

Prime Minister Abe unveils government push to solve day care crunch^[1]

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Source: The Japan Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 May 2017

AVAILABILITY

Read online^[2]

EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced Wednesday that his government will create 220,000 new day care spots, bringing the number of children on the waiting list for nurseries to zero by the end of fiscal 2020.

Abe, in a speech in Tokyo, also promised to add another 100,000 spots during fiscal 2021-2022, taking the total to 320,000 in the next five years.

Wednesday's announcement is a follow-up to a five-year plan ending in March 2018 that pledged the availability of day care for every child in the nation whose parents wish to work. It also promised to eliminate the waiting list by the end of fiscal 2017.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a news conference Wednesday that the no-waiting list goal will be postponed until 2020, as the first deadline had become increasingly difficult to achieve.

Boosting day care capacity has been a key pillar of Abe's economic policies, as it focuses on empowering working mothers to strengthen a dwindling workforce. The day care crunch — caused both by a surge in the number of working women and a shortage of nursery facilities and staff — has kept many women from returning to their careers after they have children.

"The number of people with jobs has gone up by 1.85 million over the past four years, out of which women account for 1.52 million," Suga said. "Applications for day care are increasing at an unprecedented pace. As a result, the day care crunch remains unresolved, especially in big cities."

"We plan to create day care spots for all children on the waiting list in three years at the latest," he said.

As of April last year, 23,553 children were listed as waiting for a day care facility, according to the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry. The actual demand is likely to be much greater, as the figure excludes those parents who have been forced to extend their child care leave due to unavailable day care openings as well as parents who have given up looking for jobs because they can't find help to care for their babies during job searches.

For the current fiscal year, the government is spending ¥1.15 trillion on day care support. This includes subsidies for municipal governments to build more child care centers, paying up to two-thirds of the construction costs. The government has also sponsored initiatives to rehire licensed nursery workers who are not working.

It has also subsidized private-sector businesses to build nurseries, including ones near workers' offices.

Some experts said, however, that the day care crunch will remain unresolved unless the government drastically improves the working conditions for staff.

"The biggest obstacle to the day care problem is the shortage of nursery workers," said Aki Fukoin, head of the Tokyo-based group Parents Concerned with Nursery Schools. "The government has tried to increase the number of staff by relaxing worker certification rules, but what's really needed is decent wages for the workers."

Starting this fiscal year, the government has increased the monthly base pay by ¥6,000 for all nursery workers, as well as wages for some workers.

According to Fukoin's research, the average annual pay for nursery workers, even with such pay hikes, remains at ¥3.23 million, far below the national average of all workers at ¥4.9 million.

As it is, more facilities are being staffed by inexperienced teachers with little supervision — increasing the chances of accidents, she said.

"A lot of parents are worried about the quality of care," not just quantity, she said.

Region: Asia ^[3]

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