

Summary – Key Findings Child Care Resource and Referral Program Review

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Context

The Provincial Office for the Early Years (Early Years Office) and the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) have partnered to undertake a review of the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) Program. The CCRR Program review is one element of the ongoing quality assurance and business excellence reviews the Early Years Office is leading as part of the implementation of the 2013 *BC Early Years Strategy (Strategy)*.¹

The *Strategy* is government's long-term plan to improve the integration, accessibility, quality and affordability for B.C.'s early years programs, including the child care system. The *Strategy* is grounded in the following goals:

1. Improving **Access** – Helping to ensure that early years programs and services, including child care, are available for children who need them.
2. Improving **Quality** – Ensuring that programs and services are high-quality and evidence-based.
3. Improving **Affordability** – Enabling parent choice through strategic and sustainable financial supports.
4. Improving **Coordination** – Ensuring that government and community programs and policies are integrated to meet the needs of children and families.¹

A key initiative under the *Strategy* is the implementation of a network of Early Years Centres (EYCs) throughout the province to provide families with one-stop, convenient access to a range of services and supports, information and referrals. EYCs are to build on current work in their communities, leveraging existing partnerships and programs.

Source: Provincial Office for the Early Years, The BC Early Years Strategy: An Update, 2015

The overall goal of the review was to assess the CCRR Program's mandate, service delivery and outcomes to identify ways to improve the accessibility and quality of child care resources, as well as ways to enhance coordination and partnership with other programs and services within the context of the *Strategy*.

The Early Years Office engaged independent contractors, Dan Perrin and Kim Thorau of Perrin, Thorau and Associates Ltd., to undertake the review.

Overview of Child Care Resource and Referral Program

The CCRR Program provides support, information and referral services for parents and services to child care providers in communities across B.C.²

The CCRR Program is funded by MCFD and operated through contracts with non-profit community social service agencies. There are 40 CCRR Programs and five CCRR Regional

¹ Government of B.C., The Families Agenda for BC – Building and sustainable quality early years strategy to support BC families

² MCFD website, Child Care Resource and Referral, https://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/childcare/cc_resource.htm

Coordinators located across the province, with a total budget of \$9.47 million for 2015/16. The CCRR Program budget has remained constant since 2007/08 except for minor lifts related to employee compensation.

Most CCRR Programs and Regional Coordinator contracts are held by multi-service agencies providing a range of children and family services.

The mandate of the CCRR Program is to:

- provide information to parents and child care providers;
- provide referrals to parents;
- provide outreach activities to engage child care providers and communities within the geographic area;
- recruit child care providers, including registration of License Not Required (LNR) child care providers as Registered License Not Required (RLNR) child care providers;
- provide training, education and support to parents and child care providers; and,
- provide tools and resources to parents and child care providers³.

Review Methodology

The reviewers were asked to consider the CCRR Program mandate; the services and activities under that mandate; the population of clients served; relationships with other community partners; and the relevance of the mandate within the context of the *Strategy*.

It is important to note that the work undertaken was as a review of the CCRR Program and not an evaluation of the Program or of individual CCRRs.

The review was based on interviews with a sample of stakeholders including CCRRs, EYCs and host agencies of CCRR Programs and/or EYCs and government officials. Those not interviewed were invited to submit written comments. In all, input to the review was received from 37 organizations (26 interviews with a total of 43 individuals, and 11 written submissions). The review was conducted over a five month period from November 2015 through to March 2016.

The review also included an examination of CCRR Program and EYC documentation including budget, sample contracts, activity reports, the *Child Care Resource and Referral Standards Manual* (April 2014), Program information, the *Strategy* and relevant reports.

What We Learned

General Finding

CCRRs are generally providing the services expected of them and are a key element in the child care and early years' ecosystem. At a high level, the review indicates that:

- CCRRs are operating in accordance with their contracted service deliverables;

³ Standard CCRR programs contract language.

- CCRRs have established relationships with other community service providers intended to support and promote their mandate; and
- the CCRR Program mandate and core functions are generally consistent with goals of access, quality and coordination in the *Strategy*.

The following sections follow the structure of the interviews conducted, summarize the findings of the review and raise several themes for further consideration.

Core Functions

Information and Referral

Information and Referral to Parents

According to representatives of CCRR Programs interviewed, the key service provided to parents is child care information and referrals. CCRRs feel it is important to ensure that parents have the information they need to make informed decisions about obtaining quality child care.

