

Child care in Canada expected to get long-term funding in federal budget ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA – Child care advocates have been told to expect a long-term funding commitment in next week’s budget, sources say, but some are already wondering whether it’s wise of the federal government to promise years of cash without first securing conditions from the provinces.

It’s not clear just how much money is at stake, but those in the sector with knowledge of the government’s thinking expect that the March 22 budget will extend the \$500 million pledged for fiscal 2017-18 into an annual commitment over 10 years.

Sources, speaking on condition of anonymity because details of the budget have not yet been publicly released, have been told the money is coming from the federal social infrastructure fund.

Spending \$500 million a year would amount to a commitment of about \$5 billion in child care funding over the decade that the fund is available.

Several sources said Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos, who is responsible for the child care file, has been telling stakeholders that multi-year funding is on the way.

“Minister Duclos has been fairly clear at a couple of consultations that I’ve been at, that we should expect something in the budget,” said Vicky Smallman, director of women’s and human rights at the Canadian Labour Congress.

An extended pledge would be one way to encourage the provinces and territories to sign a funding deal with Ottawa, she added.

“We said to him that it would be a show of good faith and seriousness to put money on the table, and that would help bring the provinces around.”

Mathieu Filion, a spokesman for Duclos, refused Tuesday to confirm any aspect of the budget, saying he would not comment on speculation.

The Liberal government sees the high cost of child care as an impediment that keeps some parents out of the workforce. The economic growth council advising Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recommended last month that the Liberals create a universal, subsidized child care program, similar to one in Quebec, as a way to boost the participation of women in the workforce.

The 2016 federal budget committed \$400 million to child care – as well as another \$100 million for indigenous child care – beginning in fiscal 2017-18. The money was considered an incentive to encourage the provinces and territories to negotiate a national framework on early learning and child care.

Now it seems the government wants to raise the stakes.

Not everyone is satisfied with \$500 million a year, however: some child care advocates would prefer to see a long-term commitment that demonstrates the federal government truly wants a seat at the table.

Only yearly funding increases would have a lasting impact, said Monica Lysack, a professor of early childhood education at Sheridan College. Otherwise, money allocated to the second year ends up going towards maintaining spaces created in the first year, instead of additional spaces.

“Canadians may expect a small bump up in child care growth for one year, but without ramped-up funding, there will be no new development in the subsequent years,” said Lysack, who ran as a Liberal candidate in 2008 and 2011.

“Families will continue to bear the brunt of having the least accessible and most expensive child care in the world.”

A multilateral agreement laying out broad principles for child care is expected to be unveiled sometime after the budget. The Liberals plan to sign bilateral funding agreements with provinces that will look to reflect individual needs with expectations high that the deals will be done by the summer.

Waiting so long could end up undermining efforts, warned Lysack, who suggested provinces have already started to spend the money they expect from Ottawa on their own child care programs.

“Basically, now all they’re doing is handing over the cash to the provinces who have already had to figure it out on their own, so there is nothing happening from a national perspective other than some aspirational principles that pretty much anyone would agree with.”

The government has already heard from child care experts who convened in Ottawa in December to call on the Liberals to define affordability and set specific goals to measure success.

Canadian Child Care Federation chief executive Don Giesbrecht, who took part in consultations with Duclos, said it’s important the money comes with a framework.

“If it’s a blank cheque,” he said, “I worry that it’s just more of the same.”

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