 new licensed child care spaces across the Province and supporting expansion of child care for priority groups such as children with special needs
3. **Quality:** Increasing Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) compensation and creating a RECE workforce recruitment and retention strategy to promote quality care.
4. **Inclusion:** Ensuring child care expansion plans and early years programs meet the needs of vulnerable and diverse populations, for example, Indigenous communities, newcomers, low-income families, and children with special needs.
5. **Data Reporting:** Monitoring progress towards CWELCC goals, meeting federal data requirements, and evaluating how child care systems support children and families.²

¹ [Early Learning and Child Care Agreements \(Government of Canada\)](#)

² [Canada-Ontario Early Years and Child Care Agreement \(Ontario Government\)](#)

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The 47 Municipal Service System Managers (SSMs) who plan, fund, and manage early years and child care services across Ontario are tasked with implementing the Province's action plan.

Following the policies, requirements, and expectations set out by Ontario's Ministry of Education (the Ministry), SSMs develop local programs and policies responsive to their specific community needs.

One such program area is Special Needs Resourcing (SNR), a core early years and child care service that supports the inclusion of children with special needs in licensed child care settings.³ SNR is a public service provided at no cost to families.

As noted, the Ministry has identified children with special needs as a key population to consider within its access and inclusion CWELCC pillars. The Ministry has further articulated its prioritization of this group through the 2023 Ontario Access and Inclusion Framework.

Yet, despite affirmations that access and inclusion for children with special needs is foundational to CWELCC's success, current Ministry guidelines restrict SSMs from using CWELCC funding for SNR service provision.

The exclusion of SNR undermines SSMs' abilities to meet child care system needs, both currently and as the system continues to grow.

These threats are particularly disruptive in the context of existing challenges SSMs are navigating related to delivering SNR services, such as limited RECE workforce capacity and high SNR caseloads.

³O. Reg 137/15 of the *Child Care and Early Years Act* defines children with special needs as a child whose cognitive, physical, social, emotional, or communicative needs, or whose needs relating to overall development, are of such a nature that additional supports are required for the child.

In recognizing that SSMs are experiencing complex challenges related to SNR services and require responsive action from the province, the Ontario Municipal Social Service Association (OMSSA) has solicited input from Ontario's 47 SSMs related to SNR service provision. OMSSA invited SSMs to submit discussion papers that discussed their local SNR service models, outcome and evaluation approaches, strengths, challenges, needs, and recommendations.

This paper summarizes the 43 discussion paper submissions OMSSA received.

OMSSA anticipates that the SSMs' input will inform the development of Ontario's CWELCC funding formula and policy direction going forward.

The purpose of this input is to enable the Ministry to implement policies to address the SNR-related needs of SSMs across the province.

Findings

In their discussion papers, SSMs described varied approaches to delivering and managing SNR services. Commonly, SSMs discussed tailoring their service model and accompanying outcome measurement strategies to the needs of their local system.

SSMs noted there was value in being able to adapt their service approaches to their local context and appreciated the flexibility in using child care funding to meet SNR needs. Other clear strengths SSMs discussed related to their current approaches included using a resource consultant service model with access to enhanced program supports and specialized services as needed.

As anticipated, SSMs also described facing extensive challenges related to the provision of SNR services. The top SNR-related challenges SSMs noted were the inability to use CWELCC funding for SNR services, limited early years and child care workforce capacity, and high demand for SNR services.

These identified challenges are straining the SNR system, which was reflected in the SSMs' funding utilization, number of children served per year, and SNR referral times and waitlists.

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For the SSMs who provided information about their 2018 and 2023 SNR spending:

75% had spent proportionately more of their child care budget on SNR services in 2023 compared to their 2018 spending. SSMs also typically noted increased service utilization since 2018.

Of the SSMs who reported the number of children served in both 2018 and 2023:

60% indicated that the number of children they served in 2023 had increased by 5% or more compared to 2018 rates.

The growing cost of SNR service delivery and increasing demand for SNR services are resulting in critical issues, such as burnout amongst resource consultants who deliver SNR services, termination of child care placements for children with special needs, and longer wait times to access SNR services.

