

Abe has to run to keep up as demand for childcare grows in Japan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Four years after promising to fix Japan's childcare shortage, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is warning that he may need another three years to cut daycare waiting lists to zero.

Abe has sought to draw more women into the labor force since he took power to alleviate an increasingly severe labor shortage that's caused by the aging and shrinking population. Yet one of the biggest barriers facing women who want to return to work after giving birth is a lack of daycare facilities.

[Graph showing child care waiting lists from 2009-2017, view actual graph in the online article]

That's not to deny the government credit: The number of women in employment is at a record high of 28.5 million and about 400,000 extra childcare spots have been created since the start of Abe's administration in late 2012.

The challenge is that demand for daycare has kept increasing, and a lot more facilities are needed in big cities.

When you look at the country as a whole, there are more spots available than kids waiting. But there's a mismatch: A surplus of capacity in a rural town is of no use to a struggling family in Tokyo.

[Table indicating the prefectures with the worst waiting lists & progress between 2016-2017, access in the online article]

"This time, I'm really going to put an end to the problem of daycare waiting lists," Abe told the country's biggest business lobby in May. In fact, he hopes to have done enough to enable 80 percent of women to work within five years. The female labor-force participation rate is currently just under 70 percent.

Fixing the problem is also going to take a little more understanding from the people who live in areas where demand is highest.

QuickTake Japan's Shrinking Population

Opposition from local residents who worry about noise and crowded streets is a common obstacle to setting up more childcare centers in big cities.

In the meantime, Japan will continue to see long waiting lists despite a surplus of supply.

[Graph illustrates positive linear trend for both children accessing child care and the number of spaces available, see online article]

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