

Grad students still eligible for childcare subsidy, city says ^[1]

Few of them likely actually to see money from underfunded program, GM concedes

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EXCERPTS:

Graduate students can once again qualify for childcare funding under a city-administered program aimed at helping poor parents get better job prospects, as the City of Ottawa tweaks a policy that seemed to cut them off.

The city's general manager of social services, Aaron Burry, has been under fire for the policy since the fall, and particularly since a Citizen story in December publicized the case of a University of Ottawa student, an immigrant from Ukraine seeking a subsidy so her son could be in daycare while she pursues a Canadian equivalent for her Ukrainian law degree.

Under the rule established in the fall, graduate students wouldn't be eligible for a subsidy under the \$90-million program unless they were specifically foreign-trained workers seeking a quickly obtained Canadian credential to make them employable here.

Burry insists that rule just puts in writing what has long been the practice of the program's administrators, who try to put the limited money where they think it'll do the most good. The tweak, which is still being finalized, spells out that any graduate student could be funded, depending on what they're studying and who else is seeking a subsidy.

The idea is to "support the prioritization of someone who is employed and needs to remain employed, someone finishing high school in order to become employed or someone finishing an undergraduate degree," says a form letter ready to be sent out over Burry's name. "The chances of there being any spaces or money left once we meet this priority are limited."

What's the difference in the end? Not much, Burry said in an interview. The program still spreads too little money across too many people, and a lot of worthy recipients will be left out.

"It's not a universal program," he said. In other words, being "eligible" for a childcare subsidy doesn't automatically mean you get it and it never has. There isn't enough money to go around, so the city's staff prioritize.

The province puts in about \$70 million of the program's cost and the city puts in about \$20 million. Burry estimates it would take about \$140 million in all to cover the childcare needs of people who are officially eligible for the subsidy (having a low income is the main requirement) but aren't getting it. Either the provincial or the city politicians would have to vote to spend the money and neither has.

"There's a good portion in the pool that's just trying to finish high school," Burry said. "There's kids out there waiting for that."

The program has parallels to social housing, where there's a waiting list thousands of names long of people who are eligible for discount rental units because they're poor: the truly homeless, the very ill and people fleeing abuse get priority, and then workers go down the list looking for families with children and others who seem to need the help more than others.

Single people who have roofs over their heads, even if their dwellings are lousy and they're technically eligible for social housing, may never actually get helped.

Many graduate students have been in such a boat when it comes to the childcare subsidy, said Burry (who has three graduate degrees, two of them from the U of O). Faced with a single mom working for minimum wage who wants child care so she can get a college diploma to become a nursing aide, versus a single mom with a bachelor's degree working for \$20 an hour who wants child care so she can get a master's degree, the city will typically fund the would-be nursing aide, he said. Most people with bachelor's degrees are employable as they are, even if they believe they could do better with more education.

Relatively few would-be graduate students will come across as more deserving than high-school drop outs, though the city's program does fund about 90 people pursuing graduate degrees. At last count 6,858 children had their care subsidized by the governments, according to the city. Graduate students whose childcare is funded now will continue to be funded as long as their income keeps them eligible - as a rule, Burry said, the city doesn't cut people off from the subsidy unless they no longer need child care or can afford it on their own.

Since the fall's policy came to light, the city has been peppered with open letters from the graduate students' unions at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University, complaining about both the apparent cutting-off of grad students and the city's confusing explanations.

"Both Graduate Students' Associations have received multiple contradictory statements from various City officials and it still has not been made clear whether graduate students are completely ineligible or just the least prioritized," reads the latest, signed by the U of O's Taiva Tegler and Carleton's Anna Goldfinch.

The least prioritized, Burry said, or at least well down the list. Not completely ineligible.

Trying to spread too little money across too many deserving people is the central challenge of being a social-services administrator, he said.

"It sucks, I'll tell you that."

-reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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