

Federal budget money for child care is a good first step but not nearly enough, advocates say ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Toronto parents Andy Guglielmi and Mimi Rego were delighted to see a \$7 billion commitment to child care over the next 10 years in Wednesday's federal budget.

"We are grateful that they are moving in the right direction and putting some money towards helping parents with children in daycare," said Guglielmi.

Child care for the couple's 21-month-old twins, which runs between \$2,800 and \$3,000 a month, costs more than the mortgage on their condo at Bremner Blvd. and Spadina Ave, he said.

"We are using our line of credit and I am working a second job to stay ahead of the (daycare) bill," said Guglielmi who works in sales.

"Good families with good jobs can't afford this," he said, adding that he and his wife, an elementary school teacher, each earn about \$90,000 a year.

"We need a national program," he said. "I don't want our children to have these struggles."

The \$7 billion earmarked in the budget for child care includes \$500 million already allocated for 2017-18 to kick-start a national program with the provinces and territories based on the principles of affordability, accessibility, flexibility and inclusiveness.

Details of the new national early learning and child-care framework, including how the money will be spent, will be released later this spring, Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos told the Star last week. Ottawa expects to sign bilateral agreements with provinces and territories by the summer, he added.

Child-care advocates welcomed the Trudeau government's commitment to long-term funding, but they said money available in the first five years is not enough to fund urgently-needed improvements in access, affordability and quality.

In Ontario, for example, there are licensed child-care spaces for barely 22 per cent of children under age 5 and parents in Toronto with two children in daycare spend as much as \$36,000 a year.

"To grow the system, funding needs to increase every year, beginning next year," said Morna Ballantyne of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

According to the budget, this year's allocation increases to \$540 million in 2018-19 and then by only \$5 million a year until 2021 when the funding remains flat at \$550 million.

Ottawa's contribution jumps to \$725 million in 2022-23, after the next federal election, and then rises slowly until it reaches \$870 million in 2026-27.

The money is about one-third less than the \$5 billion over five years that the previous Liberal government under Paul Martin promised provinces in 2005, advocates noted.

But anything is an improvement after a decade of no new funding for child care under the Harper Conservatives, they added.

"The ramping up is pretty slow and, frankly, quite erratic," Ballantyne said. "But clearly the federal government is serious about being in child care for the long-term and that's really good news."

"We have a lot of work to do over the next year to make sure before the next federal budget, the government has a much better understanding of what's really required in the way of a financial commitment to make a real change for children and for parents."

For Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, her job becomes personal in June when she is due to give birth to her

first child.

“For us in Ontario, it’s good to have the feds back at the table for the long haul,” she said. “Hopefully this will help shape what the provincial government comes out with when they release their framework.”

Ontario has pledged to add 100,000 new licensed spaces for infants and toddlers over the next five years and will release its funding plan in the provincial budget expected in April.

The federal budget’s plan to allow parents to stretch EI maternity and parental leave benefits to 18 months from the current 50-week limit, may help some new parents with good jobs like herself, Ferns said.

But many women in precarious and low-wage employment, either won’t have enough hours of work to qualify for EI or won’t be able to afford to live on the benefits, set at just 55 per cent of their previous wages to a maximum of \$537 a week.

“It’s nice they are extending it for the people who can get it, but it won’t make any difference for those who can’t access it at all,” she said. “That’s just not fair.”

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