



## Peace of Mind for Working Parents Short Term Child Care

Those in the child care field are perhaps closest to the stress of balancing work and a family. Greeting parents as they drop off and pick up their children is a daily reminder of what it is like to be under constant time pressures. They know first-hand how difficult it is for parents when a child is ill and unable to attend regular care. Not surprisingly, it was a group from the child care sector that first stepped forward to fill a service gap with community-based, high-quality emergency services that support families when a child is ill or when there is a disruption in regular care arrangements.

It was back in 1987 that Andrew Fleck Child Care Services (AFCCS) first initiated a small, emergency child care service to support working families, with care provided in the child's own home or through AFCCS' home-based child care system. Two years later, with provincial funding, AFCCS joined with two larger child care organizations to form a larger back-up child care service, Short Term Child Care (STCC). The mandate of the new organization was to provide high-quality emergency care with licensed providers.

During its first three years of existence, the STCC program had great success. It established strong ties in the community and had an expanding client base of trusting parents, including parents receiving subsidized child care. During that period, the former Ottawa Civic Hospital had contracted with STCC as a benefit for its nursing and administrative staff since providing emergency back-up child care was cheaper than replacing a nurse. Yet despite the success of STCC, government cutbacks in 1993 threatened to bring the service to an end. Like so many child care agencies, the STCC service could not survive on client fees alone and needed provincial funding to help defray costs. Without STCC, there would again be few options for parents in terms of back-up child care. However, the need would remain.

Thus, the STCC board faced either closing down the service or developing a new funding structure that could keep it viable. In response to pressure from the community, STCC, in partnership with the Ottawa Civic Hospital, opted to explore new ways to keep it running. At that time, there were several work-life initiatives scattered throughout the United States but none in Canada. The STCC board and the Ottawa Civic Hospital were intrigued by a New York service, a consortium of 15 organizations that had formed a partnership to gain access to emergency child care services for their employees. The Ottawa partners developed a similar consortium model to the one in New York, but initiated from within the community, and supported by both private and public funds.

The structure was relatively simple: consortium partners would pay a fee to gain access to emergency child care serv-

ices from STCC for their employees and members. To remain viable, STCC would need roughly 60% of its costs to come from consortium access fees. The more partners, the less it would rely on other funding. Although signing up the first new consortium member was a challenge, the STCC board persevered and in 1995, the National Capital Commission Emergency Child Care Consortium was born. Early members included Nortel Networks, Mitel Corporation, Ernst and Young Management Consultants, County of Carleton Law Association, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. To ensure that the new funding structure became entrenched, the Ontario Trillium Foundation supported the project during its first four years, with funding decreasing each year up to 1999.

The number of consortium partners ranges from four to five in any given year. Each employer's service access fee is based on the number of eligible employees. Together, the partners establish the hourly pay rate for care providers, and each individual partner determines whether they will subsidize the service fully, partially or not at all for their employees. Both the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) and the CUPW pay 100% of the fees for their employees. "If [postal workers] had to pay the full cost, none of them would ever use it," says Jamie Kass, National Coordinator of the CUPW Child Care Fund.

OCDSB joined the consortium in 1995, when school boards were examining the replacement cost of supply teaching and trying to better manage absenteeism. "We saw this as a perfect opportunity to provide a benefit to our employees, one that does not cost them anything," says Kathy Duffy, Human Resources Officer, Employee Support Services with OCDSB. "We find it very beneficial, because when a teacher is absent from school, we have an obligation to replace behind the teacher. So it's cost-effective for us, because we have to pay for the teacher to be away, as well as we would be paying the supply teacher. You certainly see a keen interest [in the service] from our young families," she adds.

The STCC community-based model is client-centred, designed to respond to families' needs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Care is offered in either English or French. If a child is ill, care is provided only in the child's home. When regular child care service is interrupted, the options widen to include licensed home-based care and licensed centre-based care. In the case of CUPW, most care is provided in the child's home since the care has to accommodate shift work, including evenings and overnight.

In all cases, caregivers are skilled, carefully screened, and trained in the specifics of providing short term, emergency care. "The caregivers are really good, we get very, very pos-



itive reviews. The program's ability to meet our member's needs quickly is absolutely key to the success of the program," says Kass. "If our members are a couple of minutes late to work, they can be docked. The need to know the caregiver will be there on time so that person can get to work is really important." Duffy says, "Anyone that has accessed the program has been very pleased with it. They tend to go back and access it again."

STCC is also committed to providing accessible emergency child care in the community. With start-up funding from the Trillium Foundation in 1998, STCC began to provide regular child care for Interval House, a shelter for women and children who have experienced abuse. Women in the shelter can have between 16 and 24 four-hour blocks of caregiving time, often so the mother can work on legal aspects of separation and abuse.

"These people have pretty well lost everything; they have to rebuild. The children were following the mums to their appointments and hearing the story over and over again. The poor child has already witnessed abuse or experienced abuse, so how productive is this, when we could put this child in a healthy environment and give him or her some free time and also learning concepts. I feel that we are investing in the child and it's paying off," says Lyne Tremblay, Program Manager of Family Support Services for AFCCS.

Other funders have since joined the initiative to support women's shelters, so that STCC now provides emergency child care to Interval House and five other shelters, with two more slated to receive this service later in 2005, thanks to a community grant through Success by Six.

Despite very high client satisfaction with STCC, recruiting and retaining a full roster of caregivers for mostly temporary work can be a challenge, especially during times of heavy use such as during flu and cold seasons. But with several years of service provision, the service has the data it needs to identify the cyclical ebbs and flows of emergency child care, which helps with planning how many caregivers are needed at any given time and place, thus helping to meet client demand.

CUPW uses a portion of its generous child care fund to support the emergency child care needs of postal workers from two local unions in the national capital region. In addition to being an employee benefit, being a consortium partner is "a way to support the community in looking at different options. As a community, I think we have to support each other, especially flexible programs because flexible programs are always expensive," says Kass.

Short Term Child Care is proud to enjoy a reputation for excellence and to have retained its community roots. But STCC also measures its success by the number of registrants signed up for the service. "Short term care is a preventative method. The people who register are ready to go if there is a crisis. They may never use it but it's like life insurance," says Tremblay.

Andrew Fleck Child Care Services continues to be at the vanguard of forging new, innovative services that support parents. It has recently made operational an online, fully bilingual, centralized child care waiting list, a much-needed service to the national capital community. We can only hope Andrew Fleck will continue to take the lead in years to come.

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### About the author

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