Information and referral to other community services was seen by a strong majority of respondents to be another important service. Community referrals include special needs assessment and support, infant development, hearing and speech assessment and support, income assistance and other social supports, housing, food banks, and recreation/sports programs. Several indicated that, as a “friendly”, “open” door for families, initial contact about child care often reveals other issues and referrals to other appropriate community agencies.

CCRR Program activity reports show that 14 of the 40 CCRRs made at least as many community referrals as child care referrals. Overall, in 2014/15, 57,807 families received child care referrals and 38,666 families received community referrals from CCRRs.

Information to Child Care Providers

The provision of information to child care providers is also an important activity for representatives of CCRRs interviewed, reporting that in addition to general information provided to all care providers in their area (newsletter, general emails), they offer and provide ongoing one-on-one assistance and advice, including answering questions from child care providers about licensing, business and program related matters (e.g., Child Care Subsidy, Child Care Operating Fund and Child Care Major Capital and Minor Capital Funding Programs).

Child Care Subsidy

For many respondents, the Child Care Subsidy Program is closely tied to the function of providing child care information and referrals. Without the subsidy, many parents would not be able to afford to access child care. Information, support and assistance related to the Child Care Subsidy is a key part of the work undertaken by CCRRs. The use of an onsite computer, printer and fax machine was reported to be an important service to parents in applying for a subsidy. One-on-one assistance provided to parents in understanding and completing the form and related documentation consumes a considerable amount of CCRR staff time. Service

BC offices are also charged with providing assistance with the subsidy process (although some CCRRs noted that Service BC offices will refer families to the CCRR for subsidy help) and it is understood that family serving organizations also offer support in this area.

In 2014/15, 15,538 families and 4,128 child care providers received assistance from CCRRs related to the Child Care Subsidy Program.

Many of those interviewed (including EYC representatives) talked about the complexity of the Child Care Subsidy Program and the difficulty it imposes for parents in accessing child care. It is noted that there have been efforts to simplify the Child Care Subsidy Program eligibility requirements and the application process, including a current initiative underway to develop a self-service portal providing online submissions of applications, service status updates, and two-way communication between applicant and the Child Care Subsidy Service Center.

For further consideration: Subsidy

Given the complexity of the Child Care Subsidy Program necessitating resource intensive assistance and support through CCRR Programs and others, MCFD may wish to give consideration to further streamlining and simplifying the Subsidy Program. That could potentially make the program easier to access, enabling more parents to work, and free up CCRR resources to be applied to other CCRR core functions.

Training and Education

All CCRR Program representatives interviewed highlighted the importance of training and education for child care providers. Training is crucial to support and enhance quality child care provided by all child care providers (including LNR providers). It is also important to make it possible for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) to locally meet their professional development requirements and RLNRs to meet their ongoing training requirements.

CCRR Programs indicated that in planning for and developing their training program they are cognizant of the basic ongoing child care provider training and professional development standards as well as the training needs of their communities. CCRRs reported that they often work with other partners to deliver joint training and collaborate on major education events in the community. Several CCRRs have active connections with local post-secondary institutions that deliver ECE training, and sit as active members on their advisory committees.

CCRRs are also a source of education and training for parents and others involved in the early years and early childhood development sector (such as sessions on best sleeping practices and dealing with challenging behaviours).

An environmental scan undertaken in 2015⁴ confirmed that training and education designed and delivered by CCRR Programs provides most of the professional development opportunities for those working in the child care and early years sector across the province.

⁴ Professional Learning in The Early Years Sector – “An Environmental Scan of Professional Development Opportunities in 2015”, and “An Analysis of Business Models Used by Professional Development Training Providers in 2015” prepared by Kathreen Riel.

The factors influencing the provision of training and education were “client feedback, professional networks, funding and time”.

For further consideration: Training

Given the importance of training and education to enhancing quality in the child care/early years sector, MCFD may wish to consider ways that training and education can be further improved perhaps through enhanced coordination and collaboration across the province and development of best practice standardized programming to support ECE professional development and family child care training.

Outreach and Recruitment

Outreach to Child Care Providers

Many CCRR Programs interviewed reported that the second most important service provided to child care providers, after training and education, is outreach because you have to first connect with child care providers in order to provide them with the information and education needed to ultimately enhance child care quality.

CCRRs offer networking opportunities and child care provider events and drop-in groups and support as well as site visits and newsletters. Outreach is focused on RLNR and licensed family child care providers, who most benefit from the support and connection. Some CCRR Programs also indicated that they also connect with some group child care centres.

