

Long wait for Edmonton teenage mothers to get child care, survey shows shortage ^[1]

Author: Theobald, Claire

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Jacqueline Labelle is seven-months pregnant, but has already been on a wait list for a child-care placement for her unborn son since August.

“Even then, I know a space is not guaranteed,” said Labelle, an 18-year-old student at Braemar School — an Edmonton public school that offers educational programs designed for pregnant and parenting teens at 9359 67A St. — who worried not finding child care for her son will delay her ability to graduate and put her post-secondary plans on hold.

Even after the Terra Centre for Teen Parents added 10 new spots at their on-site child-care centre, Labelle said she knows other girls in Braemar School who applied for a space while pregnant who are still waiting now that their child has been born, left to balance getting an education with caring for their newborn babies on their own.

“They are putting their name on the wait list long before they even have the child, knowing it's not a guarantee — infant spaces are at a premium,” said Carol Sullivan, manager of early childhood development at the Terra Centre for Teen Parents, adding theirs is one of only a few child-care centres in the province that take infants younger than one year old.

“It's really hard,” Labelle said, adding she checks in with the Terra Centre twice weekly since applying to see if a spot has opened for her child.

As results from the Public Interest Alberta Alberta Child Care Survey 2016 prove, these parents are far from alone in their struggle to find accessible and affordable quality care for their children.

Of the 318 child-care providers in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors surveyed across Alberta, nearly half had wait lists. For those that did, those lists were on average 59 children deep.

Even among low-income families that qualify for child-care subsidies, 44 per cent were still paying more than \$300 out of pocket per child for child care, a tough burden for low-income families.

Joel French, executive director of Public Interest Alberta, applauded the provincial government's announcement last month that it will cap child-care fees at \$25 a day per child and fund 18 early learning and child-care centres, but said the plan comes up short in terms of the number of spaces needed and in training for child-care professionals.

Among the child-care centres surveyed, 36 per cent of their employees had only the minimum 45-hour Child Development Assistant qualification, and more than one in 10 child-care centres did not offer any opportunities for professional development.

A lack of additional skills training contributes to the trouble parents have finding qualified child care for infants less than one year old or for children with special needs, said French, with 40 per cent of child-care providers not providing care for infants and 19 per cent unable to accommodate children with a diagnosed disability.

“Given that so much of the workforce is under trained, and I think in a lot of cases wants to be further trained, we need further government investments to do that,” French said.

Until more investment in quality, affordable child care is made, French warned, parents in Alberta will continue to be forced to choose between what is in the best interests of their family and what they can afford.

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