These challenges are exacerbated in rural and remote regions with large geographical areas where RECE recruitment can be difficult.

As demand for SNR already outpaces the available funding and system capacity in many areas, a growing number of SSMs have either already implemented a waitlist for SNR services or anticipate needing to do so soon.

Long wait times for SNR services actively threaten child care access and inclusion for children with special needs. Further, as CWELCC drives expansion of the child care system, demand for SNR services will also continue to increase.

The current state of SNR services in Ontario is concerning. If the Province fails to act now and appropriately resource the system, there is a real risk that Ontario will fail to achieve its goals related to the CWELCC action plan access and inclusion pillars. As such, OMSSA gathered SSM input and puts forth three key recommendations.

Recommendations

OMSSA applauds and enthusiastically shares Ontario's goals of improving child care access and inclusion for children with special needs. However, the Province's current funding policy approaches are incompatible with these goals, and there are additional system pressures that threaten the ability of SSMs to achieve improved access and inclusion for children with special needs. To address these pressing issues, OMSSA provides the Ministry with the following three recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Fully fund the cost of SNR service delivery as a core component of an inclusive and accessible CWELCC system.



All children in Ontario deserve equitable access to CWELCC spaces. However, this will not be possible if SNR is not fully funded as part of the CWELCC system. SNR is not a supplemental service; it is an essential component of an equitable and accessible child care system.

Under current provincial guidelines, SSMs have flexibility to determine their SNR funding allocations, so long as the SSM dedicates a minimum of 4.1% of their child care allocation⁴ towards SNR service provision. There is strong

agreement across SSMs that the flexibility in the current funding formula supports SSMs in responding to local circumstances and system needs, which in turn promotes quality services and helps minimize waitlists. However, existing funding no longer meets the needs of all SSMs.

SSMs require consistent stable funding for SNR services to appropriately respond to the rapidly expanding child care spaces and the priorities of promoting access and inclusion as part of CWELCC.

- **To facilitate inclusion for all children in licensed child care, OMSSA recommends that the Ministry fully funds the provision of SNR services as a core component of CWELCC, while supporting SSMs to maintain authority over their SNR service models.**

⁴ Less TWOMO allocation, Wage Enhancement/HCCEG, Administration for Wage Enhancement/HCCEG and One- Time Transitional Grant. Ontario Child Care and EarlyON Child and Family Centres Service Management and Funding Guideline 2024.

Recommendation 2: Support capacity building within in the child care and SNR workforces.



The current early years and child care workforce capacity is limited, which strains the SNR providers who support child care.

OMSSA recommends the following actions for the Ministry to take to build capacity in child care and support SNR service providers in the meaningful inclusion of all children in licensed child care.

- *Introduce a sustainable wage grid for RECEs comparable to Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs) in Ontario's school boards. Fair compensation in early years programming will help stabilize the child care workforce and to build capacity for child care programs to deliver inclusive programming. Higher child care capacity will reduce the existing strain on SNR service providers.*
- *Provide direction on foundational principles of quality to support greater consistency across the province, while recognizing the importance of local quality tools in the development and management of quality child care programs.*
- *Enhance ECE training requirements for the Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology related to delivering inclusive child care programming and supporting children with diverse developmental and behavioural support needs.*
- *Maintain capacity building by and for resource consultants, including specialized services from qualified clinicians as an eligible expense under SNR.*
- *Ensure the continued availability of enhanced program staffing for child care programs to hire additional staff to support classrooms with complex needs.*

Recommendation 3: Strengthen inclusive practices and adopt inclusive language.



Achieving inclusion for children of all abilities and needs requires thoughtfulness and a focus on the environments where children spend time.

To this effect, OMSSA recommends the following actions to further inclusion within child care.

