

\$2.5B daycare plan could serve half of Toronto's young children

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EXCERPTS

In a move to ensure promised federal and provincial child-care money meets the needs of local families, a new city report calls on all three levels of government to fund an additional 30,000 licensed spaces in Toronto and cut parent fees by at least 25 per cent over the next 10 years.

The proposed child-care growth strategy comes with a pricetag of up to \$1.9 billion in capital funding and another \$610 million in annual operating costs, with city taxpayers picking up 20 per cent of the tab.

If implemented, it would give half of Toronto children under age 4 — or 70,000 kids — access to licensed child care by 2026. There are currently about 37,000 licensed spots for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

"Toronto Children's Services has heard time and again from parents and caregivers that the child-care system is not meeting their needs," says the staff report to be discussed by the city's community development committee Thursday.

"From a lack of physical spaces located near home, school or work to the highest average parent fees in the country, to a fee subsidy wait list of over 15,000 children, the system is leaving many families behind and others under significant strain," the report says.

Toronto parents Sara Ehrhardt and Glenn Gustafson, who pay \$20,000 a year in child-care costs for their 2-year-old son Clarence, welcomed the report.

"It's great that the city is putting out a vision and talking about the importance of access and affordability," said Ehrhardt, 37. "We need our mayor to champion it with the other levels of government because it is one of the key issues holding Toronto families back."

Ehrhardt, who last year started a Facebook group of east-end Toronto parents dedicated to improving child care in the city, called the report's objective to serve 50 per cent of the city's young children "a big step."

The goal of decreasing parent fees by 25 per cent to 40 per cent over the next decade is an important objective for the next generation of Toronto families, she added.

The 10-year growth strategy is largely based on an October 2016 city report that showed half of Toronto families with young children would choose licensed child care if it was affordable.

Currently, three-quarters of local families can't afford licensed care. Middle-income families are the least likely to use the service because they earn too much to qualify for a fee subsidy, but not enough to absorb the full cost of care, according to the October analysis.

As a result, many of these parents are not able to return to work or are forced to use questionable unlicensed care.

"This is our made-in-Toronto plan," said Councillor Janet Davis, a long-time child-care advocate, who urged the city to develop the strategy. "It is the foundation to begin a dialogue with the federal and provincial governments."

Ontario has promised to spend up to \$3.75 billion over the next five years to add 100,000 licensed spots for children under age 4. Toronto is expecting to receive about 30,000 of those spaces.

The federal budget recently committed \$7 billion to build a national child-care system over the next 10 years. But if Ottawa directs its money to low-income families only, Toronto's plan won't work, Davis warned.

"What we need in Toronto is a broader range of child-care options that are affordable and accessible for all families," she said in an interview.

"We are responsible for managing the second largest system of child-care services in the country after Quebec. We have the capacity and the knowledge to move this forward," she said. "But we cannot do it if the federal and provincial governments decide on their own what they are going to fund and how they are going to fund it."

Under Toronto's traditional 20-per-cent contribution to child care, the city would be on the hook for up to \$500 million, including \$380 million in capital funding and as much as \$122 million in annual operating expenses by 2026.

"For me, this is going to be the test," Davis said. "Are we going to step up as a city and show leadership and be prepared to continue to build child care in partnership with the federal and provincial government?"

Toronto Mayor John Tory says he supports child-care expansion, but wants the city to wait until promised federal and provincial funding is in place before committing local dollars.

"We are willing and I think we should be willing and enthusiastic as a city to make an additional contribution to having a more robust child-care system in the city," he told reporters Tuesday.

"But our ability to come up with huge sums of money, especially on the capital side . . . for social programs is limited and should be limited," he said. "We won't be able to see what the city's contribution would be until we see what the other governments are doing."

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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