North Words Preschool Speech and Language Program celebrating 20 years

The Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) is celebrating 20 years of delivering the North Words Preschool Speech and Language Program.

In 1999 the Ministries of Health, Community and Social Services, and the Ministry of Education and Training committed money for the expansion of services to preschool children with speech and language disorders. At the same time, the NWHU was selected as the lead agency for the program.

Originally called the Kenora & Rainy River District Preschool Speech & Language Program, it quickly became known as North Words and shortly thereafter, the existing logo was developed. The logo depicts a parent coyote howling with its pack of young coyotes surrounded by evergreen trees under a crescent moon. The parent coyote was given the name ELI, which is short for early language intervention.

Program Manager Debby Cousineau currently oversees speech, language, hearing, and vision services at the NWHU and has been involved with the North Words program since its inception.

“We’ve had a lot of different professionals working to support North Words over the years,” remembers Cousineau, “but they’ve all had one thing in common – a drive to provide a high level of service to the youngest residents of northwestern Ontario and their families”.

For 20 years, the goal of the North Words program has been to provide early identification and intervention for children with speech and/or language difficulties. In addition, the program also provides community education and support to promote literacy, play, and social skills.

Over the past two decades over 5,500 children have received services through the speech and language program. In its start-up, year 196 kids received speech and or language services. So far, in 2019 that number is close to 500. The increase in numbers is due in part to the number of service locations offered by the program. In year one there were seven service locations; today that number has grown to 65 different sites in 13 communities.

North Words and the NWHU introduced the Infant Hearing Program in 2001 to provide hearing screen tests to newborn infants. Since its inception, almost 13,000 babies in the NWHU catchment area have received a hearing screen.

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Cutline for attached photo (click here to view photo online)

Child Health Fest - Fort Frances
(May 2000)

The North Words program, along with Healthy Babies Healthy Children and other Northwestern Health Unit programs hosted a Child Health Fest at the health unit office in Fort Frances. Children & families were invited to participate in a variety of fun activities while meeting Northwestern Health Unit program staff and other children’s service providers in Fort Frances.