- *Collect data on program-level supports provided by SNR, such as the number of classrooms supported annually by SNR services to accurately reflect the scope and impact of SNR service supports being delivered across the province.*
- *Strengthen inclusion requirements in child care licensing and CWELCC funding in alignment with the Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC).⁵*
- *Update SNR terminology to more inclusive language that focuses on describing the service rather than describing the children who use SNR services. OMSSA recommends the term ‘inclusion resource services’ as a replacement for SNR.*
- *Invest in classroom-based staffing supports above and beyond ratio to facilitate greater inclusion of all children in licensed child care. The additional staffing would help programs proactively support access and inclusion rather than having to staff reactively based on needs.*
- *Work with Ministry of Health to ensure access to medical supports for children with medically complex needs are available in licensed child care equivalent to those provided in the public school system.*

By fully funding SNR service delivery, building workforce capacity, and adopting inclusive practices, the Ministry can immediately support SSMs in effectively delivering SNR services, thus enabling SSMs and the Province to achieve Ontario’s vision for an affordable, accessible, inclusive, high quality, and accountable child care system.

⁵ OHRC’s Human Rights-Based Approach to Policy and Program Development

Background



In Ontario, there are 47 Municipal Service System Managers (SSMs) who plan, fund, and manage local early years and child care services across the Province. This includes 37 Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs), who oversee services for upper-tier or single-tier municipalities, as well as 10 District Social Service Administration Boards (DSSABs), who oversee services in regions where no upper-tier municipality exists.⁶

Ontario's Ministry of Education (the Ministry) establishes policies, standards, and reporting requirements for SSMs to in the delivery and management of early years and child care services, including special needs resourcing (SNR) services. The Ministry also allocates funding to SSMs for the delivery of these services.

SNR Funding Context

Provincial funding for early years and child care services has evolved in recent years, both in ways that have assisted as well as challenged SSMs in SNR service provision. In 2013, the Ministry introduced a new early years and child care funding framework that provided SSMs increased flexibility for delivering SNR services. Within this framework, SSMs access a set of early years and child care grants that SSMs can use to meet their individual program needs, with the requirement that SSMs must spend a minimum of 4.1% of their child care allocation on SNR services.⁷ This flexibility has been helpful in enabling SSMs to adapt SNR policies and programs to meet their local communities' needs.

More recently, the Province joined the CWELCC system and introduced the Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement in 2022. Ontario's participation in CWELCC provides a transformational investment to the Province's licensed child care sector and offers significant promise for improvement to the early years and child care system. Since 2022, licensed child care programs participating in CWELCC across Ontario have made significant progress in lowering child care fees for families of children aged six years and younger.⁸ By March 2026, families with children attending CWELCC-enrolled child care programs can expect to pay on average fees of \$10-a-day.⁹

⁶ [Service System Managers for Child Care and Early Years Programs \(Ontario Government\)](#)

⁷ Ontario Child Care Service Management and Funding Guideline 2013

⁸ Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Guidelines 2024

⁹ [Canada-Ontario Early Years and Child Care Agreement \(Ontario Government\)](#)

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As child care has become increasingly affordable to families, more families seek child care. Under the CWELCC system, the Province has tasked SSMs with expanding the licensed child care system by 86,000 spaces to improve families' access to child care. The creation of new spaces will greatly benefit children, families, and communities across the province. However, there is a concern that, along with other vulnerable groups, children with special needs may be disproportionately disadvantaged in accessing CWELCC-funded child care spaces.

Therefore, there is a need to implement a strategic plan to ensure that all children, including children with special needs, have equitable access to licensed child care.

CWELCC Access and Inclusion Framework

In recognizing the need to ensure equitable access and inclusion to child care for all children and families across the province, the Ministry developed Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework. This framework, released in June 2023, intends to support SSMs in developing and implementing child care service system plans that promote equitable child care access and inclusion for all children and families across the province, particularly underserved and vulnerable populations. The framework articulates its vision in the following way:

Ontario's vision for access and inclusion is that more children (of all abilities and socio economic backgrounds) can actively and meaningfully participate in child care, and be supported in forming authentic, caring relationships with their peers and educators.

