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UPDATE ON THE POSITIVE LEISURE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH (PLAY) PROGRAM

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report, April 21, 2005, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. This report be forwarded by the Regional Clerk to York Region's area municipalities for information.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide Committee and Council with information regarding the Positive Leisure Activities for Youth (PLAY) program.

3. BACKGROUND

Research findings: "*When the Bough Breaks*" completed in 2001 by Dr. Gina Brown, reported that providing recreation opportunities for children of single parents on Social Assistance is associated with positive outcomes for both child and parent. The research found that providing recreation can be cost-effective in reducing dependency on other social and health services.

In late 2003, York Region held focus groups with single parents receiving Ontario Works. Parents stated that participation in recreation would benefit their children by increasing social, academic and interpersonal competence. They described benefits for themselves including reduced anxiety and depression and an increased sense of confidence and self-worth.

As a component of its Family Strengthening Initiatives, York Region's Community Services and Housing Department piloted the PLAY program in spring 2004. The program made funding available for recreational programs provided by local municipal Parks and Recreation Departments for children aged 6-12 of eligible sole-support parents on Social Assistance.

The Program was developed based on research indicating that participation in quality recreational activities encourages children to:

- Achieve improved physical and emotional health.

- Develop psychosocial skills.
- Develop positive self-esteem.
- Participate in their community.
- Increase capacity to learn.
- Develop strengths, talents and interests.
- Identify with positive role models.

Through additional funding, the PLAY program has been expanded to also include low income families receiving child care fee assistance and families in Rent Geared-to-Income Housing.

3.1 Integrated Service Delivery

To facilitate effective enrolment and participation in the PLAY program, a collaborative approach with internal and external partners was used to assist parent's access to the program, manage the registration process and effectively track participation and expenditures. Nine York Region Municipal Parks and Recreation Departments are partners in the PLAY program and meet quality operating criteria which include being a member of the High Five Quality Assurance process.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Funding for PLAY

York Region has used the reinvestment of the National Child Benefit (NCB) to fund the PLAY program. NCB is deducted from the allowances of Social Assistance recipients based on a provincially mandated direction and the funds are then used to support programs that "help prevent and reduce the depth of child poverty and/or promote attachment to the workforce, resulting in fewer families having to rely on Social Assistance".

In addition, in 2004, York Region was successful in its application to the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation under the Community Sport Opportunity Fund (CSOF) to access additional funds to support this program. Some of this Fund was used to expand the eligibility criteria for PLAY to include low-income families receiving Child Care Fee Assistance (CCFA) and families living in social housing on Rent-Geared-To-Income.

Municipal Recreation Departments are paid the actual cost of the recreation program, up to a maximum of \$90.00 per child, per program session.

4.2 Program Evaluation

York Region conducted surveys with participating families in July 2004 to evaluate the spring 2004 PLAY pilot.

Survey results indicated:

- 94% of parents, of child participants, gave a good or excellent rating for the recreation program.
- 94% of parents confirmed they would recommend the program to other parents.
- 83% of parents planned to re-enrol their child(ren).
- 83% of parents were able to enrol their child(ren) in his/her first choice of program.
- 17% of parents, who participated in spring, did not plan to re-enrol, as they believed they would be exiting Social Assistance or their child(ren) were too old.

Parent and child feedback, expressed through written letters, surveys and phone calls, described improved self-esteem, community engagement, and feeling successful as a parent.

Despite the overall success and positive feedback received during the pilot phase, some barriers to participation in the PLAY program were identified during the spring 2004 session and included transportation availability, age limitation, and space limitations in desired program. As a result, changes were made following the pilot phase. These include:

- The age limit expanded from 6-12 years to 4-12 years.
- The maximum program funding increased from \$80.00 to \$90.00 per child/per session.
- Eligibility expanded to include two-parent families on Social Assistance, low-income families receiving Child Care Fee Assistance and Rent-Geared-To-Income families.

4.3 Outcomes and Indicators

Initial indicators provide a comparison of participant involvement during the spring 2004 and fall 2004 recreational sessions. Although the following data is preliminary and collected during the early stages of this program, findings indicate a positive outcome for families participating in PLAY:

- PLAY participation grew from 142 to 298, an increase of 156 children (110%) from the initial pilot.
- Of the children enrolled:
 - 65% were children of Ontario Works participants.
 - 35% were children of parents in receipt of Child Care Fee Assistance and Rent-Geared-To-Income Families.
- Of the families receiving assistance through Ontario Works:
 - 17% were engaged in employment-related activities.
 - 13% had gained employment income.
 - 16% exited Social Assistance for reasons other than employment.

Exits from Social Assistance and attachment to the workforce, which can be enhanced through the provision of family strengthening initiatives, provide cost savings to the Region.

4.4 Relationship to Vision 2026

York Region's PLAY program supports Vision 2026 by:

- Responding to the human services needs of a growing and changing population.
- Responding to children in need.
- Fostering effective working relationships with community partners.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The PLAY program is 100% funded through reinvestment of NCB and the Community Sport Opportunity Fund. The total cost for the spring and fall sessions of the PLAY program is \$29,066 with 440 children participating. Table 1 shows the overall cost for each session as well as the average cost per participant.

Table 1
Program Expenditure

2004 Session	# of Participants	Total Cost	Average Cost per Participant
Spring	142	\$ 9,239	\$65.00
Fall	298	\$19,827	\$66.50

It is anticipated that family strengthening initiatives like PLAY, combined with a range of return to work supports will reduce the length of time participants require Social Assistance. Further analysis will be done in the future to track exit rates where families are accessing family strengthening initiatives like PLAY along with employment and other supports and the resulting potential savings to York Region.

Funding concerns may arise after 2006 should the Province decide to stop the NCB clawback which is currently reinvested in community programs such as PLAY and not replace it with other provincial funding.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The PLAY program has provided an excellent example of the Region working with the Recreational Departments in all areas of York Region. In all local municipalities in York Region, children of Ontario Works participants and eligible low-income families, have the opportunity to enrol in the recreation programs. Without the PLAY program, these children would have difficulty accessing community recreation programs because of the inability of their families to pay user fees.

7. CONCLUSION

The PLAY program was developed based on the premise that children's development and a family's economic success is strengthened when they are involved in positive experiences, engaged in their communities, and influenced by positive role models. Research indicates that providing recreation for children of parents on Social Assistance is associated with positive outcomes for both child and parent. In addition, research has established that providing recreation can be cost-effective in reducing dependency on other health and social services.

York Region remains committed to working in partnership with the community to ensure that PLAY programs are high quality, delivered cost effectively and continue to meet measurable objectives. As part of York Region's Family Strengthening Initiative, departmental divisions will continue to work together to provide the PLAY program, one of the innovative and responsive programs and services which are associated with positive outcomes for families in need.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.