

B.C.'s working poor: Affordable child care key to lifting families out of poverty ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Mar 2017

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

The issue of child care hits families right in the heart — the safety, wellbeing and development of their children is at stake.

It also hits them right in the wallet.

Cheaper daycare would not only help families, it would also — perhaps surprisingly — be a big help to the economy, experts say.

Universal \$10-a-day child care would increase government tax revenue because more mothers could return to work, those experts argue. They also say it would create secure, well-paying jobs for early childhood educators and that the so-called “living wage” would not need to be as high as \$20.64 in Metro Vancouver if parents paid less for daycare.

Wait lists for child care are often long due to a lack of spaces, and costs can be high — the median fee paid by parents of toddlers in Vancouver is \$1,325 a month, a recent study found.

Since 2007, child care costs have risen 35 per cent while incomes increased only 10 per cent, organizers of the Living Wage for Families Campaign say.

Stephanie Scarfo, 34, is one of many parents who can't afford child care. Instead, she works the graveyard shift at a Vancouver grocery store, and then stays home during the day with her young children — a schedule that often leaves her exhausted.

“Every morning, it was just like I was being dragged by a rope, I couldn't even open my eyes. It was brutal,” the good-natured woman, who is currently on maternity leave, said during an interview in her Burnaby home.

She is grateful her employer offers her flexible hours because it allows her to balance work and motherhood on a limited budget. She dreams of affordable daycare that would allow her to work a day shift.

“(Then) I could go to work like a regular person during the day when the sun is up and not be grumpy, not be tired,” Scarfo said.

According to the coalition of child care providers pushing for the \$10-a-day plan, Canada ranks last among developed countries for child care spending, and B.C. is worse than the Canadian average for high fees, few regulated spaces, and low government funding. As a result, many mothers don't work, or choose to work only part-time.

Last week, the federal government announced a funding boost of about \$90 million annually for child care in B.C., but that wasn't enough to convince the B.C. Liberals to support the \$10-a-day plan. B.C. Finance Minister Mike de Jong said the money would be used to create new child care spaces.

In Quebec, since low-fee childcare was introduced in 1997, more than 70,000 mothers have entered the workforce. And more than 85 per cent of women aged 25 to 44 in that province have jobs, compared to just 72 per cent in B.C., economist Pierre Fortin said in an interview.

The Quebec system more than pays for itself through increased tax revenue, but there have been problems with the quality of the child care. Because of this, he urges B.C. to move slowly and focus on expanding non-profit daycares if it decides to implement a universal plan.

The program should be a continuum of public schools, added Fortin, a Université du Québec à Montréal professor. “It should be the first block of our education system, and the most important one because of the brain development between zero and five years (of age). If you miss the first three years, the damage is going to be done for the rest of the life.”

Research shows high-quality care for young children pays off in better health and education outcomes and makes the daycares more equal and reliable.

Even the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade made affordable child care a top priority for the 2017 provincial election, saying investment in daycare produces significant economic returns.

"The high cost of child care hampers our province's affordability, makes it difficult for businesses to attract labour, and prevents many from entering the workforce," the board's election platform says.

But the Quebec universal daycare program has been expensive for taxpayers in a province with one of the highest overall tax burdens, argued Stephanie Cadieux, B.C.'s minister of children and family development. Escalating costs have forced Quebec to base fees on family income, she said.

Implementing a \$1.5-billion universal plan would require a significant increase in taxes in B.C., Cadieux said.

"That said, we acknowledge the challenges many parents face when trying to balance raising a family with pursuing work and training opportunities — and we recognize that access to quality child care is an important part of finding that balance," Cadieux said in an emailed statement.

"Government is working to ensure that parents have access to the supports and services they need to help them build a better future for their families."

In its February budget, the government announced an extra \$20 million to help create 5,000 new child care and after-school program spaces. The money is for the construction of the spaces, not operating costs, and will focus on creating spaces in regions that are underserved or to address other needs, such as for infant-toddlers or aboriginal children. Since 2014, the government has created 4,300 new, licensed child care spaces, which is a portion of the 13,000 it will create by 2020, Cadieux said.

The NDP has said it would introduce a \$10-a-day plan, if the party forms the next government. The plan would be implemented over time and would start by focusing on infant spaces and on providing care for people with the lowest incomes.

"It's an anxiety reducer, for one. And when you are already concerned about (living) paycheck to paycheck, the last thing you want to worry about is your most precious resource — your children," NDP leader John Horgan said in an interview.

In January, 16-month-old Macallan Wayne Saini died in an unlicensed daycare, prompting his parents Shelley Sheppard and Chris Saini to demand child care reform in B.C. They said the choices were "impossibly limited" and that parents are "pressured" into taking the few available spots.

In 2013, when Scarfo's first daughter, Mia, was a year old, she desperately searched for daycare. She found a licensed one for \$42 a day, but it was expensive and she was unhappy with the care. Currently on maternity leave with her third child, Gema, she plans to return to the graveyard shift.

"I'm definitely not looking forward to the sleepless nights," she said. "But with the situation the way it is, we really have no other options."

Scarfo has worked at the grocery store for 16 years and now earns \$18 an hour. She works 24 hours a week, almost the maximum number of hours offered by her employer. Her husband works in the roads department for a local municipality, bringing home \$1,500 every two weeks. But their mortgage consumes one of those cheques, and utility bills kill much of the second.

"It goes quickly. It seems you should be able to make it, but it just goes," she said.

The frugal mother cuts costs by making her own baby food, buying second-hand kids' clothes, not owning a cellphone, and studying the flyers at work so she can buy groceries on sale.

A Mainstreet/Postmedia poll done in early March found 46 per cent of respondents support a \$10-a-day child care program, despite the cost. Twenty-nine per cent were opposed and 25 per cent were unsure. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

"This isn't a few kooky left-wing women who think this is a good idea," said Sharon Gregson, with the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C., the group behind the \$10 A Day campaign. "This is completely mainstream now. The crisis is at a point where it boggles the mind that government is not dealing with this issue, or they think that by partially funding a few more spaces ... it in any way alleviates the crisis."

Gregson's group's plan calls for full-time child care for \$10 a day and part-time child care for \$7 a day — families with annual incomes under \$40,000 would get child care for free. Overseen by the education ministry, it would be phased in over seven to 10 years.

A study prepared for the group found the \$1.5-billion \$10-a-day childcare plan would pay for itself by generating government revenue, and would create 69,000 new jobs and add \$5.8 billion to B.C.'s GDP.

Gregson said one-third of children show up at kindergarten already vulnerable in one area of development or another.

"What we know from all the evidence-based research around the world is that high-quality early care and learning experiences are good for lifelong development," she said.

"You're more likely to be a good worker, you're more likely to go to post-secondary education, you're more likely to be a homeowner, you're less likely to get involved in crime or early pregnancy."

Twenty per cent of B.C.'s children — 163,000 kids — live in poverty, according to First Call's 2016 B.C. Child Poverty Report Card. The majority of those kids have parents who work, First Call says.

-reprinted from Vancouver Sun

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