The framework goes on to share the following about the Province's perspective on inclusion:

The Ministry acknowledges that every Ontarian has their own unique circumstances and that multiple factors that can act as barriers will need to be identified and assessed in the creation of an inclusive system of early child education. The CWELCC system presents an opportunity for Ontario to introduce initiatives that support the needs of diverse and underserved and vulnerable populations, including low-income, Francophone, Indigenous, Black, other racialized and newcomer communities, as well as children with special needs. It aims to support children to have access to inclusive environments where they can participate, play, and learn in meaningful ways, and form authentic caring relationships.

This vision is supported by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which both highlight how all children, including those with special needs, are entitled to the same opportunities – for example to health care, nutrition, education, social inclusion, and protection.

- Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework, June 2023

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Through this framework, the Ministry shares its clear vision for a more accessible and inclusive child care system for all children and families, including children with special needs.

The Access and Inclusion Framework also affirms the Ministry’s commitment to collaborating with SSMs to “gather data, assess barriers to access and inclusion, and support a plan for increased access to affordable licensed child care.”¹⁰ Given that CWELCC funding and policy directions requires continual refinement as CWELCC system implementation continues, this collaboration is essential.

As such, input from the SSMs is needed to ensure appropriate Ministry funding formula and policy direction towards the SSMs’ and Ministry’s goals of access and inclusion. To that end, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) has engaged the SSMs across Ontario to provide necessary input to the Ministry.

OMSSA Engagement with SSMs

OMSSA is a non-profit association who supports, connects, and advocates for its Members, Ontario’s SSMs.¹¹ To inform the Ministry’s CWELCC funding formula and policy, OMSSA invited SSMs to provide input about their local circumstances and challenges related to SNR.

Specifically, OMSSA asked SSMs to submit discussion papers that responded to questions about the SSM’s SNR service model, measurement and evaluation approaches, SNR system capacity and current challenges to service delivery, and recommendations for improvement. A full list of the questions OMSSA posed to SSMs can be found in Appendix A.

¹⁰ Ontario Access and Inclusion Framework (2023)

¹¹ [About OMSSA - Ontario Municipal Social Services Association](#)

Findings

Of the 47 SSMs across Ontario, 43 submitted discussion papers in response to OMSSA's invitation. These findings summarize the perspectives discussed in the 43 SSM submissions.

SNR Service Delivery Models

SSMs discussed a variety of service delivery models and adaptations to suit their unique local context and meet system needs. Some SSMs indicated they deliver SNR services directly to child care programs, whereas other SSMs contract third party community agencies to deliver these services.

Commonly, SSMs discussed using tailored models that provide different services based on needs. Some examples of this tailoring approach included offering both classroom-wide and child-specific supports, short-term and long-term supports, and other tiered service options. SSMs also described their individual approaches to the following SNR service features:

- **Enhanced program supports:** SSMs typically provide resources to support additional short-term staffing above ratio requirements in classrooms with complex needs. Some SSMs directly hire enhanced program staff to support child care centres and others allocate funding to child care centres for the programs to use for this purpose.
- **Specialized consultation services:** SSMs engaged specialized clinical services to support Resource Consultants¹² (RCs) to identify goals, associated strategies, and/or accommodations for children on their caseloads. The clinical services included professionals such as occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, behaviour therapists, physical therapists, and mental health clinicians.
- **Professional learning supports:** SSMs described supporting professional learning and capacity building of child care programs through activities such as RC mentoring, modeling, and workshops for child care programs.
- **Quality initiatives:** Many SSMs noted they deliver quality initiatives to make classrooms more inclusive by requiring program staff to reflect on their program delivery, potential barriers, and existing efforts to deliver accessible and welcoming programs.

¹² Please note the term resource consultant will be used throughout this paper to denote the individual who provides SNR services, however, note some SSMs use a different term such as early interventionist.

Strengths of Current Service Models

SSMs highlighted the following features as helpful and important to maintain in their service models going forward: funding flexibility, resource consultant service delivery models, enhanced program supports, and specialized consultation services. Details are noted below.

