

Billions in child-care spending needed to fix child care in Toronto, report says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An ambitious "made in Toronto" plan would open enough child-care spaces for half of the families in this city, but only if all three levels of government spend billions over the next decade, a new report says.

The proposal, set to be debated at city hall later this week, would lead to the creation and operation of some 30,000 new child-care spaces by 2026. They would be open to children up to four-years-old while also cutting costs for parents by 25 to 40 per cent.

The report also lays out the massive increase in capital and operating spending needed to accomplish that goal. By the end of the 10-year plan, the city would be spending some 50 times what it is now on capital and operating costs, and that would only be 20 per cent of the required money.

The bulk of the funding would come from Queen's Park and Ottawa, where the governments in charge have committed to major child-care investments but haven't said how much Toronto will get.

Coun. Janet Davis says the report will hold those governments to account by dictating how the city wants to spend the money.

"This sets out a plan that I think has been lacking for many years," Davis told CBC Toronto.

"We have two levels of government who have made big promises on child care. And I hope they're not deceiving the parents of Toronto."

Currently, there are some 37,000 licensed spaces in the city, which is only enough for some 31 per cent of the children. About eight per cent of families have their daycare fees subsidized by the city, but there's also a long waiting list.

Those factors have made finding child care — even if it's part-time — both difficult and expensive. Torontonians pay the highest fees in the country, with many spending the equivalent of rent on daycare every week (at the end of 2016, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found the median child-care spending for families with infants was \$1,649 a month, The median figure for toddlers was \$1,375 a month, and for preschoolers it was \$1,150 a month).

Study finds half of Toronto parents want child care option

A demand study that's part of the new report found if child care were cheaper, about 50 per cent of families would seek it out.

"We simply don't have enough licensed spaces," Davis said, adding those that do exist are too expensive for about three-quarters of the families.

With the issue gaining more prominence — parents staged several demonstrations during the city's budget process this year — the provincial and federal governments have made major child-care announcements.

Premier Kathleen Wynne vowed to build 100,000 new spaces across the province. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's latest budget includes \$7 billion in child care spending over 10 years, which also appears focused on creating spaces.

Struggling families looking for answers

Sultana Jahangir, of the Scarborough-based South Asian Women's Rights Organization, says she's had plenty of questions about those announcements, but says she always answers with a degree of caution.

"We don't know where the money is going ... we feel it should be clarified right now," she said, noting even she's confused by exactly what's been committed.

Jahangir said child care is the biggest barrier for many immigrant women in the city. Even educated newcomers, she says, are forced to stay home to look after their children due to the high price of child care.

"Most of the women give up their career to stay home to take care of the children," she said.

Jahangir welcomes the city's new plan — "at least they're taking some initiative" — but says she's still awaiting a clearer picture of how the potential investments will play out.

Child care plan needs council's approval

Davis cautions the report "makes assumptions" about money the city could get from the other governments, and how much city council would be willing to spend.

"It's intended to be the framework for discussion," she said, noting the prices cited aren't a done deal.

"I think there's a will on the part of this council to really invest in child care as we should as a city."

The Community Development and Recreation Committee is set to debate the report this Thursday, and if approved it will go to city council for approval.

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