

Childcare recruitment in crisis mode: advocate ^[1]

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Yukon childcare is in the midst of a recruitment and retention crisis, say advocates who hope new federal funding will be used to entice workers to remain in the field.

“We get a very low wage, we’re not paid a lot, and that has a part to do with retaining people,” Lynn Rice-Rideout, the newly-elected president of the Yukon Childcare Association, said in a recent interview.

Last month, the federal government signed a national childcare and early learning agreement with the provinces and territories.

The Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework aims to expand access to high-quality, affordable childcare across Canada, and is directed at assisting families most in need.

These include lower-income, indigenous, and single-parent families; families with children with disabilities, parents who work nights and weekends, and parents in “under-served communities.”

The framework will see \$7.5 billion put toward childcare across the country over 11 years, starting with \$500 million this year.

Each province and territory will get \$2 million a year, plus an additional amount based on population. The Yukon will get a total of \$2.4 million.

Katie Swales is the co-ordinator of Partners For Children at Yukon College’s School of Health, Education and Human Services, and is a member of the Network for Healthy Early Human Development Yukon. She was pleased to see Ottawa shine a spotlight on childcare.

“Children are generally ignored,” she said.

“They’ve never been a priority, even though they should be right at the top of the list.”

Swales and Rice-Rideout agree it’s critical that the childcare community determines how the new federal money is spent.

“I want to stress how important it is that the community drives the local framework and it’s not driven by bureaucrats. I think that’s super-duper important,” said Swales.

Unlike cities in the south, Whitehorse is not wanting for childcare spaces (availability is more scarce the communities).

At last count, the Department of Health and Social Services found that nearly a quarter of the Yukon’s 1,500 childcare spaces were vacant.

But it’s offering high-quality, sustainable childcare that’s a struggle, said Swales.

“It’s not a viable business if you’re going to operate a quality program,” even when it’s non-profit, she said.

“You have to cut corners in order to keep the doors open.”

By “corners,” Swales means staff wages.

“People don’t earn what they should, and it’s up to the program to decide what they’re going to pay,” she said.

Wage scales are based on experience and training and vary from daycare to daycare, said Rice-Rideout, who works at Yukon College’s Nakwaye Ku Daycare.

At the college, entry-level workers make between \$11.90 and \$13.32 an hour.

Childcare workers with a diploma – the highest certification available inside the territory – earn \$16.07 an hour.

Childcare centres often lose staff to education assistant positions in schools, said Rice-Rideout.

The Yukon government offers grants to licensed daycares and family day homes so facilities need not pass on operating costs to families.

It's up to the employer, however, to decide where grant money goes, and it isn't necessarily passed on to employees, said Rice-Rideout.

Placing an infant (aged zero to 18 months) in a licensed childcare facility in the Yukon is also a challenge, as there are fewer spots for babies, said Swales.

The federal government dubbed its childcare deal "historic," but it isn't the first time Ottawa has proposed a major childcare spending initiative.

In 2005, Paul Martin's Liberal government penned a deal with the 10 provinces that would see \$5 billion funneled into childcare across the country over five years.

That agreement, which was dismantled in short order by Stephen Harper's Conservatives, was markedly more ambitious than the framework announced on June 12.

The Yukon NDP believes the new childcare deal doesn't go far enough.

"We can certainly agree with the five childcare principles of affordability, quality, flexibility, accessibility and inclusivity," NDP MLA Kate White told the legislature last month.

"Unfortunately, what is missing in all of this is universality."

Quebec, which has had low-cost, universal childcare for two decades, opted out of the federal framework because it wants to retain control of its system.

Ontario is moving toward universal childcare too.

On June 6, the Ontario Liberals announced they would spend \$1.6 billion over the next five years to help make childcare more accessible and affordable to all families.

The money will be put toward 45,000 new licensed childcare spaces, mainly in schools, and will expand capacity for children ages zero to four by 100,000.

Patti McLeod, the Health and Social Services critic for the Yukon Party, highlighted the uncertainty inherent in the federal Liberals' long-term funding promise.

"Obviously, this may present some challenges, given that a federal election is two years away," she said.

Frost said the new federal funding could go toward improving access to childcare in the communities, such as in Ross River, which does not currently have a daycare centre.

"Every Yukon child requires the best benefits possible," Frost told the legislative assembly in June.

"Some things have not been working so great, but we aim to address some of those challenges."

-reprinted from the Whitehorse Daily Star

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