Funding Flexibility

Provincial guidelines allow SSMs to determine their own SNR budget with the requirement that SSMs allocate a minimum of 4.1% of their child care allocation to SNR. This flexible model of funding allows SSMs to modify their allocations based on their models of service or existing needs, which in turn minimizes waitlists. In the context of CWELCC this flexibility has helped, however the current funding no longer meets the needs of all SSMs. If the Province wishes to meet its goals around inclusion, SNR must be fully funded as part of the CWELCC system. Insufficient funding will lead to increased prevalence of the challenges raised throughout this paper including longer wait times, inequitable access to spaces and termination of care.

Resource Consultant Model

The SSMs who responded to the discussion paper indicated that RCs are each assigned a group of child care providers who they consistently support to facilitate inclusion in child care programs. Whether RCs are employed by the SSM or a third-party agency contracted by the SSM to deliver the services, a service model where each RC is responsible for supporting a distinct set of child care programs allows for child care programs to access consistent, predictable and high-quality inclusion supports. RCs' relationships with child care providers also offers stability for child care programs during a period where child care programs are experiencing ongoing recruitment and retention issues.

Further, assigning RCs a stable group of programs helps families build trust. One SSM noted, “[Our region] does not have a robust early intervention system [or] clinical complex case managers. Resource consultants are often the first person to get to know the child/family before a diagnosis. These consultants provide hands on, boots-on-the-ground supports.”

When a child who requires SNR services begins attending a child care placement, having a RC assigned to that program facilitates timely SNR service access. Additionally, for families who need to change programs, it is helpful to have a dedicated RC supporting the new program before the child transfers to facilitate seamless service.

Enhanced Program Supports

SSMs noted that enhanced staffing is used as a short-term inclusion support for licensed child care centres to access where they have a classroom with complex needs. SSMs overwhelmingly identified this as a high-demand area that needs to be maintained, with 38 of 43 SSMs identifying this as priority component of their system.

SSMs noted that there is currently an exceedingly high demand for enhanced program staffing because of greater behavioural needs present in child care programs combined with limited workforce capacity related to child care staff recruitment and retention.

Specialized Services

A final service model strength that the majority of SSMs identified was access to specialized services such as occupational therapists, behavioural therapists, speech language pathologists, physical therapists, and mental health therapists. SSMs noted these services provide a crucial support for resource consultants as it gives them the ability to consult with clinicians on goals and strategies to support children receiving SNR services.

Taken together, SSMs greatly appreciated having flexibility to adapt their service models as needed to respond to local circumstances, a RC-based service model built on trusting relationships with child care providers, and access to enhanced program supports and specialized services when needed.

Monitoring and Evaluation Approaches

SSMs reported using a variety of approaches for measuring service outcomes and the quality of SNR service delivery. Most commonly, SSMs collected and monitored the following:

- Ministry Key Performance Indicators (required)
- Family surveys
- Connections to local quality initiatives
- Formal and informal data collection from child care licensees
- Waitlist data
- Staff professional learning (completion and evaluation results)
- RC observations about licensee participation and successful engagement in SNR
- Child outcomes such as transitions to school, number of terminated placements

When asked about the effectiveness of existing Ministry KPIs, SSMs typically agreed that the Ministry KPIs should include recognition of a class-wide support provided by RCs, which is not currently reflected. A new annual KPI could be: Total classrooms supported. Aside from the classroom KPI, SSMs had varied interest and feedback related to KPIs collected.

Current SNR System Capacity

To understand the current SNR system capacity across the province, including how this has changed in recent years, OMSSA asked SSMs to report their funding allocations and SNR utilization rates in 2018 and 2023, along with SSMs' current wait times for SNR services.

Funding Allocation

SSMs were asked to share the percentage of their child care allocation spent on SNR in 2018 as well as in 2023. In total, 36 SSMs provided data to both parts of this question. Of these SSMs, all spent at least 4.1% of their child care allocation in 2018 and 2023 on SNR. Almost all SSMs also exceeded the minimum requirement at both points as well (100% of SSMs in 2018 and 97% in 2023).

