



Geneva Wants More Support For Its Youngest

GENEVA – A consortium of community groups and social service agencies will begin trying to make it easier to raise an infant in Geneva.

They are calling it the “First 1000 Days Promise,” a reference to the first three years of an infant’s life and the groups intend to fulfill that promise by improving nutrition, exercise, health care and parenting support for all the community’s newest members.

Participants will get free gym access, free diapers and formula, groceries, access to a private laundromat and help getting access to counseling and early childhood education support for the first three years of the infant’s life. There are no income eligibility requirements for any of these services.

“Communities regularly invest in food, sports and formal education for school aged children, but parents of young infants pretty much go it alone,” said Jim Gerling, a retired pastor who founded Success for Geneva’s Children 20 years ago. “Evidence suggests all families can use support during these most challenging years when children are most vulnerable and parents most challenged.”

The “First 1000 Days Promise” groups – which include Success for Geneva’s Children, Geneva 2030, the Boys & Girls Club of Geneva, the Partnership of Ontario County, The Geneva Center of Concern, Geneva Reads and the Office of Children and Family Services Healthy Families program – will begin signing up families in January with some services starting instantly.

The program is anchored at the Geneva Community Center at 160 Carter Road in Geneva. Starting Jan. 3, the center’s gym will be open from 8 a.m. to 12 noon Monday through Friday offering play and reading spaces for children age 0 to 5. Breakfast and coffee will be available. Planning is underway to install six washers and dryers at the center to make it easier for parents to do laundry while getting some gym time for the kids.

“The best help we can give to our school system is to deliver healthier, better prepared young children to its pre-school programs,” said Karen Fahy, executive director of Geneva 2030, a collective impact organization. “Helping Geneva invest more in its youngest, most delicate citizens can be a transformative step for the community.” Jennifer Morris, Geneva 2030’s 0-K Action Committee leader, has been part of the First 1000 Days program planning.

Once in the program, The First 1000 Day staff will meet with parents and discuss other services that can make being parent of an infant or toddler easier and most effective. The Partnership for Ontario County is currently installing Family Counseling space in the Carter Road location with plans to making counseling services more accessible and comfortable for all families. The First 1000 Days participants will have access to these services.

“Imagine giving parents a place to seek advice and guidance,” said Tracey Dello Stritto, executive director of the Partnership for Ontario County. “Parenting is tough for everyone. This can help all before big problems can arise.”

The Healthy Families program-nursing staff will offer home visits to some participants as well. The bulk of services will emanate from the Geneva Community Center, which is owned and operated by the Boys & Girls Club of Geneva Inc.

“Generally Boys & Girls Clubs focus on services for school aged children,” said Chris Lavin, executive director of the Boys & Girls Club. “However, we see an opportunity for families across the community to get some help making sure kids are developing the tools to learn and live well from their earliest days. We are pleased to invest our space and food expertise to this effort.”

Lavin said the Community Center began “Toddler Time” prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and found a wide variety of Geneva families benefiting from better services for infants and toddlers. Seniors who were the main source of day care for some children needed a better place to let the little ones run. Families with working parents often lacked a true “play place” where they could meet other parents and gain playmates and share advice. Kids from all families liked picking out their own cereal and meeting new friends.

“It wasn’t just the economically challenged,” Lavin said. “Raising an infant is not easy and there are no lessons or licenses for this stage of life. Communities spend a lot on youth sports, but this may be even more important.”

The First 1000 Days Program has garnered the early support of the Wyckoff Family Foundation and the Mother Cabrini Foundation of New York City. Food Link of Rochester, working in partnership with the Center of Concern and the Boys & Girls Club Food Team, will be contributing to the nutrition efforts.

“We will need more support to grow and sustain this effort,” said Barbara Weinberg, chairperson of Success for Geneva’s Children. “However, we are excited about impacts we can start making right away. This effort gets to the roots of many challenges we see surfacing in the pre-school and elementary school years.”

There is no fee for participating in The First 1000 Days and no obligations. Interested parents or expecting parents can contact the Geneva Community Center at 315-759-6060 or stop at 160 Carter Road during morning “Toddler Time” hours between 8 a.m. and noon to sign up or learn more about this project.