

With a new director, Sharon Day Care's biggest year yet

SHARON

By Alexander Wilburn

"This whole school year has been a big jump for us," Carrie Olsen, director of the Sharon Day Care Center, said during a mid-day interview on Friday, Jan. 13. The floors of the baby-gate-divided center (with children this young you have to look down to see the action) were a bustle of activity: crawling, coloring, cookies.

Olsen joined the center as director in 2015 and initiated the first infant/toddler program in September 2016, which opened "to a full house. Right now we have seven infants enrolled and seven toddlers enrolled, in addition to our 15 pre-schoolers, so it's busy.

"We also have an after-care program, which is a little lighter right now, but that's normal for the winter months. It picks back up in the spring."

The after-care program is post-school afternoon supervision for the students at the neighboring Sharon Center School, with ages ranging from kindergarten to seventh grade. For Olsen, it means another accomplishment for the center. "For the first time ever we are offering care from eight weeks old to seventh grade."

Enrollment overall, she said, is up by 75 percent this year, which meant hiring new staff. The total, counting Olsen, is 12.

"The ratio between staff and child is one to four for infant-toddler, and in pre-school it is one to 10. So for any given day, if we have seven babies and seven toddlers, that's four teachers that need to be there. We're open 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and I can't expect our staff to work 10 hours

a week five days a week, so we have some coverage part of the days from part-time employees as well."

By the end of this coming summer and fall, the babies in the infant program will have transferred over to the toddler program, but Olsen said that exactly when that happens is personalized.

"The toddler program ranges in development, meaning some babies that are 15 months old still aren't ready for the toddler program; they still want two naps a day, or are still crawling."

Of course, once those spots open there's a line waiting to fill them.

"We have three babies right now on the waiting list for the full-time infant program. There's a big demand. I get phone calls at least once a week asking if a spot is open; this week it was three phone calls for babies and toddlers. I know there's such a need in the area, and I feel badly when we don't have the space. We have parents who are pregnant and are on the waiting list for fall."

Beyond filling spaces, Olsen said the physical space of the center is still their biggest challenge.

"It looks like a lot when the room is empty, but every baby needs his or her own crib and then there are 7 toddlers playing and it's not as much space. But we're very grateful to be so near to the school, and that the transition for the children from daycare to Sharon Center School is so seamless. We take walks to the library, the librarian comes to us in the winter months, and if I have a question I have the resources of the school. We can make use of the education consultant or the school psychologist.

"What we use most right now is the gym in winter."

This December, the Sharon

Day Care Center was one of the recipients of a grant from the Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation, which awarded 50 charitable organizations in the area money to aid residents in economic need.

"The center is using the money to give families who need things like winter clothing, like coats, or food items, or some extra help through the winter months. We try to give back to the community as much as they've given us.

"We also participated in Sharon's toy drive through the holiday season and got a great response to that, and we donate to the food pantry as much as possible.

"Just now we received a grant from the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation for the teachers, so they're going to get iPads for the classrooms to help with their assessments.

"We're also getting some other curriculum tools and some coaching from an early-childhood professional."

With that the multi-colored scarves came out, there was a drum for the toddlers to beat, and a dance party had begun.



PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER WILBURN