Importantly, 75% of SSMs reported spending a larger proportion of their child care budget on SNR in 2023 compared to 2018. SSMs who reported both years' allocations spent an average of 10.76% of their child care budget on SNR services in 2018 and 12.30% in 2023.

For the SSMs who reported spending a similar or reduced proportion of their child care budget on SNR in 2023 compared to 2018, it is possible that this finding can be attributed to increases in the SSMs' overall child care funding, child care room closures resulting from workforce challenges or continuing COVID recovery.

Service Utilization

In addition to exploring funding allocation changes over time, OMSSA asked SSMs to share the changes to SNR service demand. For this question, 25 SSMs provided details of their SNR service utilization rate in both 2018 and 2023. Of these, 60% (n=15) of the SSMs reported a 5% or higher increase in children served in 2023 compared to 2018. The remaining 40% (n=10) of SSMs reported a comparable or decreased number of children served in 2023.

The SSMs who provided service to fewer children in 2023 compared to 2018 noted a few key reasons for the decrease, including lack of child care program staffing, limited staff capacity within child care programs, and instability within the SNR workforce. The lack of child care staffing has resulted in programs closing classrooms and higher SNR waitlists, which are not reflected in SNR caseload data.

Further, the limited capacity of the child care workforce has resulted in child care programs turning away or terminating the placements of children who need inclusion supports, especially children with diagnoses. SSMs also noted that lack of funding for new RC positions and the lack of information on upcoming SNR funding added further strain. Other reasons for decreased service utilization included ongoing pandemic recovery processes and challenges with family readiness to engage in SNR services.

Wait Times

As a third indicator of system capacity, OMSSA asked SSMs to share their SNR wait times. Of the 38 SSMs who responded to this question, SSMs reported a wide range of time frames for service. In some cases, SSMs noted delays of over 100 days for children to access services.

For the SSMs who provided information on whether they maintain a waitlist or not, 24% (n=9) of the SSMs reported maintaining an active SNR waitlist. Some of the SSMs who noted they do not currently keep a SNR waitlist indicated that they anticipate needing to implement one soon in response to growing demand. Further, some SSMs indicated that while they do not have a waitlist for general SNR services, they did have waitlists associated with particular SNR service aspects, such as enhanced program supports or specialized consultative services.

Additional System Capacity Challenges

As discussed above, most SSMs spent a higher proportion of their child care budget on SNR services in 2023 compared to 2018. SSMs also reported providing service to more children per year in this same period. Finally, a growing number of SSMs reported either currently maintain a waitlist for SNR or needing to implement one soon, meaning children and families will keep experiencing delays in accessing necessary inclusion supports.

Beyond these above indicators of system capacity strain, SSMs discussed the presence of increasingly complex needs of children in the child care system, a limited capacity of the child care system to meet children's needs, high SNR caseloads, and child care terminations.

Increased Complexity of Support Needs

SSMs reported finding that children currently attending child care have higher-than-typical behavioural and self-regulation support needs, possibly due to the lingering impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on children's development. 32 of 43 SSMs noted that SNR services are seeing an increase in the number of children with complex needs.

Further, SSMs are currently unable to meet the needs of some children, particularly those with complex medical needs. SSMs cannot use SNR funding for one-on-one support that may be required for children with complex medical needs unlike the public school system. This means that some children with complex needs do not have access to licensed child care.

Some SSMs have been able to find alternative support options, but there is a growing concern that the lack of funding and collaboration with the Ministry of Health may result in a violation of Ontario's Human Right Code.

Limited Ability of Child Care to Meet Complex Needs

While needs within child care programs are increasingly complex, SSMs discussed a limited capacity for the child care system to meet all children's needs. Child care programs are struggling to staff programs, both in terms of number of staff required to provide child care as well as the capacity of those staff.

New RECE graduates are entering the workforce without the skills they need to successfully support inclusion needs in their classrooms, an issue which is further exacerbated by the reality that child care programs are lacking experienced staff to mentor junior staff. Educators are also burning out more quickly because they do not have the tools they need or a stable team to lean on.

