

Ontario budget to pump millions into child care subsidies ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie & Rushowy, Kristin

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Apr 2017

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Thursday's provincial budget will make child care more affordable for Ontario families by earmarking millions of dollars in new money for fee subsidies, the Star has learned.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa and Indira Naidoo-Harris, minister responsible for early years and child care, will outline the government's five-year child-care spending plan during a pre-budget announcement at the downtown Toronto YMCA Wednesday afternoon.

This year's funding will focus on providing immediate relief to Ontario families struggling with the high cost of child care while the government works with municipalities to expand the system over the coming years, sources told the Star.

Child-care advocates were at Queen's Park Tuesday, urging the government to invest at least \$200 million for operating costs and \$500 million to build new spaces to kick-start last year's pledge to create 100,000 licensed spots over the next five years.

"We have a child-care crisis here in Ontario – we have the highest child-care fees in the country, spaces for only one-quarter of kids, and early childhood educators' wages and working conditions are far too paltry for the professional and vital work that they do in our communities," said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"We are expecting big things from this Ontario budget and we're expecting (Premier) Kathleen Wynne to finally deliver on her child-care promises."

While about 15,400 children wait for daycare subsidies in Toronto, more than 4,000 spaces are vacant because parents can't afford fees that run as high as \$20,000 a year.

"Child care cannot wait," said Ferns, who is expecting her first child – due in June – and already looking at a one- to two-year waitlist for daycare.

The government's five-year plan aims to double the number of spaces for children under age 4 so that 40 per cent of infants, toddlers and preschoolers young children in the province have access to licensed child care.

Ontario expects to spend between \$1 billion and \$3 billion on capital and between \$600 million and \$750 million in annual operating expenses on the new spaces by 2021.

The province currently spends more than \$1 billion annually on 350,000 licensed daycare spaces, including about 72,000 spots in Toronto.

The education ministry has already held consultations across the province to hear from families about other child-care changes they'd like to see, Naidoo-Harris said.

"The real work is underway ... we are looking at quality, affordability, accessibility and responsiveness because we know that families out there need support and are facing challenges when it comes to child care," said Naidoo-Harris, in an interview on Tuesday.

"This is a priority for our government, a priority for me," she said, adding her ministry's work will "transform the way we deliver child care in this province."

But the province must ante up some funds immediately in the budget and not "back-end" the bulk of the money, said NDP MPP Catherine Fife, her party's early years critic.

"If everything is tied to around election time – families can't wait for the politics to play themselves out on the child-care file," she said in an interview. "We need an infusion of cash this year."

The NDP will also push the government to commit funds for not-for-profit daycares only, Fife said, adding "our commitment is to making sure that every dollar goes toward children, not toward profit."

Ferns is hoping that in addition to the funding, the government will also outline a long-term plan to make the system more affordable for families "either in the form of more subsidies – but better than that would be a commitment to really building an affordable fee scale for

families.”

During the province’s public consultations, Naidoo-Harris said she heard several concerns from parents – from not enough places to not enough spaces.

“In other areas of the province, in some of the more urban areas, it was an affordability question, where people were really having a hard time making those ends meet and being able to pay for the child care (they needed),” she said.

But in Windsor, families were asking for daycare outside of 9-to-5 – after school and into the evening, and services for parents who have seasonal jobs or work part-time.

“All of that feedback is something we are looking at very closely because the bottom line is we want to create a system that works for all Ontario families,” Naidoo-Harris said.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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