

Federal Liberals look to target child care funding to 'vulnerable' families^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Trudeau Liberals are going to push provinces and territories to funnel new federal child care dollars to what Ottawa describes as those most in need of help, despite concerns from advocates that a more universal approach would yield the greatest results.

The Liberals have repeatedly said since last month's budget that they want to use a 10-year investment in child care to help families most in need, including families from low- and modest-income backgrounds.

A spokesman for Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said the Liberals want to target the promised funds to single parent households, or children with mental health issues and not only at low-income families. Mathieu Filion said the government wants to help the "most vulnerable in our society," believing the spending could have a positive influence these children later in life.

The government's decision means the Liberals face the possibility of a revolt from the child care sector over their focus on "vulnerable" families, with groups debating whether to publicly oppose the plan.

Internal government documents show the Liberals have been pushing the concept of targeted spending for more than a year. One briefing note warns Duclos about managing expectations in a sector that expected big things from the Liberals after years of little federal interest.

"To build a system that would make it affordable and accessible to all parents who want it is an expensive proposition," said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

"Managing expectations is a lot about cost."

In one briefing note ahead of a January 2016 meeting with Ballantyne's group and other child care advocates, officials suggested Duclos ask about how best to use limited federal funds, given competing and pressing social needs, with particular emphasis on asking about indigenous families, low-income, lone parent, rural and remote communities, "parents working non-standard hours," and families with children with disabilities.

A separate briefing note for Duclos from March 2016, ahead of a meeting with his provincial counterpart from Nova Scotia, lays out the Liberals' thinking: "The importance of early learning and child care is clear for all children, however those children who find themselves in particularly deprived and vulnerable conditions do benefit the most and could use the additional support."

The Canadian Press obtained copies of the briefing notes and other child care documents under the Access to Information Act.

Child care experts say the best available evidence on child care suggests a universal program helps more women enter the workforce, which translates into more tax revenues for governments.

During testimony late last month before the House of Commons status of women committee, economist Pierre Fortin said a low-fee universal system is less costly for governments than the traditional, purely targeted system. Fortin, who has written a widely recognized study on the economic returns from the Quebec daycare system, also said that more than two-thirds of vulnerable children come from middle- and higher-income families.

The Liberals have promised to spend \$7.5 billion over a decade on child care, starting with \$500 million this fiscal year and increasing to \$870 million annually by 2026 to fund spaces in provinces and territories, as well as indigenous child care on and off-reserve.

The Liberals say the budget money could potentially create 40,000 subsidized spaces over the next three years, about 13,000 spaces a year or about 2.4 per cent of the roughly 543,000 regulated child care spaces in Canada for children five and under.

The Liberals based the figure on an annual federal subsidy of about \$7,000 per space for all provinces and territories except Quebec. Social Development Canada says Quebec was removed from calculations because accessibility and affordability is higher in that province.

As well, the department said, the estimate was revised downward from 44,500 spaces to 40,000 because provinces and territories might

use some federal funding in other ways.

Documents prepared by the department before and after the Liberals took office show that officials estimated the cost to create or operate a space for one year at anywhere between \$11,500 and \$16,000, based on available data.

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