

Capital wishlist: Robyn Benson says it's past time for proper, universal child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

To mark the 150th birthday of Confederation, we asked local residents from a variety of backgrounds to share their wishes for the future of the capital and the country. Today: Robyn Benson.

As a single mother in the early 1980s, I found accessing child care extremely difficult. I needed to work; so, we made do. My daughter, at age 10 or 11, began caring for her younger brother after school. Along with this came the nagging fears you have as a parent when your young kids are home alone.

I had hoped that, by the time my children had kids of their own, Canada would have the type of child care system in which parents would be able to go to work with the peace of mind that was not available to me. Sadly, this is not the case.

Canada lags far behind many other countries of comparable wealth when it comes to access to quality child care. High fees, rising faster than the rate of inflation, and lack of spaces mean getting child care in Canada is almost always a matter of luck.

Inadequate government support for licensed child care puts downward pressure on the wages and benefits of child care staff. Poor compensation and difficult working conditions are barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified childhood educators. Since most child care employees are women, the poor compensation contributes to the overall gender wage gap.

As we look to Canada's future, at this time when we celebrate 150 years of Confederation, we have the opportunity to change our country's age-old child care story.

I am encouraged at the federal government's 10-year financial commitment for child care. However, the budgeted incremental increases each year are too small to build a universal system that would give every family access to the affordable, high-quality services so desperately needed across our country.

I believe our children are worth more, and I know that the equality of Canadian women depends on it.

Child care policy has a direct and disproportionate impact on women. When governments act to make child care accessible, our participation rates in the labour force rise dramatically. This improves women's economic status and the overall economy.

The federal child care agreement with the provinces and territories will soon be announced. Canadians will be watching to see if their governments are ready to bring about real change. We need child care funded and managed as a public service that all families of all types can count on. What a gift this would be to Canadians and our country's future.

- Robyn Benson is National President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, which represents over 180,000 workers from coast to coast to coast.

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