Despite the recognized value in this outreach, several CCRR Programs indicated they have had to curtail their outreach activities due to funding constraints. They no longer regularly visit all communities in their area and, focus site visits on RLNR child care providers followed by visits to licensed family providers, on request when possible. In 2014/15, CCRR Programs made 1,423 site visits to RLNR providers and 1,094 site visits to licensed providers.

Outreach to Communities

Several CCRRs underscored the importance of community outreach to raise awareness of CCRR services including child care information and referrals, and assistance with subsidy. CCRRs indicated that they regularly attend community events, parent sessions or drop-ins and information sessions (such as Strong Start programs, new mom’s groups, child minders’ programs, booths at community fairs).

In terms of community development, CCRRs are active participants in ECD tables and other community or municipal planning tables or processes, bringing the child care voice to the table. CCRR Programs reported that they often partner or collaborate with other community service providers to deliver events and activities, including training and conferences.

In 2014/15, for the purpose of community outreach and development, CCRR Programs provided, attended or supported 5,359 events, presentations, and programs across the province.

Recruitment of Child Care Providers

Outreach is important for the recruitment of child care providers as well. CCRRs are responsible for providing information, answering questions and promoting licensing, and the registration of LNR child care providers.

Respondents indicated that they are continually promoting licensing and registration options to prospective LNR providers and interested individuals through general advertising, attendance at community events or parent information sessions and individuals coming to the CCRR office. This includes advice and assistance to individuals interested in licensed group care where the CCRR Program staff will provide information on the current state of child care in the community, licensing standards and local regulations.

RLNR Child Care Providers

Several CCRR Programs indicated strong support for RLNR child care providers as a way to enhance quality in the sector overall. Some also look at RLNRs as a stepping stone to becoming licensed family child care providers, thereby increasing the number of available licensed spaces in the community. A few respondents indicated that Licensing Officers in their region prefer the progression from RLNR to licensed family child care provider as the applicant will have already met many of the licensing requirements.

Most CCRRS interviewed did, however, report that the recruitment of individuals as RLNR child care providers was difficult and the registration and monitoring of RLNRs was a time consuming process taking up significant resources of the CCRR. Difficulty recruiting RLNR providers is attributed to a number of factors including cyclical economic conditions. The most common reasons cited by CCRRS for the low recruitment of RLNRs are:

- the number of children that an RLNR provider can care for (two in addition to their own children) is no greater than they could care for as a LNR;
- the level of rigor of the registration process and on-going registration requirements are onerous with the continuing education requirement exceeding the licensed family child care requirements; and
- the difference in subsidy rate for an LNR and RLNR (\$415 for RLNR; \$354 for LNR) is an insufficient incentive to become registered.

There has been a general decline in the rate at which LNRs become registered as RLNRs and LNRs become licensed. In 2011/12, 69 LNR child care providers became licensed; in 2014/15, 36 LNRs became licensed. In 2013/14 (the first time this statistic was requested), 190 LNR child care providers became RLNRs and in 2014/15, 146 LNRs became RLNRs.

There has also been a general decline in the number of RLNR child care providers. From 2011/12 to 2014/15, the number of RLNR child care providers fell from 798 to 585; as of the end of the third quarter of the 2015/16 fiscal year there were 466 RLNRs.

In 2011/12, CCRR Programs made 2,000 home visits to prospective or RLNR providers while in 2014/15, CCRR Programs made 1,423 home visits to prospective or RLNR providers.

For further consideration: Enhancing quality

Given the low numbers of RLNR child care providers, compared to the level of effort and resources required to recruit, register and monitor RLNRs, MCFD may wish to consider whether there is a better way to enhance quality in the delivery of child care.

Lending Libraries

All CCRR Programs offer a lending library of equipment, toys and curriculum kits and materials. For a few CCRRs, the lending library is considered one of the key services provided by the CCRR, providing access to quality toys and educational materials and tools. Several CCRR Programs offer the lending library service to child care providers only, some focus on child care providers but the library is also available to parents and others are equally available to child care providers and parents. An inventory of lending library items is available online with a few CCRRs offering online ordering. Generally, lending library items are picked up in person. A few CCRRs provide a delivery service and some CCRRs, particularly those serving remote or rural communities have made delivery arrangements with transportation firms or school districts.

Some CCRRs also maintain a resource library of educational materials and information on best practices that is open to care givers and providers, practitioners, ECE students and parents.

In 2014/15, 15,211 individuals borrowed resources from CCRR lending and resource libraries.