With child care programs struggling to function at a more basic level, SSMs noted that classroom educators are viewing children's behavioural needs as overly 'challenging' and 'stressful'. SSMs discussed being concerned that children and families are experiencing increased child care placement terminations, reduced hours at child care, or denial from child care entirely due to their child's needs.

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Increased Reliance on SNR Services

Given the lack of basic inclusion knowledge in licensed child care programs, RCs are receiving referrals for basic child care programming support that, historically, experienced educators at the child care programs would manage through inclusive classroom programming. RCs are then being stretched to take on larger caseloads and support more basic inclusion needs. SSMs have heard that RCs are increasingly receiving referrals that could have been prevented through basic inclusive pedagogical practices which RECEs should have learned in their Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology programs.

Geographically Isolated Regions

The above system strains are exacerbated in Northern, remote, and rural communities with large geographical areas where RECEs can be more difficult to recruit. Additionally, RCs travel long distances between programs which means the frequency of their support is reduced. In some circumstances, child care programs will only see their RCs in-person once per month with virtual visits in between.

In summary, SNR service systems are strained, and SSMs are facing extensive challenges with SNR service delivery. Taken altogether, the SSMs experiences related to SNR services show an increasing demand for SNR services that is outpacing the current SNR system capacity. With the planned expansion of the child care system under CWELCC, the strains on the system are likely to further intensify further if the Ministry does not take responsive action.

Opportunities and Future Directions

For Ontario to reach its access and inclusion goals under the Ontario CWELCC action plan, the Ministry must take responsive action to alleviate SNR system strains. There were several consistent recommendations for the Ministry across the SSMs' papers. These recommendations relate to funding and policy flexibility, child care and SNR system capacity, general inclusive approaches, and administrative support for SSMs.

SNR Funding and Policy Flexibility

There was overall agreement across SSMs that the flexibility in the current funding formula is helpful for SSMs to respond to local service needs and circumstances. However, in order to meet the Province's access and inclusion goals SNR must be fully funded. The inclusion of SNR costs within CWELCC funding would have an immediate positive impact on SNR service delivery across the province. Therefore, OMSSA recommends that the Ministry fully funds SNR as a central component of CWELCC funding.

Capacity Building in the Child Care and SNR Workforces

SSMs provided recommendations related to building capacity in the child care and SNR workforce. One such opportunity is to introduce a stable and equitable wage grid for all licensed child care program staff, which would help stabilize the child care workforce. In turn, increased stability in child care programs allows for capacity building and would alleviate the existing pressures on SNR service providers to provide basic programming support.

Relatedly, there are opportunities for the Ministry to support greater consistency of program quality. Most SSMs have some mechanism for supporting quality in their licensed child care programs, and these quality initiatives pose an opportunity to promote ongoing reflection in programs on inclusive program design. Direction from the Province on foundational principles of quality would support greater consistency across the province. A quality initiative could be further strengthened by the inclusion of those principles in licensing regulations.

Given that SSMs note that recent RECE graduates have limited basic inclusion skills, OMSSA recommends that the Ministry enhance ECE training requirements for the Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology related to delivering inclusive child care programming and supporting children with cognitive, physical, social, emotional, communicative, and/or broader developmental support needs.

OMSSA recommends that the Ministry continue to support capacity building for child care programs through RC mentorship, workshops, and specialized services from qualified clinicians. Lastly, as the current child care system capacity is limited, OMSSA recommends that the Ministry ensures the continued availability of enhanced program staffing to bolster child care programs' abilities to meet the needs of all children in their classrooms.

Inclusive Practices and Language

The third category of recommendations relates to the Ministry adopting more inclusive practices and language. To do this, OMSSA recommends that the Ministry begin to collect data on program-level supports provided by SNR, specifically the number of classrooms supported annually by SNR services rather than only child-specific data. OMSSA also recommends that the Ministry update SNR terminology to more inclusive language that focuses on describing the service rather than describing the children who use SNR services.

