

Why subsidized home daycares are struggling to survive in Quebec ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

For years, Diane Rufh had no trouble keeping the six spots at her subsidized home daycare full.

If she had an opening, all it took was a sign in the window at her home in Pincourt, on Île Perrot, and a parent would come knocking.

Then, last spring, she lost four children in a month and a half.

"It broke my heart to see them leave," said Rufh, who has a degree in early childhood education and is bilingual.

The exodus happened right after the Quebec government changed the fee structure for public daycare.

Parents are charged \$7.55 a day for a subsidized spot, but now many end up paying pay extra fees at tax time, depending on how much they earn.

Some parents end up owing the government as much as an additional \$2,300 per year, per child.

"One [parent], right off the bat, said she couldn't afford it anymore," said Rufh.

The other parents switched to private daycares.

Private, non-subsidized daycares set their own prices, which range from \$35 to as much as \$65 a day. But parents receive monthly tax credits to put towards their private daycare fees.

Some parents find that easier to manage than paying a lump amount owed to the government for their child's subsidized spot when they file their income tax return in April.

After the four children left Rufh's care, it took her about a month to fill three of the vacant spots.

The one remaining spot is still empty. Rufh's been unable to fill it.

She's operating with five children, the minimum she needs to break even, but she's constantly worried about what will happen if she can't maintain that number.

"At four spots, I am not able to pay my mortgage anymore," said Rufh.

Subsidized home daycares invisible

What complicates Rufh's situation is getting the word out that her subsidized home-based daycare exists.

In 2015, the Quebec government introduced La Place 0-5, a website to help parents find a daycare space.

There, parents can register their child on the waiting lists of all subsidized non-profit early childhood centres, known by their French acronym, CPEs, as well as subsidized private, for-profit daycare centres.

Since January 2016, private, non-subsidized daycare centres have also had the option of having their waiting list managed by La Place 0-5.

But subsidized home-based daycares are still not listed on the website.

That is simply unfair, said Franca Dinolfo, an instructor in early childhood education at Vanier College.

Subsidized home-based daycares, or service de garde en milieu familial, make up about 40 per cent of all subsidized spots in Quebec.

Dinolfo says the home-based care is an attractive option for a lot of parents, who prefer the family setting with fewer children of different ages playing together to the classroom setting of a CPE.

Meeting quality standards

Not being included on the website means parents don't always know about them or the services they provide.

Subsidized, home-based daycares must meet strict criteria for quality, educator training and cleanliness.

Each CPE is supposed to help manage the home-based daycares on its territory, to ensure they're meeting those provincial standards - and to inform parents seeking daycare space about them. But that doesn't always happen.

Dinolfo said parents should know about all the options open to them. That's why she doesn't understand the delay in adding them to the website, La Place 0-5.

"It's supposed to be set up as a transparent system that's accessible to everyone," said Dinolfo.

Quebec's Family Ministry says it's aiming to add subsidized home-based daycares to La Place 0-5 by the spring of 2018.

"I'll believe it when I see it," said CSN representative Lucie Longchamps, whose labour federation represents many subsidized home daycare operators.

Government 'slashing away,' CSN says

When Quebec's subsidized daycare system was first set up by the Parti Québécois government 20 years ago, the demand was greater than the number of available spots.

To help catch up, later Liberal governments issued thousands of permits to create private daycare spots.

But the market is saturated, Dinolfo said. She believes there are too many permits being issued to private daycare centres.

Recent numbers from the ministry show the number of private, unsubsidized daycare spots has exploded, growing from a mere 1,600 in 2003 to more than 61,000 at the end of March 2017.

While CPEs are nearly always full, the occupancy rate at subsidized home daycares has slid four percentage points in the past year, to 82.13 per cent.

It's a slide the CSN is trying to fight, Longchamps said.

"There's no question that the way the government is doing things now is slashing away at our system," she said.

Longchamps said more than 125 home daycare centres closed for good last year. A CSN survey done last fall revealed 1,600 empty spots provincewide.

Many operators are hobbling along at half their normal salary because of their vacancies, she said.

"You can perhaps do that for a couple months but certainly not for a year," said Longchamps.

To survive, she says the government needs to recognize the value of subsidized home daycares and stop delaying.

Quality controls?

The CSN is also planning a campaign that will promote the differences between subsidized home daycares and private home daycares, which are not regulated.

"There is no oversight there; you're not assured of what your child is getting," said Longchamps. "Parents are not well-informed."

After 20 years of running her subsidized home daycare, Rufh feels like it's the beginning of the end.

She loves her job and has cared for a generation of children from the time they were babies until they left for kindergarten.

It's something she takes pride in. But she feels abandoned.

"We are on our own," said Rufh, who has advertised on magarderie.com as well as Kijiji and Facebook.

Quebec Family Minister Sébastien Proulx refused CBC's request for an interview.

A ministry spokesperson would only say the ministry is working out the details of how to get daycares such as Rufh's added to the La Place 0-5 website. The website itself says "future services for home-based daycares" are under development.

Rufh doesn't know if it will come in time for her.

"It would break my heart to close the daycare," said Rufh.

-reprinted from CBC News

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