

Province gathering info for new child-care policy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With a commitment to create 100,000 more child-care spaces over the next five years, Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris got plenty of suggestions on how to do it during a one-day tour and town hall in the Windsor area Tuesday.

Naidoo-Harris, minister responsible for early years and child care, was making her 13th stop on a 16-city tour across the province seeking input for new a child-care policy framework to be released later this year.

"Affordability, accessibility, quality and responsiveness are the four areas we're hearing about," said Naidoo-Harris, who held a town hall meeting at Mackenzie Hall Tuesday evening.

"Affordability and accessibility are the two that are emerging as the main changes parents would like to see."

The province currently is spending more than \$1 billion per year on child care. The government has committed another \$650 million to \$750 million toward operating costs, including subsidies, as it looks to add 100,000 licensed spaces beginning this year.

Currently, the government reports the province has 390,000 licensed child-care spaces.

"By adding another 100,000 spaces, we're hoping to double the percentage of spaces available to children who are zero to four years of age," Naidoo-Harris said.

"It's a bold commitment. Our goal is that 40 per cent of children zero to four will have access to a child-care space."

How the government sets out to achieve that goal is a key reason for the tour.

Naidoo-Harris said the province also wants to maintain the quality of child-care and promote flexibility in meeting families' needs.

"Identifying the best ways to do that is what we're trying to do," Naidoo-Harris said.

"Is it subsidizing spaces? Is it related to the rental space for operators or is it something else?"

In addition to public meetings and touring the province's daycares, the government is also consulting operators, child-care experts and soliciting opinions online.

Naidoo-Harris said one of the challenges in crafting a new framework is there are some variances throughout the province.

"We need to know what's working and what's not working," Naidoo-Harris said.

"The cost of child care in urban centres like Toronto varies from Thunder Bay, London or Kitchener.

"There's costs that may be down to geography."

For rural Ontarians the issues of accessibility and flexibility can be more predominant.

Naidoo-Harris said what is clear to the government is the importance families place on Early Years and child-care programs.

The expansion of those programs in recent years has only increased the demand for more.

"(Programs) are important because of the lasting impact on the future of children," Naidoo-Harris said.

"They take in everything in those early years.

"It's really important that we get this right as a province, a community and a society."

The minister added studies have shown these programs are making an impact on narrowing the gender wage gap and child care is making it easier for both women and men to participate in the workforce.

Naidoo-Harris said such supports are particularly important for single parents.

"It allow single parents to be able to work and that helps in the drive against poverty," Naidoo-Harris said.

"It has a real impact on families and our future."

-reprinted from Windsor Star

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