Additional actions to move towards more inclusive practices include moving towards a policy framework informed by the Ontario Human Rights Code, investing in classroom-based staffing supports for child care programs, and working to improve access to child care for children with medically complex needs.

Conclusion

The CWELCC system has resulted in a historical investment in Ontario's early years and child care system. This initiative offers enormous potential to increase children and families' access to affordable, inclusive, high quality, and flexible licensed child care.

Under CWELCC, Ontario has set ambitious priorities for SSMs to expand child care spaces and prioritize access and inclusion for underserved populations such as children with special needs.

The SSMs who implement the Province's vision for early years and child care services are committed to achieving these goals but are facing extensive pressures and navigating complex challenges related to SNR services.

Through Ontario's CWELCC funding formula and policy, there is an opportunity for the Ministry to address the key SNR-related constraints and challenges facing SSMs. Specifically, based on the collective experiences and input of 43 SSMs, OMSSA provides the three following recommendations to the Ministry:

1. Fully fund the cost of SNR service delivery as a core component of CWELCC.
2. Support capacity building within the child care and SNR workforces.
3. Strengthen inclusive practices and adopt inclusive language.

SSMs and the Ministry are aligned in their aims to achieve child care access and inclusion for all children. By taking these three actions, the Ministry will remove significant barriers and improve the ability of SSMs to effectively deliver SNR services in a way that meets the needs of Ontario's children, families, child care providers, and the SNR system overall.

Appendix A: OMSSA Discussion Paper Questions for SSMs Related to SNR Services

Service Delivery

1. SSMs deliver SNR in a variety of ways including direct delivery and third-party contracting. Please provide a brief overview of your SNR service delivery model. Please consider all aspects of your funding including direct supports to children and families, supports to licensees and professional learning. (250 words)
2. What aspects of your SNR service delivery model are important for your SSM to maintain going forward and why? (250 words)
3. How do you measure your SNR service outcomes and/or quality? Are the existing Ministry KPIs reflective of your SSMs services? (500 words)

Changes in System Capacity

1. What percentage of child care funding did your SSM use to deliver SNR in 2018 and 2023? Please include the percentage change in funding between 2018 and 2023. (100 words)
2. What has your experience been with SNR usage over the last two years? Are your caseloads and referrals increasing or decreasing? Are there factors that may be driving this change (e.g. pandemic impacts)? Please include the percentage change in the number of children served between 2018 and 2023, example below. (250 words) $(\# \text{ of children served } 2023) - (\# \text{ children served } 2018) / (\# \text{ children served in } 2018) \times 100$
3. What is the average time it takes to transition a child from referral into service (in days)? Does your SSM maintain a waitlist for SNR services? If so, how many children were on it as of January 31, 2024? (100 words)

Changes in System Capacity

1. What are the largest pain points you are experiencing as the SSM related to SNR? What concerns are you hearing from agencies, providers and families (e.g. access issues at the centre/home level for children with identified special needs, access related to children with medically complex needs)? (500 words)
2. Has your SSM experienced any barriers in delivering the necessary SNR services based on the funding available? If so, please describe (250 words)
3. Are you facing workforce challenges related to SNR? What workforce supports do you feel are required in your SSM and/or across the province? Have you implemented any workforce strategies to date for SNR? If so, please list. (500 words)

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Opportunities

1. What opportunities are there to improve SNR service across the province? Do you have any specific recommendations for the Ministry? (500 words)
2. What is working well in your SSM's delivery of SNR? (250 words)
3. What does your SSM need from the province to support access and inclusion for children and families who use SNR services in the continued expansion of CWELCC? (500 words)

Special Needs Resourcing Funding and Support

Thank You

OMSSA would like to thank the following individuals for their assistance in developing this report:

City of Greater Sudbury

- Caitlyn Bourque
- Miranda Mackie

Regional Municipality of Durham

- Melissa Beaucaire
- Emily Witlarge

Regional Municipality of Peel

- Marianna Healey
- Laura Sparling

Regional Municipality of York

- Stacey Hodgson

And all the individuals on the Special Needs Resourcing Committee, including OMSSA Staff, for their dedication to this work.



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