Coordination

Community Relationships

CCRR Programs interviewed reported a high degree of coordination between CCRRs and other community agencies. As noted earlier, CCRR Programs regularly attend community events, including other ECD and early years programs and activities, are active participants at planning tables and collaborate with others to deliver joint initiatives. Coordination of service delivery, including partnerships with other service providers across the broad community and social service sector, was considered integral to the work of the CCRR Program.

Overlap and Gaps in Services

Respondents were asked specifically about perceived overlaps or gaps in services in their community in the child care/early years sector.

The vast majority of those interviewed did not perceive any significant areas of overlap between early years and child care services and programs in their community and region, largely due to ECD and other community tables or forums. Many indicated that they work hard with other community partners to minimize unnecessary duplication. Where more than one agency provides service, such as community social service referrals or assistance with subsidy, it is a deliberate “no wrong door” response to community demand.

Some of those interviewed reported gaps in certain specific early years programs in their communities (generally smaller and remote communities) but indicated these were

recognized and receiving attention. Several commented on the lack of qualified ECEs and ECE training programs in some regions of the province.

Enhancing Coordination

Co-location and integrated service delivery were espoused by most of those interviewed as the principal way to enhance coordination and collaboration and promote seamless and convenient information, referrals and services to families.

Several felt that the greatest benefit to families would be achieved through service hubs housing a full range of early years services – early childhood development, child care, health and social - but it was recognized that the costs of such an approach are likely prohibitive in many cases. Being a part of a multi service agency serving children and families was also put forward by many of those interviewed as a way to enhance coordination, leverage resources and achieve synergies.

Many of those interviewed agreed that the model of the EYC as a one stop shop for parents providing a range of early year's information, referral and programs is beneficial to families. Many were also of the view that, to ultimately realize the goal of the EYC as a one-stop shop for families, further integration between the EYC and CCRR Program is needed. Both CCRR and EYC representatives interviewed believed that CCRRs are well-placed with the experience and expertise and the presence in the community to play a key role in better integrated service delivery.

Interface and Relationship with EYCs

Representatives of co-located CCRRs and EYCs commented on the benefits of the co-location model in terms of enabling integration of services benefiting parents, regardless of whether they are under contract to the same host agency. Facilitated by co-location, they have implemented ways to coordinate and integrate services such as common reception, coordinated referral process, shared resources such as lending library, joint activities such as common play-groups and training.

Where there is both a CCRR and an EYC in the same community but at different locations, CCRR Programs reported that they work closely with the local EYC for example, by providing services at the EYC location for a period of time each week such as child care information and referrals, subsidy assistance and parent training/education sessions.

Some of those interviewed commented that the lack of initial direction may have led to some early issues around coordination between EYCs, CCRR programs and other community service providers, especially where they were not co-located. They all indicated that has been overcome as they have worked together. EYC representatives interviewed commented positively on the role played by CCRRs in serving families and how coordination with CCRR Program was a major contribution to the EYC's objectives.

For further consideration: Coordination

Given the perceived benefit of co-location and integrated service delivery in promoting coordinated, seamless and convenient services to families, MCFD and the Early Years Office

may wish to consider ways to better integrate the EYC and CCRR Programs, including increasing co-location.

Leveraging Technology

Several interview respondents noted that significant improvements could be made in connecting with and getting parents and child care providers the information they need through better use of online resources and leveraging of social media. Some CCRRs extensively use websites, digital newsletters, social media and similar approaches but most would like to do more but feel they lack tools and capacity. They felt that more effective use of online tools and social media could help to better connect parents with services and support networking and connections between child care providers to support quality through information exchange and best practices.

Many noted that the current provincial CCRR website is ineffective and out of date; the CCRR Facebook page is not readily accessible or easily found and may not be well used. Some suggested that coordination and delivery of services could be enhanced through development and implementation of “virtual” services – online hubs providing information on all early year services in the community, region and province. It is understood that the Early Years Office is already exploring online tools to provide better information to parents about child care and early years programs and services.

For further consideration: Enhancing use of technology

Given the increasing importance of online resources and social media, MCFD and the early Years Office may wish to consider ways to support CCRRs and EYCs in this area, through some combination of central “hub” or “portal” resources, making tools available to agencies that make it easier for them to connect electronically and helping agencies develop their online and social media capacity.

Conclusion

CCRRs are operating in accordance with their mandate and are generally contributing to goals of accessibility, quality and coordination in the *Strategy*. There are, however, opportunities to adjust the mandate, functions and services of the CCRR and EYC programs to more effectively use existing resources and better align CCRRs within the child care and early years’ ecosystem and overall strategic framework.

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